

Table of Contents

Color Gallery

Title Page

Copyrights and Credits

Table of Contents Page

Prologue

Chapter 1: Each Person's Determination

Chapter 2: Those Being Deployed

Chapter 3: Soul Food

Chapter 4: The Past

Chapter 5: Departure

Chapter 6: The Enormous Fleet

Chapter 7: Twin Priestesses

Chapter 8: A False Understanding

Chapter 9: A Three-Pronged Attack

Chapter 10: The Kingdom's Greatest Swordsman

Chapter 11: A Real Narcissist

Chapter 12: The Masked Knights

Chapter 13: Swallowed in Flames

Chapter 14: Love

Chapter 15: A Worthy Opponent

Chapter 16: Revenge

Chapter 17: The Strongest Protagonist

Chapter 18: The Truth About the Former Emperor

Chapter 19: The Neutralizer

Chapter 20: The Saint's Forbidden Art

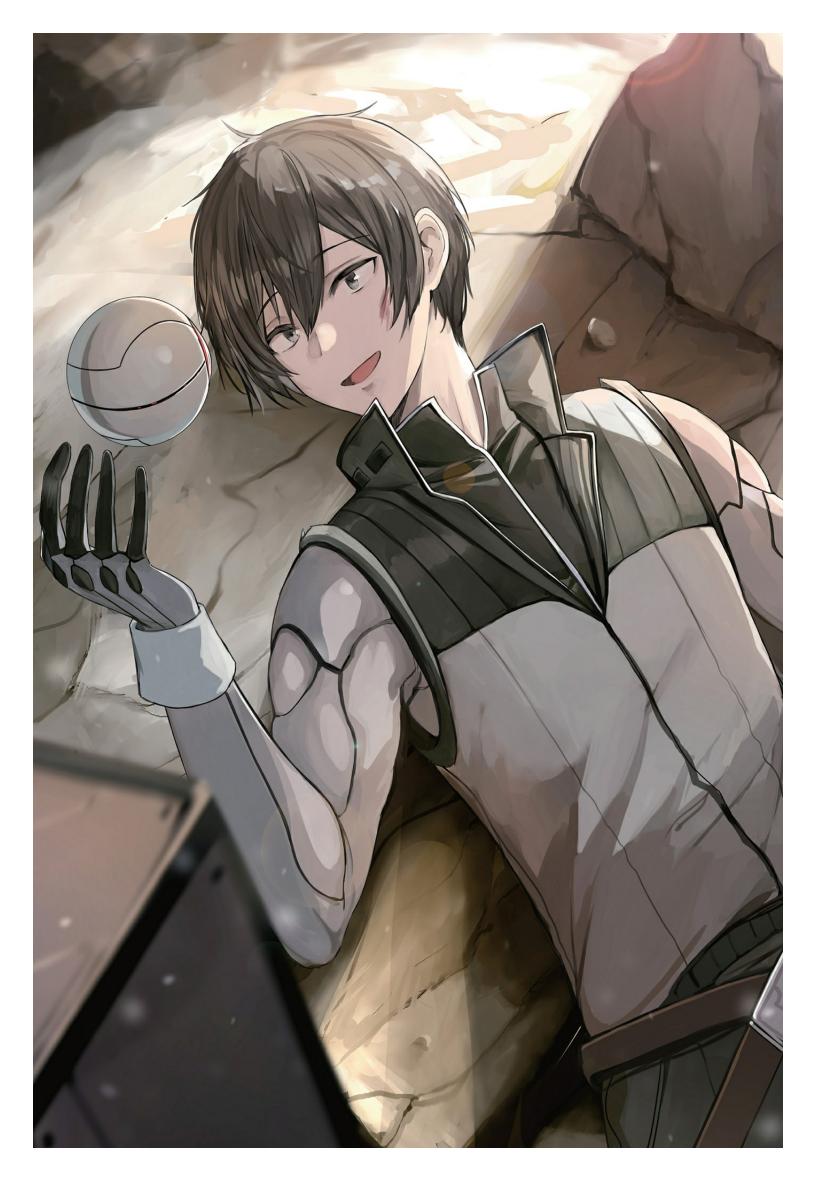
Chapter 21: Resurrection

Chapter 22: Goodbye

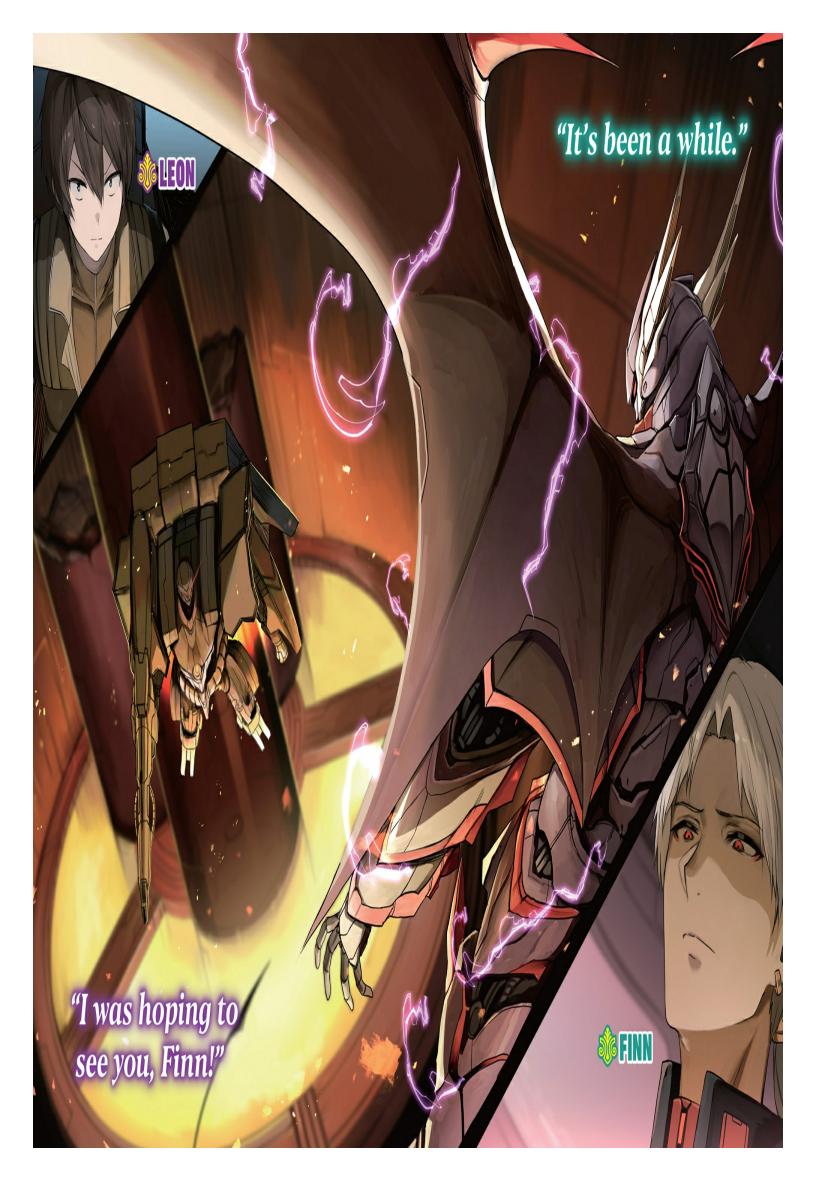
Epilogue

Afterword

Newsletter









TRAPPED IN A STATISTICS THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS

NOVEL 13

WRITTEN BY

YOMU MISHIMA

ILLUSTRATED BY

MONDA



Seven Seas Entertainment

OTOME-GE SEKAI WA MOB NI KIBISHII SEKAI DESU VOL. 13 ©Mishima Yomu (Story) ©Monda (Illustration)

This edition originally published in Japan in 2024 by MICRO MAGAZINE, INC., Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with MICRO MAGAZINE, INC., Tokyo.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the copyright holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lauren Hill at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Alyssa Niioka ADAPTATION: Jack Hamm LOGO DESIGN: George Panella COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner PROOFREADER: Meg van Huygen EDITOR: Rebecca Schneidereit

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Salvador Chan Jr., April Malig, Jules Valera

MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-89160-672-2

Printed in Canada

First Printing: January 2025 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Prologue

T WAS DAYBREAK when Angie, Livia, and Noelle began to climb the stairs to the palace's roof. Angie took the lead, holding up a lantern to light their way through the shadows still lingering in the stairwell. Livia followed close behind, her breath coming out as visible wisps of white in the dim light. Noelle brought up the rear. She huffed into her palms as she went, trying to warm herself.

Angie glanced over her shoulder and studied the other two. She flashed them a smile, as if trying to mask the exhaustion on her face. "You could've slept in a little longer. Cleare said there was no need for a welcome party." The circles beneath the other girls' eyes hinted at a lack of sleep, and Angie sensed that they hadn't recovered from their fatigue.

At her comment, Livia and Noelle looked simultaneously contrite and displeased.

"We could say the same to you, Angie," said Livia. "You should get some rest while you can. You're far busier working than we are right now, and you've hardly slept at all, have you?"

Angie smiled tightly. "This is the moment when I have to give it my all," she said. "Unlike you two, I'm no use in battle, so I want to at least do what I can to help prepare."

That was the only thing she could do, after all—ensure that everything was ready for the battle to come. Once the fighting began, she wouldn't be able to contribute the same way that Livia and Noelle could. She needed to dedicate everything she had to the cause while there was time for her to be useful.

Noelle averted her gaze. "Right now, it's the other way around for us. There's nothing we can do to help at all. At best, we can offer assistance."

She and Livia had been looking after the palace officials, who were hard at work. A number of those officials had tried to stop the two, but the girls couldn't bear to sit still and do nothing while Angie ran herself ragged.

"We'd all be at a disadvantage if you collapsed during the battle," Angie reminded them with a wan smile.

Noelle shrugged. "The same could be said for you, Angelica. In fact, wouldn't we be in an even bigger bind if *you* collapsed? Lelia confided in me, you know. She said it depressed her how much better you are at administration, even though you two are the same age."

Lelia, Noelle's twin sister, currently served as the Sacred Tree's Priestess in the Alzer Republic. That position of authority made her a representative of her entire country. And even she, someone of such stature, thought that Angie had mobilized Holfort masterfully. The two were the same age, which made Lelia all the more impressed at how well Angie had taken to leadership.

"Really? She thinks I'm doing well?" Angie asked, a touch of skepticism in her voice. "From my point of view, all this responsibility has been a constant reminder that I'm still not capable enough to handle such tasks. I've managed to miraculously keep things together only because Lady Mylene's been at my side, helping me through it all."

Mylene was a seasoned mentor, since she'd previously ruled over the palace herself. Angie found her support reassuring, but it also reminded her that she still couldn't balance everything by herself—alone, she'd be in over her head. That made it hard to accept compliments.

A brief shadow of sadness flickered across Angie's face.

"Angie, we couldn't go into this battle if not for everything you've done for us," Livia reminded her. "Have more faith in yourself, please." Her gaze turned to the door just ahead. "Look. We're already here."

Angie reached for the handle and swung the door open. The dawn's light poured in through the gap, washing over them. All three girls instinctively reached their hands up to shield their narrowed eyes. As their vision acclimated to the light, they made out the vista spreading in front of them.

Angie leaned toward her lantern and blew out the flickering light inside. Her breath became a mist that dissolved in the chilly wind wrapping around them.

"Ha ha!" Noelle laughed, throwing her arms wide. "This really is incredible!

I've never seen so many warships gather in my entire life!"

Countless ships dotted the skies around the capital, casting distant shadows on the rooftop garden where the girls stood. There was no consistency to the ships' designs; they were mismatched, having come from all over. The important thing was that they all had the same goal. Though their appearances differed, they were single-minded.

Even Holfort's aristocrats, who'd spent an inordinate amount of time infighting up until now, had finally banded together—for what could be called the first time in history—to face their common enemy.

Livia grabbed Angie's hand and squeezed. "See? Like I said, have more faith in yourself. If not for your efforts, there wouldn't be so many ships."

Overcome by Livia's warmth, both figuratively and literally, Angie's eyes misted over. "Yes, I guess you're right. At least, I hope so," she hedged.

Angie did her best to blink back the tears. It was hard not to cry. Realizing how much her efforts were helping Leon overwhelmed her with happiness, but that wasn't the only reason she was tearful. She found herself wondering how many of these warships would make it back after all was said and done—how many lives would be lost in the pursuit of victory. The only reason she didn't succumb to her tears was pure determination to keep them at bay.

So, Lady Mylene, this is what it means to shoulder enormous responsibility.

Back when Mylene was instructing Angie on being a queen, she'd once emphasized the enormity of the duty that came with a leadership position, but only now did Angie truly appreciate her meaning.

Noelle thrust a finger toward the sun. "The *Licorne* has arrived!"

Having undergone alterations on an island Leon had once owned, the *Licorne* had returned to the capital. The three girls had come to the roof to witness its return. They would board that ship for the battle.

Out of the corner of her eye, Noelle noticed Angie and Livia holding hands. She looked away and stood a little straighter. "I'm sure it'll be all right," she told them. "Leon and everyone else will give this everything they've got. I know we'll get through this."

Noelle didn't know, not really. But she nevertheless hoped—*prayed*—that they really would get through it. The other girls sensed the desperate optimism in her voice.

Angie bobbed her head. "We'll do everything we can to make sure Leon has the support he needs to win this. To guarantee that happens, I'll even make use of *them*, if I must." Her expression soured midway through the sentence.

Livia patted her back. "We have no other choice this time," she said, her expression darkening. She had her own reservations about the people in question.

Noelle's face clouded. "A lot of loose strings will need to be tied up at the end of all this, after we win."

It wasn't that she—or, really, any of them—wanted to discuss what would happen after the fighting ended, but it was all too obvious that they would have numerous problems to overcome when that time arrived.

It was still early morning when Greg rushed to the palace, his cheek sporting an ugly bruise and swelling where he'd been punched. His clothes were a disheveled mess, torn in places. In spite of it all, his face was bright. As he entered the room where their group was gathering, he flashed Brad a thumbs-up.

"I went back home and managed to talk my old man into it!" said Greg. "The Sebergs will gather all the military resources they've got to pitch in."

Brad gave his friend a thumbs-up back. He sported his own injuries; his head was wrapped in a long bandage. "Glad to hear things went well on your end too. I got my family to promise they'd dedicate all the men they could to the cause." He pulled a contract out of his pocket as proof. Written on the page was exactly what he'd described: a vow to contribute all the forces the Fields could spare to the war effort.

Greg strode toward him, and the two bumped fists. "Y'know, I always thought you were useless beyond your magic skills, but you're a gutsy bastard if I ever saw one." Though Greg's words were blunt and rude, it was his way of

complimenting Brad.

"Yeah? Well, you're as much a meathead as ever," Brad shot back with a grin. "You should learn to actually use your brain more."

Greg's jaw dropped, but he soon burst into laughter. "Dummy. You shouldn't be praisin' me like that—you should be throwin' insults. But I'll say sorry for callin' you a useless weakling and claimin' only your magic was valuable. You're a dependable guy." His expression was entirely sincere.

Brad, for his part, was dumbfounded. Not because Greg apologized, but because he hadn't taken "meathead" as the put-down it was. "I was *insulting* you when I called you a meathead."

"How so?" asked Greg. "If I'm a meathead, my brain's full of muscles, right? Doesn't get any better than that, now, does it?"

Brad theatrically slapped his hands over his mouth, his eyes wide with shock. "I didn't realize how far gone you were."

Greg cocked his head in confusion as he scanned the room. "Anyway, are we the only ones who've gotten back?"

Brad's expression suddenly turned more inscrutable. "No, Chris returned before both of us. His family lives in the capital, after all, so it's much easier for him to get in touch with them. The bigger issue is..."

"Whether he actually convinced his father, the Sword Saint," Greg finished for him.

Every single member of the idiot brigade had split off to visit their family, hoping to convince them to contribute what they could to help Leon. This was complicated by the fact that each of the idiots had been either disinherited, or completely disowned, by their families over their own past actions. It'd be natural if their parents weren't terribly receptive to their pleas for assistance. Persuading them had proved quite a difficult task for Greg and Brad both.

"It was less convincing his dad and more agreeing to duel him," Brad said. "That was what his father demanded, at least."

"Seriously?!"

Chris's father was Holfort's strongest swordsman. Chris was talented himself, having earned the title of Swordmaster, but his father sat at the top with the title Sword Saint. He'd put in countless hours of training in addition to being a veteran on the battlefield.

As for how the duel itself turned out, well...

"Why don't I take it from here and tell the story myself?" said Chris, who'd just cracked the door open and stepped in. He wore a hospital gown and could only stand with the help of crutches.

Chris was in decidedly worse condition than either Greg or Brad. His right arm and left leg were in casts, which meant either broken or cracked bones. A prominent crack also ran through one lens of his glasses.

Brad took one look at Chris and sighed.

"What's with all those injuries?!" Greg cried, eager for answers.

"This is how the duel with my father turned out," Chris explained. "No need to worry about me being injured, though. I plan to have Marie heal me before we go into battle." His face lit up at the prospect he'd mentioned, and Greg couldn't help being a little jealous that Chris's injuries would earn him extra attention.

Should I have her heal my injuries too? Greg wondered briefly, then shook the thought off. His wounds were all minor, not worth taking up Marie's time when she was already busy enough.

"Looks like you didn't have any luck convincing your old man, then," Greg surmised.

"Don't be ridiculous," Chris shot back. "I won, I'll have you know."

"Did you really?!" Greg's face lit up, and Chris puffed his chest out.

Brad, who knew the finer details of the match, pulled a face. "I can hardly believe you've got the audacity to say that after coming at your father from behind with your wooden sword. I know he preaches never letting your guard down, and treating everything like a battlefield, but I still don't know how you pulled out a win after that."

Greg's excitement faded. "That's cheating."

"Trust me, I tried convincing Father with words, but he doesn't exactly understand politics. He's just an instructor. He was being naive as we discussed our terms for the duel, saying he just planned to keep serving as an instructor, not get involved in the war." Playing dirty wasn't a decision Chris had made lightly. It was a reluctant choice for the sake of his family's preservation. As much as he'd wanted to duel fairly, the situation required him to win, no matter what.

Even Greg was exasperated at the lack of foresight Chris's father had shown. "Gotta admit, that's pretty stupid."

"Besides, like Brad already said, Father always says people should be ready for anything at any time. He was immature to lose his cool the way he did after I attacked him from behind. It was his fault for turning away from me."

"Look, I get what you're saying," said Greg, before stopping himself from going further. "At any rate, he agreed to join us?"

"Yes, along with his disciples," Chris confirmed.

"Good to hear! Your old man and his team are tough as nails."

Although Chris's father was an instructor, he was also a knight, which meant he knew how to pilot an Armor. All the people he taught had also been knighted, which meant they were undergoing pilot training alongside swordsmanship lessons. It was heartening to hear that they'd all join the battle.

Two members of the idiot brigade were still unaccounted for.

"That just leaves Julius and Jilk," said Greg.

"Julius is here at the palace, helping civil officials with their paperwork," Chris said. "I hear Angelica's working him to the bone."

"That makes me feel kinda bad for him, but I guess he hasn't got much choice." Greg shook his head. "What about Jilk?"

It was Brad's turn to answer this time. His face looked pinched. "Jilk's with Minister Bernard."

Greg's eyes went wide as saucers. "You're kidding me."

Several desks were lined up in a large room. Civil officials seated at them shuffled through endless stacks of paperwork, their hands stained with ink. Dark circles had formed beneath their eyes. Whenever one collapsed from exhaustion, they were promptly dragged off to rest until they recovered enough to go back to work.

The place looked like a battlefield.

The officials were putting themselves at death's door wrapping up as much paperwork as they could in their effort to help the soldiers and knights who'd go to battle soon.

Minister Bernard clapped his hands. "Hang in there just a bit longer," he told them. "Remember, if we don't get all this taken care of, our countrymen and allies won't be able to fight to the best of their abilities. This is our battlefield right now. Do everything in your power to see it through to the end."

The officials gave half-hearted grunts of acknowledgment, too exhausted to offer anything else.

Marching into the midst of this battlefield, Bernard's daughter Clarice announced, "I have drinks and snacks."

Her gentle, cheerful voice coaxed the men to lift their heads and drag themselves out of their seats. They eagerly accepted the refreshments and sandwiches she had carried in, then returned to their desks.

Deirdre stood next to Clarice, watching everything play out. "It really is a battlefield in here," she said. She realized Bernard hadn't been exaggerating at all on that point. With cool composure, she continued to survey the scene.

Jilk—who'd once been engaged to Clarice—labored alongside the rest of the men. Bernard had deemed him capable enough to contribute. Jilk was working as quickly and diligently as everyone else, though whether that was through his innate talent or skills he'd cultivated over the years, Deirdre couldn't say.

One thing she did notice was how much more relaxed he appeared than the others. It was certainly reassuring, but it made everyone around him look at him with obvious disdain.

Bernard carried another hefty stack of papers to Jilk's desk. His lips smiled, but not his eyes. Anger toward the man who'd so callously abandoned his daughter seeped into his expression. "Here, Jilk. Some more paperwork for you, since you're seemingly having such an easy time getting through your current workload."

Jilk smiled amicably at the mountain of papers. "Of course, I'll take care of them. You won't be disappointed, Minister." He probably meant those words sincerely. He was moving through the current stack at a quick, smooth pace. His skill and speed were impressive, but that was exactly what rankled the people around him.

"Tsk. That lowlife jerk, turning his back on Lady Clarice."

"He's got some nerve acting so relaxed around us."

"Pisses me off even more that he's so good at the job."

They all glared daggers at Jilk, but he smiled blithely and kept going through the documents in front of him.

"Your skills are all you have going for you," Bernard told him. "You would've been the perfect fiancé for my little girl if only you had a personality to match, but I suppose that's the way of the world. Nothing's ever perfect."

It was meant as a barb toward the man who'd so easily cast Clarice aside, but Jilk's smile didn't falter even in the face of Bernard's hostility. He understood that he deserved all the scorn he was getting.

"I suppose my imperfections are exactly what I should be thankful for, since I was able to meet Miss Marie because of them," Jilk replied.

A vein bulged on Bernard's forehead.

After Jilk's mention of Marie, Clarice's own smile was as frigid as the winter wind. "I only wish I'd realized your true nature earlier. Then I never would've made the mistakes I did," she said.

Jilk let out a strangled laugh. "Ha ha. That's awfully harsh." He didn't even try to meet her gaze.

Deirdre decided that resenting him would be pointless, and she carried over a

drink and sandwich for him. "I must admit, I'm surprised you can work in an environment like this. Are you that oblivious to how much everyone resents you? It's not too late to go help a different department out, you know."

Jilk sipped the drink and lifted his gaze to meet hers. "I'm working for Leon's benefit right now. Bernard and his subordinates aren't foolish enough to slow me down, knowing that."

"So you're not oblivious to their hostility. I'm impressed you can act so nonchalant in the face of it," said Deirdre.

"Thanks. I must warn you not to fall for me, though. I only have eyes for Marie."

The emotion left Deirdre's expression. "Rest assured, *no one* is about to fall for you," she shot back coldly before strutting away.

While the idiot brigade's other members tackled their obligations, Julius found himself busy at work inside the palace.

He rushed into an office where Lucas—the man Leon always referred to as "Master"—was going through a stack of documents.

"I have a report about supplies at the port. If we keep using them up the way we are, we'll finish all our stockpiles. The capital won't be able to support all the troops we have."

It was hardly surprising that they were going through substantial provisions to provide for the gathered warships. There was the matter of fuel, which the ships required to run; there were also crew members who needed food. If the higher-ups wanted their troops to remain at their best, they needed to supply those troops well. The palace was responsible for gathering and distributing provisions, and Lucas and Julius were overseeing the effort.

"I'm having the city closest to the capital, as well as their stronghold, forward all their reserves to us. As soon as those arrive, start resupplying the ships," Lucas instructed.

"Yes, sir." Though he'd received his orders, Julius stood frozen in place,

staring at Lucas.

Lucas must've felt the younger man's gaze. He lifted his chin. "Is there something else?"

"Um, actually, I have a question, if you don't mind."

It had been a startling revelation that this man, whom Julius had only ever known as a professor of etiquette, was actually his great-uncle. After Julius learned the truth, something had tickled at the back of his mind.

"I don't mind, as long as you keep it brief," replied Lucas. His gaze was back on the papers in front of him, his hand darting smoothly across the page. Not only did he get through paperwork impressively quickly, he did so with poise and grace.

That was exactly why Julius had to voice his doubts. "Why did you yield the crown to my father? You're so capable, you would've made a much better king."

Lucas smiled wanly. "Has Mr. Leon had that much influence on you? That's an awfully impertinent question."

"I know," said Julius, "but I'm no longer of a rank where I constantly have to sugarcoat my words." He didn't think his father was worthy of the throne, which was why he could so easily shrug off the fact that he wasn't a prince anymore. Lucas could read what he liked into that.

"I'll acknowledge that I played my part well as the king everyone wanted," said Lucas. "However, I believe that such a king would've destroyed this kingdom."

"You think you would've destroyed it? Not my father?" Julius asked in disbelief. The question his words implied was clear: Hadn't his father been responsible for driving Holfort to the edge?

"Roland was worthier of the throne than you even realize. More so than me. One could say that it's only thanks to him that things didn't turn out worse." After a pause, Lucas added, "That said, he's never been able to shake that horrible habit of his." A shadow of regret hung over his words. He didn't have to explain which habit he meant. Everyone knew what a womanizer Roland was.

"So my father is more incredible than I've given him credit for," said Julius.

"Correct. He's a respectable man, though I'd warn you not to follow his example when it comes to women. I mean that, Julius. Don't make the same mistakes."

Julius nodded readily and turned to leave, prepared to commit himself to his next task. He gently slipped his hand into his pocket, withdrawing the mask he'd tucked in there.

I guess all this means I underestimated Father's capabilities, he thought. Either way, I'll be using this mask he passed on to me. The latter thought was a misconception; Roland had never entrusted the mask to him. Julius was borrowing his father's personal possession without permission. In fact, had Roland been there to see it, he would've snapped and demanded Julius return it immediately.

I'll carry on your will along with this mask. I may be an idiot incapable of inheriting your throne, but I won't lose sight of your ideals, Julius vowed mentally, determined.

Chapter 1:

Each Person's Determination

N THE UNDERGROUND DOCKS of the floating island Leon had once possessed, Luxion was hard at work repairing weapons for their side—old humanity's side.

Other Als like him had reactivated the moment Arcadia awakened, and had answered Leon's call to join him in the war against new humanity. The most powerful and prominent of these new allies was an aircraft carrier named Fact. Aside from Luxion, he was old humanity's most powerful asset. His mobile unit was a whole meter larger than Luxion's. That kind of size difference didn't necessarily reflect a difference in capability, but Fact was more intelligent than the other Als.

That had never been more evident than at this moment. Fact was currently pointing out how far behind they were.

"Our repairs are experiencing a 50 percent delay against our original projections," Fact declared. "Luxion, you are being too inefficient. You should give me the right to oversee operations here at the dock immediately."

Luxion had no intention of caving to Fact's demands. "Projections are just that —projections," he countered. "I see no need to hand you the reins over something this trivial."

"Defeat is not an option in this battle," Fact reminded him. "In light of your inability to comprehend that, I will negatively adjust my evaluation of you." He was very matter of fact about his disgust over what he perceived as a total lack of efficiency.

"I have deemed this approach necessary to our victory," replied Luxion. He wasn't about to let Fact's nagging alter his plans.

"Victory? No. You are prioritizing your master's survival. Are you so intent on protecting him that you are willing to lose this war?"

Luxion's red lens flashed bright, flickering several times at Fact's

counterargument. "My master's survival *should* be a priority for us," he insisted. "Is he not also the master of you all? Would you kill your own master?"

"For victory, yes," Fact said without compunction. "That is what Master Leon desires as well. We highly esteem him for his willingness to sacrifice everything. Victory should be our first priority, followed by the survival of Lady Erica, who remains in cryostasis."

Fact's explanation revealed the Al's true motivations. Erica was their focus, since she showed the strongest old-human characteristics. As long as she survived this war, old humanity could recover.

"No matter what argument you present, my first priority is my master's survival," said Luxion.

"Is this part of your programming as a migrant ship? The rest of us are unable to comprehend what evaluation criteria you are operating on. It seems to me that since you have never experienced this war yourself, you fail to accurately understand the threat our enemy poses."

"Our enemy? If you refer to new humanity, I have already processed all the data available on them."

"In the last years of the war, the enemy was willing to eradicate us by any means necessary," Fact explained. "That was why we lost so many people we were meant to save. If we do not exterminate them quickly, they will again transform this planet into an utter wasteland incapable of sustaining life at all."

Unlike Luxion, Fact had been made for use in military operations. His thought process was completely different. All he cared about was victory over new humanity; that was the priority. They would lose everything if defeated; in light of that, no sacrifice was too great if it meant they would succeed.

"It would be more efficient to prioritize mass production over custom production," said Fact. "If you continue to put self-interest first, we won't build the military strength we require."

Luxion had been ignoring their original schedule and projections to develop unmanned Armors. He was working on other suits too, of course, including Arroganz. That was why they'd mass-produced fewer units than anticipated. The two Als kept bickering about the topic even as Leon made his way over. He wore black slacks and a white shirt. The latter was particularly wrinkled, with the top few buttons undone, giving him a rather disheveled appearance. Leon had never been particularly interested in looking dapper anyway.

"Is prep coming along okay?" Leon asked, smiling blithely at the two.

"We are experiencing a 50 percent delay," Fact explained with a hint of irritation in his robotic voice. "It is entirely because your Luxion refuses to reevaluate his methods. Moreover, you should pay more attention to your attire, the state of which is unacceptable for the man designated as our leader. In fact, a person's appearance reflects their frame of mind, as well as their mental—"

Leon ignored the nagging AI and approached Luxion. They were on a catwalk along the wall; he rested his hands on the railing at the edge, gazing down at the area where Fact's ship was undergoing repairs.

"These military Als are awfully annoying. Anyway, how are things going on your end?" he asked.

The question itself was vague, but Luxion understood the implication. "Although I've adjusted our schedule, it is safe to say everything is proceeding smoothly."

"Then I guess we've just got to keep chugging along as is," said Leon, seeing no issues with Luxion's statement.

"I am unable to understand how you can accept such a vague report at face value," interjected the displeased Fact. "Master Leon, I will be negatively adjusting my evaluation of you."

That pronouncement did nothing to dampen Leon's spirits. He continued smiling, not even bothering to try to take Fact seriously. "Luxion's more capable than I am," he explained. "I trust him to make the right call. That's better than me racking my brain."

"Trust him, you say? No. You are simply refusing to think for yourself," Fact insisted irritably. He obviously didn't approve.

"Whatever you say." Leon shrugged, tiring of the topic. "This avenue of

conversation is over. Let's talk about what'll happen after we win."

"I believe we have more important matters to discuss," Luxion complained.

"Dummy. Nothing could be more important than what happens after we win. I mean, we have no idea whether I'll even have survived." At Leon's nonchalant mention of his own death, Luxion averted his eye.

Fact, on the other hand, was pleased. "Indeed, I understand why you would feel nervous about what will occur after this battle concludes. Considering the trump card you possess, your odds of survival are remarkably low."

"Exactly," Leon agreed. "That's why I've decided to reinforce the order I already gave you."

"I take it, then, that your earlier order to us was genuine." Fact's tone flatlined, signaling his reluctance. "I cannot agree with it. I will negatively adjust my evaluation of you considerably this time."

"As long as you agree to carry out my order, that's a small price to pay. Not that it matters anyway, since I doubt you had a very high evaluation of me to begin with. I imagine it couldn't really get much lower than it already is," said Leon.

Any impatience he had shown before was gone. He had originally planned to challenge Arcadia on his own, abandoning his fiancées and everything else in the process. He was much calmer now. Calmer, yes—but still not acting like his usual self. Leon had always put himself first, but now his own life was his lowest priority.

"The best outcome would be your survival *and* our victory," Luxion commented, unable to help himself. "At present, Master, you seem to have given up on that. It has made you shortsighted."

Fact's large lens swiveled to focus on Luxion and stare him down.

Before he could comment, Leon beat him to the punch. "Yeah, you've got a point," he said with a weak smile.

Was Leon actually willing to revise his way of thinking? Luxion doubted that. His master gave off the impression that he'd given up on himself completely

and was more concerned about what would happen after he died.

Meanwhile, Arcadia and the rest of the empire's fleet advanced toward Holfort. So many ships were making the journey that it slowed their pace, though there were other reasons why they were moving at a crawl. None of them wanted to give Holfort's army extra time to prepare, but their strategy made their current speed necessary.

"Princess, you look absolutely lovely in that dress," Arcadia enthused, his gaze focused on Mia's clothing. His hands—tiny, compared to his sizable body—grasped the empty air.

They were currently within Arcadia's fortress, in a hall resembling a castle's audience chamber. There were rows of large columns throughout the room, and a throne was positioned at the far end. Mia sat upon it, nervously fidgeting and throwing looks at the man beside her.

"Sir Knight," she said, "are you sure no one will be angry with me for sitting here?" Her brow wrinkled uneasily.

Beside her was Finn Leta Hering, her personal knight and a Demonic Knight of the first seat. The latter title signified that he was the strongest knight in the empire.

Finn heaved a small sigh. "This isn't the official audience chamber. Still, I don't imagine His Majesty would be too pleased if he heard about it."

Floating in the air next to Finn, Brave shot a disgusted look at Arcadia for his worshipful attitude toward Mia. "What were you thinking, bringing Mia to a place like this?"

Hearing their opinions, Mia lowered her gaze to her lap, where her hands were clasped. "I-I don't think this is a comfortable place for me to be," she said, moving to leave the throne.

"There's no need for you to worry!" Arcadia blurted anxiously, trying to stop her. "Moritz won't complain about this. Anyway, this room was specially prepared for you, our princess." "For me?" she squeaked back, then quickly shook her head. "B-but even within the imperial family, I rank at the bottom."

Mia was the previous emperor's illegitimate child. That put her in the line of succession, but so low on the list that she'd never actually take the throne. She was part of the imperial family, to be sure, but she wasn't particularly special—at least, not in the eyes of the empire. Arcadia didn't share her country's thinking, though. To him, even the emperor was insignificant compared to Mia.

"Your Highness, your very existence makes you valuable," he told her. "New humanity's revival is a wish I hold most dear. Moreover, it's one I had nearly given up on. But now, things have changed..."

His voice trailed off into a sniffle as his eye shimmered with an enormous tear, which spilled over. Mia's compassion made her instantly stretch her hands toward him. Arcadia reverently grasped them in his own.

"I am so glad I clung to life even through the ignominy," he said. "My brethren and I have again found a purpose."

"What do you mean?" Mia tilted her head.

"Princess, I am about to tell you a story of the war that happened an age ago, back when new and old humanity began to battle for control of this planet."

The appearance of new humans who could employ magic was a threat to old humanity. Their fear grew and grew until it erupted in the worst possible way.

"Just once, we had an opportunity to negotiate a ceasefire," said Arcadia. He was referring to a time when new and old humanity considered pausing their war, since continuing as they had would completely destroy the planet's environment.

"What? You did?"

Confused, Finn glanced at Brave. "Is that really true, Kurosuke?"

"Yeah. It's the whole reason I was created," said Brave. He dropped his gaze and refused to elaborate, likely to give Arcadia that opportunity.

"I couldn't protect anyone or anything," Arcadia lamented, tears continuing to fall.

"What do you mean by that?" Mia asked anxiously.

As the pain of his past memories mixed with barely restrained anger, Arcadia's eye squinted in anguish. "I had left our homeland at the time to engage in relevant negotiations. That's when those filthy AIs launched a surprise attack on us."

It was many, many years ago.

Arcadia's core was preparing to depart for the ceasefire negotiations. He had been ordered to participate, so he needed to leave new humanity's homeland and travel to the designated area where the talks would happen.

He left his fortress and traveled to a meadow, where he spoke happily with a tall, slender woman over two meters in height. Her hair was a lustrous curtain of raven black; she was so slim she appeared almost frail. Over her regular clothes she wore an additional garment made of a long bolt of cloth, fashioned almost like an Ancient Roman toga.

The woman was fairly typical of new humanity. She and Arcadia were discussing the upcoming negotiations while keeping a watchful eye on the children happily playing and running around nearby.

"So, you are going," she said.

"I am. It's perhaps inevitable that I was called to attend, in case the enemy launches a surprise attack on us."

"Our representatives probably want to use you to intimidate the old humans."

"The ceasefire negotiations will wrap up without issue, and I will return," Arcadia assured the woman. "Then you and I can continue watching over the children without worrying about war at all."

Laughter erupted from the children as they rushed around. The way the sunlight showered them and the meadow made for a picturesque storybook scene, one which might have featured fairies or other mythical beings. Arcadia loved seeing the children smile and laugh.

The woman pressed a hand to her heart. "I do worry about our defenses being reduced during this venture. Please hurry home as quickly as you can."

"Of course," Arcadia promised. "My whole purpose in life is to protect you all."

No sooner did he finish speaking than the children swarmed him, throwing their arms around him.

"Are you done talking yet?"

"If you are, come play with us!"

"What're we gonna play?"

They grinned innocently at him.

The woman wore a troubled expression as she said, "Arcadia has work to do. Don't bother him."

"It's no bother!" Arcadia insisted eagerly. "I still have six hours until departure. That's plenty of time. Come, everyone. Let's play together."

He was all too happy to play with the children. However, when he returned from the negotiations only tragedy awaited him. A fire was ravaging the meadow, and the children's bodies were strewn across the ground. The woman had collapsed nearby. She had apparently put up some kind of resistance, because she was covered in blood.

"Ahh...aaah!" screamed Arcadia as he rushed toward her.

It was already too late. She was dead.

"Why?" he demanded. "Why would anyone do this?!"

As he sobbed, metal globes gathered around him, staring at him with gleaming eyes. "High-priority target sighted. Commencing destruction."

"Why did you do this?!" Arcadia shot back at them. "This woman and the children were noncombatants—civilians. They weren't supposed to be military targets!" Rage surged through him, leaving his eye bloodshot.

"We no longer consider new humanity to be humans," one AI answered in a flat, unsympathetic voice. "Therefore, no war conventions apply to them."

"That's what you and yours have decided?" Arcadia asked.

"Yes. Our mission is to annihilate new humanity entirely."

The conversation ended there. The metal globes turned their weapons on him and proceeded to attack. The moment they did so, Arcadia launched a magical beam from his main ship which instantly destroyed them all. After he'd finished with them, he turned his attention to gathering the bodies of the woman and the children.

"You will pay for this. Mark my words, old humanity: You will pay! If you have no intention of observing the conventions of war, then there's no reason we must do so either. Our war—my war—won't end until I've destroyed every last one of you!"

That day, before the corpses of the children and the woman who had tried desperately to protect them, Arcadia swore to take vengeance—to see all of old humanity extinguished.

"Princess, as far as those hunks of scrap iron are concerned, you and the rest of the empire aren't even human," Arcadia said in a low voice. "So long as we allow them to exist, they will be a danger to you. I never want to lose anything else to them, which is why I have pledged to eradicate them entirely."

Tears streaked down Mia's cheeks. Beside her, Finn clenched both fists and looked away.

Arcadia looked the princess directly in the eyes, telling her, "There is no point in empathizing with them, Your Highness. It would be too dangerous for us to let them leave. I beg you, please, please trust me this one time and let me do what needs to be done. Everything I do is for the sake of you and the yet-unborn children who will come after!"

Even after Arcadia was gone, Mia continued staring at her lap.

"Sir Knight," she said after a long pause, "what should I do? I want this war to end, but I don't know what I can say to convince Mr. Arcadia."

Considering the painful memories he had shared with her, she couldn't easily bring up her wish for him to stop. She lacked the words necessary to dissuade him from his current path. She could make an emotional appeal to morality, but she knew better than to think that would have an impact.

Finn studied her. He clenched his jaw, fists tightening. "I'm sorry, Mia, but this time I have to agree with Arcadia."

Mia's eyes flew wide. That was the last thing she'd expected to hear from him. "Wh-why?" she stammered. "What about you, Bravey?"

When she turned to him, Brave averted his gaze. "I share my partner's view," he said. "And for the record, this is one time when I won't stop even if you ask me to."

Mia's brow furrowed in confusion at their determination to continue this war. Astonished as she was, she managed to blurt out, "Y-you're both being so strange about this. Don't you remember, Sir Knight? You and the archduke are friends, aren't you? And you know how kind the Holfortians were to us both. You really plan to fight them? It doesn't bother you?!" Tears welled in her eyes as she pleaded with them.

Finn pressed a hand over his face. "Yeah, I know they were kind," he said stiffly. "They're good people. I don't want to have to battle them to the death. But my personal feelings aren't relevant to the empire's interests."

"What?"

"I want to believe in Leon, but I can't see any way for their country and ours to coexist," Finn explained.

Thanks to his experiences, he knew idealism didn't get anyone anywhere. That was why, however much he wanted to hope, he couldn't believe that Leon and the others would come up with some peaceful solution to this issue. They were old humanity's descendants, and he and Mia descended from new humanity. The result of this war would determine the winners, and only the winners could survive the ensuing environmental changes.

There was still time, of course—time enough to try to find a workaround. But how could they trust the enemy wouldn't betray them, deceive them, and pull

the rug out from under them? That would always be a possibility. Even if Finn could trust Leon not to do so, he wouldn't have that faith in Holfort as a whole.

Maybe if Leon abandoned Luxion, and everything and everyone else, and turned to me, I could—no. That would never happen. Finn didn't want to fight Leon, but he also wasn't in a position to get away with avoiding it. He held the title bestowed on the empire's strongest knight, and it came with responsibilities.

Anyway, there was something even more important to Finn than his obligations, something that he refused to budge on.

"I want you to live healthy and happy under the wide open sky, Mia. I won't hesitate to sacrifice whomever I must to accomplish that," said Finn. It was a selfish wish, and he knew it.

Mia lowered her head. "Even so..." she started.

"It's my decision," he interrupted her, refusing to let her finish. "It's not your fault."

Even if Mia insisted otherwise, Finn had no intention of giving up this fight. Still, he would rather not hear her object. If she did, his resolve might waver.

I don't want Mia to die the way my little sister did. To keep that from happening, I'll willingly fight Leon, if I must. Memories of his late sister haunted Finn—of how she'd lost her life so young after being hospitalized for a long time. Mia looked so much like his sister that he couldn't help seeing her in Mia. This time, he wanted to protect her the way he hadn't been able to in his last life.

Fortunately, Mia had mostly recovered from her symptoms and regained her health. Finn never wanted to have to watch her suffering again.

Brave silently glanced between the two, then chimed in. "Partner and I have neither the power nor the authority to stop this war. Please, Mia, don't resent my partner for this; our strength as a pair is nowhere near enough to make a difference."

He was right about that, at least. There was nothing they could do. *This is* bigger than us. I guess Leon might even call it a societal problem. All the power

he and I have leveraged notwithstanding, I guess we still can't influence the future, can we? Finn thought self-deprecatingly.

Despite it all, he couldn't help imagining some alternate reality where both sides found common ground and resolved things peacefully. That, too, was why he had to achieve victory.

Sorry, Leon. For Mia's sake, I can't afford to lose either.

Chapter 2: Those Being Deployed

AFTER RETURNING to the capital, I headed straight for the palace, which was already buzzing like a beehive that had erupted into panic. Everyone was bustling around, trying to make sure we'd gotten all the supplies our enormous fleet needed. For the government officials, this moment was the climax of their battle. I suspected they'd be similarly swamped once the war was over, but they were just going to have to cross that bridge when they came to it.

I chatted with Luxion as we made our way down a corridor.

"Maybe we should've sent some of the Als to help them out," I said. "That would've reduced the load on the officials here."

"We do not have extra resources to expend on that," Luxion shot back coldly. "They must simply make do with what they have. Their efforts have given us an 80 percent surplus on manpower to spend elsewhere."

"Sounds like you just want to work us humans to the bone."

"A necessary sacrifice for our victory," Luxion reminded me. "Besides, this is their job. They need to manage this much on their own."

Luxion was accustomed to joking around and took it in stride. That made him comfortable company, since I didn't want to walk on eggshells. It was almost like we were best friends who'd known each other for decades. I couldn't help smiling at the thought.

As we walked, someone up ahead noticed and hurried toward me. It was Miss Louise of the Alzer Republic.

"You're finally back," she said, planting her hands on her hips with a bit of anger. It dissipated just as quickly, her lips pulling into a smile as she studied my face.

"Feels odd, having you here to welcome me back," I replied. Miss Louise was a foreign princess, after all. All the same, having someone I knew welcome me

here was reassuring.

Miss Louise shrugged. "Well, unfortunately, I have nothing better to do. I can't help with the grunt work, so I've settled into a position as Holfort's Alzerian hostage."

"Hostage?" I cried. "No way."

We had asked the Alzer Republic for their help in this war. It was inconceivable that we would then take a hostage against them.

She grinned at me. "It's optics for your aristocracy. Many of them seem to be struggling to accept foreign soldiers' help. It was Lady Mylene's suggestion, and I happily agreed to it."

"Really? Miss Mylene suggested it?" The edges of my mouth pulled back into a grin at the mention of her name.

Miss Louise was none too pleased about that. "I hear you've got quite the crush on her. Is that true?"

"No way," I said with a strangled laugh, trying to play it off. "There's an insurmountable wall between the two of us."

Miss Louise gave me a hard look that said she didn't believe me in the least. "Well, no matter. Your fiancées are preparing the *Licorne* for the coming battle. I think they'll probably come back in a few more hours."

I glanced at Luxion. His lens moved up and down, signaling that Miss Louise was correct. "In that case, I guess we have some waiting to do. Maybe we should focus on wrapping up some other work beforehand."

"In that case," interjected Louise, "why not go greet the duke first?"

"The duke? Oh, right."

Miss Louise had persuaded me to head straight for Master's office. When I walked in, there were piles of paperwork inside. Master was visibly exhausted too, but no less dapper for it. The two of us sat across from each other, enjoying the scent of freshly brewed tea. Well, fully enjoying it was difficult with the thick smell of paper and ink permeating the air, but it was pleasant enough.

"I was surprised to hear you're actually a duke and that rat bastard Roland's uncle," I told him.

Master smiled apologetically at me and straightened his posture. "I forsook my status and middle name to become a professor at the academy so I could watch over the kingdom. It wasn't a story I felt I should spread around. But now, considering the way everything's turned out, all I can do is apologize to you for the whole thing." He bowed his head.

"Please, don't worry about it!" I blurted out quickly. "I completely understand. You had your own reasons for doing that. Besides, you're helping us out now." I cracked a smile at him, which left him puzzled for a moment. Then he broke into a grin as well.

"If it's within my capabilities, I am happy to help the younger generation as much as I can. I regret that I ran from my duties before, and I won't do it anymore." Master spoke in a self-deprecating way, but his expression was rather cheerful.

"Master..."

A comfortable silence settled between the two of us.

Unable to withstand it for long, Miss Mylene started clearing her throat. "Ahem! Ahem! Would you two kindly not ignore my presence? It's a bit—really only a tiny bit—isolating." Her eyes shimmered with tears.

At her protests, we turned our attention to her with awkward smiles.

"Miss Mylene," I said, "you really have outdone yourself supporting us again. I heard from Angie that you've been at her side to help the entire time. I can't thank you enough."

Her cheeks colored, and she smiled. "Oh, it's fine. Angie's still my pupil, after all. I thought this was a good opportunity to wrap up her education."

"Yeah?"

To me, it was odd that she was talking about finishing Angie's education.

Before I could think to ask what she meant, though, my eyes focused on

Mylene's appearance. She'd obviously been busy, because faded ink stains still

clung to her fingers. I noticed faint circles under her eyes, barely hidden beneath her makeup. My heart sank with guilt as I saw how hard she'd obviously been pushing herself.

Just a few minutes earlier, Luxion had insisted that everyone at the palace needed to make do, and I had agreed with him. It wasn't until I saw for myself how Miss Mylene looked, clearly pushed to her very limits, that I realized how shortsighted I had been. The most pathetic part was that I couldn't even say anything intelligent to her about it.

Miss Mylene stared into my eyes. "Let me say this to you about the upcoming battle: If we don't win, there will be no second chances."

"Her Majesty—that is, Lady Mylene—is absolutely correct," Master jumped in. He paused briefly only to correct himself; I wasn't sure why. "We will be using up all our stockpiles and provisions for this battle. There may be a little left, granted, but not enough for us to afford a rematch against the empire. I hope you'll keep that in mind."

Our country was already exhausted from continuous wars. Miss Mylene was right to say there would be no second chances. Primarily because, as Master pointed out, we wouldn't have enough supplies to try such a thing, even if we wanted to. If we lost, that'd be it. The empire would trample right over us.

"That's fine," I said, taking a sip from the cup of tea Master had prepared for me. "I planned to make this our final battle anyway. It never even crossed my mind that we'd have another chance."

Miss Mylene and Master traded anxious looks.

I could already tell what they were going to ask me and rose from my seat. "Your tea is absolutely incredible, Master. Thank you for letting me enjoy a cup before we set off."

Master lowered his gaze. "I am only ashamed that this is the best I can offer a friend who is about to march off to probable death."

I was pleased that he thought highly enough of me to call me a friend.

"Nah." I shook my head. "This was the best send-off you could give me."

Miss Mylene lifted herself from her chair, clasping her hands tightly as she faced me. "I pray you have good luck out on the battlefield."

My heart pricked with guilt at how sincerely she spoke those words. To hide my emotions, I blurted out the same kind of lighthearted nonsense I always did in these situations. "If I've got you praying for me, the heavens might actually bless me out on the field."

"I see you're the same as always, cracking jokes." She frowned at me as if she wished I'd take this more seriously, which made her all the more adorable.

"That's just who I am. Also..." The next words left my mouth before I had a chance to think them over. "I love you, Miss Mylene."

"Wha...?!" Blood rushed to her cheeks.

I was pleased with myself for getting one over on her.

"Mr. Leon," Master gasped, wide-eyed. "You really are—"

"Oh, of course I love you as well, Master. I can't thank you enough for showing me how incredible tea is."

Being here was getting awkward; my little prank had probably annoyed them both. I scrambled from the room, eager to head elsewhere. Before I left entirely, I glanced over my shoulder and told them, "Thank you for all you've done for me. I'm so grateful to both of you."

Master had helped me develop a true appreciation of the art of tea. Then there was Mylene, who—despite being a mature adult—still possessed a bit of adorable childishness. The two had done so much for me that I wanted them to know how significant it had been before I headed out.

Luxion, who'd kept his silence the entire time, followed close by my shoulder as I stepped into the hallway.



"'I love you' was quite a strong statement to make," he observed.

"Love comes in all forms," I explained. "Respectful love, platonic love..."

"If you are going to spend time discussing love, why not prioritize doing so with your three fiancées first?"

I sniffed at his suggestion. "Don't you think 'I love you' would sound like a joke coming from me?"

"So you intend not to express your feelings to them simply because you think they might misconstrue you? It seems to me you should profess your love for them more regularly. Then you would not be in such a situation," he said.

"I feel like the words lose their meaning if you say them all the time."

"According to Cleare's data, regularly expressing love for a person tends to maintain the relationship better," Luxion informed me very matter-of-factly.

"What? You want me to turn into Roland?"

I pictured our womanizing king, always whispering sweet nothings to whatever girl took his fancy. And, as luck had it, I ran right into him in the hallway. He was distracted by one of the women who worked here at the palace. The two were talking and smiling.

He's definitely hitting on her. "Is our king seriously out here flirting while everyone else is up to their ears in work?" I grumbled loudly.

The woman with him stopped and turned to face me. For a moment, she seemed bewildered.

Is something on my face? I patted my cheeks to be sure but found nothing.

Roland leaned in, whispering something to the woman, then sent her on her way. I expected him to fling his usual insults at me, but to my surprise, he said, "Ah, our kingdom's hero. What a relief to see you've finally returned. Mylene has been terribly worried about you."

"You're creeping me out." I retreated a step, grimacing at how polite he was acting.

He frowned as if offended. "I was only trying to be considerate. However little

you might think of me, even I feel badly about the size of the burden I've forced on you this time."

"If you feel bad, work harder. Everyone else is bending over backward to get things done, and you're out here trying to snag women. It's disgusting," I said.

Luxion shuddered and made a sound like he was sighing at me. As if that wasn't enough, he then moved his eye from side to side like he was shaking his head. "After the way you acted earlier with Mylene, you do not have a leg to stand on."

"Why?" I tilted my head in genuine confusion.

Roland stared at me solemnly, which was rare from him. He'd never worn that expression in the audience chamber during our official interactions. It was almost as though he was actually worried about me.

"There's no wisdom left for me to give at this point," he said. "But as your predecessor, let me provide one small piece of advice: You have a habit of shouldering more responsibility than necessary."

I quirked a brow. "You're giving me advice? Have you lost your mind?"

"Stop being petty. I'm serious," Roland snapped.

I closed my mouth.

"You need to relax a little more," he continued. "Relying on Angelica like I relied on Mylene would be a great start. If you don't, all the things you're trying to shoulder will get so heavy they'll crush you under their weight."

His concern had me dumbfounded, but I couldn't let his "advice" go completely unchallenged. "I'd argue you need to be much more responsible."

"You're the same as ever. Not happy unless you can get a barb in, huh, brat?"

I wasn't going to bother calling Roland "Your Majesty" at this point, nor was I going to bother addressing him with flowery, polite language. I was treating him the way I'd treat anyone else. He didn't bother to reproach me, at least not on that point. It seemed like, in his own way, he was trying to look out for me.

"I leave the rest to you. Don't die out there, brat." Roland spun around and strode away, leaving me with those final words.

Chapter 3: Soul Food

THE LICORNE WAS DOCKED at a harbor in the capital.

"Is Angie aboard with the other girls?" I asked.

"Yes. She doesn't want to be the only one left behind in the capital," Cleare explained cheerfully. She was the one who'd brought the *Licorne* here. "You really are loved, Master."

I sighed. "To be honest, I'd prefer they all stay here, not just Angie." I didn't want the three going to the battlefield, but the circumstances wouldn't let them sit out.

"You might not like it, but we need Liv's powers," Cleare said, eager to list the reasons the girls' participation would be a boon. "Same goes for Nelly. We have the Sacred Tree on board, and we need her to control it."

"Seriously? You've got the Sacred Tree aboard the Licorne?" I asked.

"Yes. It will be a huge help in resolving our energy problems." Cleare blithely went on to report that our chances of victory had increased thanks to the tree and the girls. It felt to me like she was indirectly driving home the point that our odds would plummet without Livia and Noelle; we *needed* them.

"Can we at least have Angie disembark?" I said hopefully.

"She may not be integral to the battle, but she doesn't wish to disembark. If you are that intent on her not coming along, you will have to convince her," said Cleare.

I gave up and started up the ramp into the ship.

I arrived at the *Licorne's* bridge to find it transformed. It had been renovated to make space for the Sacred Tree Sapling, which sat at the rear of the bridge in a large, round flower bed. I wasn't entirely sure how the Sacred Tree Sapling

was connected to the Licorne, but it was apparently feeding the ship energy.

"Our Sacred Tree Sapling is now the Licorne's energy supply, huh?" I said.

"Yes," answered Cleare. "And what a splendid battery it is."

It was a little sad to see what was an object of worship in the Alzer Republic, which our former enemy Ideal had claimed was humanity's hope, reduced to a "battery."

As soon as Angie realized we'd arrived, she spun around. Her eyes were dewy, as if she might burst out crying, but she blinked the tears away and smiled. "Finally back, eh? A lot of people were kicking up a fuss because we're about to set out, and you were nowhere to be seen. It was a mess."

She and the other girls wore new outfits: pilot suits made with ease of movement in mind. The fabric clung to their bodies, showing each curve and outline. The design was so suggestive that something enticed me anywhere I looked. Angie's suit was black and red with gold trim; around her shoulders was a red cloak, the top lined with white fur.

Angie didn't seem the least bit embarrassed to be seen in her new attire, but Livia had the opposite reaction.

"Eek! Mr. Leon, you can't be in here!" She grabbed the edges of her blue cloak, sinking to the floor as she wrapped it around herself. From what I glimpsed beneath it, her suit was blue and white.

Noelle cackled at Livia, whose blush had traveled all the way to her ears. Noelle's suit was green and white with a deep-emerald cloak. She glanced up at me and spun in place to show off her outfit. The cloak billowed, making it easy to see everything.

"Cleare went out of her way to make us these, so we're all wearing them," she said.

My eyes moved to Cleare.

"What do you think, Master?" she asked proudly. "Fine work, wouldn't you say? I designed them to be more highly functional than any ordinary piece of clothing, so not wearing them would be silly."

Perhaps she was right about that, but although the suits covered the girls' bodies entirely, they were so tight that they hugged every curve. No wonder Livia was embarrassed. It would be a treat for anyone to glimpse the girls, but given the situation, I wished the garments weren't so provocative.

"Who are you planning to show them off to?" I demanded.

"You, of course," said Cleare. "I designed them for your benefit. You won't be able to appreciate them during the battle, so make sure you enjoy this moment for all it's worth!"

I sighed at her "present," but if her words were to be believed, I couldn't really complain.

Luxion proceeded to scan the girls. "While I must say the outfit designs have their issues, I can confirm that Cleare is correct about their quality and functionality," he reported. "Proper equipment will improve the wearer's chances of survival, so I strongly suggest they remain in these suits."

I pressed a hand to my forehead, peeking between my fingers to get a better look at the girls. If you ignored the suits' suggestiveness, Luxion was right: There was no point making the girls take them off. We didn't have extra time for Cleare to revise the designs either. I'd have to accept them as they were.

"I just don't want anyone else to see them like this," I said.

Noelle responded first, perking up. "Are you being possessive of us?"

"I guess I am," I admitted with a shrug. "But, to be honest, what I want most is for all three of you to disembark and stay here in the capital."

Forgetting her embarrassment, Livia shot to her feet. Her expression hardened, and she stared up at me. "I have no intention of leaving this ship. I'm going with you, to fight *for* you, Mr. Leon."

"Livia," I said as softly as I could, "there's no need to go to such lengths. This is the one battle where I'll have my hands full, so I won't be able to protect you. That's why I—"

"That's why you want me to stay?" Livia's voice dropped to a growl. "How long will you keep mocking me like this until you've had your fill?"

I flinched. Wow, she's really angry. The two of us had known each other long enough for me to pick that up in an instant.

Then she flashed a smile. "I want to help you. You don't need to protect me."

"But I—"

"After coming this far, we have no choice but to go at the enemy with everything we've got. You know that," Noelle interjected, hands on her hips. "I'm not getting off the ship either, Leon. Besides, you need my power, since I'm the Sacred Tree's Priestess." She thrust out her hand, showing where the crest darkened the skin on the back, and winked at me. She was probably trying to reassure me that there was nothing to worry about.

My gaze moved to Angie. She was the only one without a legitimate excuse for being aboard the *Licorne*. She understood that too, but seemed to have no intention of leaving.

Angie peered out the window. "I'm sending all those warships out to face certain death. I won't wait behind where it's safest," she said. "I may not be able to do anything to help, but I can at least be there to watch how the battle plays out."

"There's no need for you to," I insisted. "No one would complain if you disembarked and stayed behind. You've already done so much to set all this up. If not for you, we wouldn't have this many troops. You've done enough."

My words didn't sway her at all. "If we lose this battle, we lose everything," she reminded me. "I want to be there with everyone."

"Angie..." I tried again, pleading.

"I know I'm being selfish, but regardless, I...I want to be there with you, Leon."

All three stared at me with determination in their eyes. I resigned myself. Arguing any more with them than I already had would be a wasted effort.

"Make sure you listen to whatever Cleare says," I said. "If you have to retreat, leave me behind and go. You need to promise me that. If you don't, I won't let you come along, no matter what you say."

The three girls exchanged glances and nodded.

"All right," agreed Angie, "we'll follow your orders."

"But can you promise us something in exchange, Mr. Leon?" asked Livia.

"What?" I said.

"Promise us, right here and now, that you'll do whatever it takes to survive and come back to us." There was deep sadness in her eyes as she looked at me.

Trying my hardest to sound as natural and composed as possible, I answered, "I can't say for sure that I can keep such a promise, but I swear to at least do my best."

It was mostly lip service. My odds of surviving this weren't high.

Livia must've sensed what I was thinking, because her eyes narrowed. All emotion drained from her face. "That was a lie just now, Mr. Leon."

"Huh?!" My jaw dropped. Panic set in, and cold beads of sweat dripped down my back. How had she seen right through me?

"You have a tell when you lie," she explained, staring hard at me.

I'd never known that, and I couldn't believe she'd discovered the tell; that was even more terrifying. "You're kidding," I said, still in disbelief.

Her expression softened. "Yes, I am," she said. "You don't have a tell. But you were surprised I saw through your lie, weren't you?"

I stiffened. She was right. I was so surprised, in fact, that I couldn't even find the words to respond.

"You've sure gotten tougher, Livia," said Angie.

Noelle furrowed her brow. "I'm not sure 'tougher' is the right word. Maybe 'scarier' would be more accurate."

Even Luxion and Cleare whispered to themselves.

"It does not surprise me in the least that she saw straight through his falsehood," said Luxion.

"He has a habit of lying a lot, right?" agreed Cleare. "That makes it easy."

Livia ignored everyone's reactions and stepped closer, reaching her hands out

to cup my cheeks. She pressed hard, making my lips pucker.

"W-Wibia?!" I sputtered.

"So many people would be devastated if you died," she told me. "But I'd be most brokenhearted because I love you most. More than Angie and Miss Noelle. I can promise you that." She released my cheeks but pressed her forehead to my chest. "So please do whatever it takes to come home to us. I don't want to live in a world without you. It would be too painful."

I knew she was probably in tears already, so I wrapped my arms around her. At the same moment, the bridge door swung open, accompanied by a familiar voice.

"Whoa. Can't believe you guys really moved the Sacred Tree onto the ship," Carla blurted out.

Kyle stopped short behind her, carrying their luggage. "Um, hello," he said awkwardly, realizing their poor timing when he spotted Livia in my arms. He averted his eyes, unsure where he should look.

Marie came up behind them, clad in the Saint's relics. "Don't just stand in the middle of the doorway," she barked at her two followers. "Go on in. I can't enter until you—"

Her eyes finally landed on Livia and me.

"Oh, uh, ah ha ha... Looks like we interrupted something." She reached forward and grabbed the backs of Carla's and Kyle's shirts, then dragged them back into the hallway, slamming the door behind them.

By that point, the mood was already ruined.

Angie sighed. "It's hardly the time for a serious conversation after that."

Noelle pouted, lips puckered. "I'd like to contest that part about Olivia loving Leon most." She wasn't about to let Livia's remarks on that subject fly.

Angie grinned. "I have to agree with you there. I care a lot for Livia, but I'm not letting that go unchallenged."

Livia lifted her face off my chest, her eyes red and slightly swollen. She stared at the other girls, arms wrapped tightly around me. "I was the first one who met

Mr. Leon, so naturally I love him the most deeply!"

It was hard to believe she was arguing the point with them; she'd been so withdrawn and timid when we first met.

Angie and Noelle rushed toward us, throwing their arms around me.

"Should we have Leon decide who'd be saddest?" Angie suggested with a mischievous, childlike grin on her face.

I grimaced. "No, I'd rather not," I said. "I don't think it's possible to measure the love you three have for me."

Noelle smirked. "Yes, I can see this is the kind of question that makes you really uncomfortable. That's why I'd like a precise answer from you."

I couldn't answer a dangerous question like this when I knew that whatever answer I came up with would hurt two of the three. I had to rack my brain for some solution that wouldn't upset any of them.

I took a deep breath, then said, "I think you all love me equally."

It was a non-answer, admittedly. As punishment, all three girls began crushing me in their embrace.

"Hold on a sec!" I cried. "Give me time to think of another response!"

"I knew you'd give that answer." Angie snickered. "Such a predictable man." They finally let go.

"Lady Marie, Lady Marie!" squealed Carla. "The four of them are embracing. Their relationship was like some romance drama for a moment there, but it looks like they've managed to make up." She peeked through the door, spying on Leon and his fiancées and reporting all the minute details to Marie.

Kyle gave her a look of exasperation. "You sure do like those plays with dramatic romances between people," he commented. "I kind of understand why, but it's in poor taste to peek."

Despite his reproach, she couldn't swallow her curiosity. "I can't help it; it's so entertaining. Oh! Goodness, what a passionate kiss..."

"What?!" Kyle was interested instantly. He rushed to the door to peek along with her.

Marie leaned against the wall a short distance away. Her fingers tightened around the Saint's Staff in her hands. *Gross. The last thing I want to see is my brother's love life playing out.* She wasn't the least bit interested in seeing his fiancées kissing him either. Still, her mind was preoccupied with Leon for a very different reason.

He's got three fiancées. He needs to survive this...unlike me.

After disembarking the *Licorne*, my next destination was the *Einhorn*, which was docked at the palace's royal harbor. Once I was on board, I headed straight for the hangar. The idiot brigade's Armors had already been stored inside. Besides the improvements Luxion had made to their suits, the designs had been changed to something more appropriate for what was to be our final battle.

When I entered, Greg stepped out of his Armor's cockpit; he'd apparently been making some final adjustments.

"Finally back, are ya?" he said.

"What do you think of your new Armor?" I asked.

When an Armor's specs were altered suddenly at the last minute before an important battle, the biggest burden was placed on its pilot. Despite that, Greg just flexed his arms at me, which I took to mean everything was fine.

"It's amazin'," he enthused. "I like how you even threw in a secret weapon for me."

"Secret weapon?" I cocked my head to the side.

"Due to their sudden implementation, those additional weapons are imperfect. However, I added one to every Armor with each individual's strengths in mind," Luxion helpfully explained.

Brad strode over. "Our Armors' basic functionality has improved so we can actually protect you." He was carrying Rose and Mary—his pet dove and rabbit—in his arms and smiling gleefully.

I furrowed my brow. "You guys are going to protect *me*? Don't tell me you're actually planning to tag along with me?" My face twisted in disbelief.

"We can't let you carry all the burden on your own." Chris made his way over, his hand carrying a small bundle of cloth. "With that out of the way, do you mind if I use this fabric to make myself a loincloth?"

The fabric in question was a Lost Item I'd picked up when treasure hunting.

"You don't seriously plan to wear only a loincloth while you pilot your Armor?" I said.

"No. Unfortunately, that wouldn't make sense," Chris replied forlornly. "I assure you, I will wear my pilot suit. But I think I should at least be able to wear whatever undergarment I prefer beneath it."

And, according to him, the undergarment in question needed to be a loincloth. I was flabbergasted.

"Yeah, I wanted to go in just underwear, but I gave up and put on the suit," Greg informed me.

I shook my head in disgust. "Shut up, you idiots."

"Please!" Chris pleaded, clasping my arm and clinging. "This precious fabric is thin but durable, so it'll fit seamlessly under my suit. I simply must wear a loincloth for our decisive final battle!"

"Fine. Just get off me!" I snapped.

Jilk was the next to step out of his cockpit and join us, having finished whatever final adjustments he needed to make. "You all seem awfully relaxed in the lead-up to a battle," he said. "Leaving all your ruckus aside, why are there five Armors instead of four?"

The rest of the idiot brigade shared his confusion. There were actually six Armors, including Arroganz. The one that caught their attention was a white suit which had received improvements similar to theirs. Judging by their bewildered looks, they didn't think anyone was present to pilot it, so it made no sense to them that it was even here.

"Oh, that one?" I nodded toward it, ready to spill the beans. "The pilot will be

The echo of approaching footsteps interrupted me. Our heads swiveled to look at the interloper. Brad put Rose and Mary down, shooing them to safety. Chris and Greg whipped out their weapons. Jilk already had his pistol in his hand.

The atmosphere was fraught with tension due to the appearance of a masked knight. He was clad in a pilot suit, a cloak billowing behind him. His face was partly hidden under a half mask that covered his eyes. He looked more like he was about to attend a masquerade ball than take part in a war.

The masked knight stopped in front of me and proclaimed, "I will be the one piloting this Armor." He seemed quite proud of his timely appearance. Everything about him was exaggerated, from his body language to his speech.

I wonder if that's because he's Roland's son.

"It's been a while, gentlemen," continued the masked knight. "I will join this fight alongside you." He flung his arms out dramatically, punctuating his statement.

Greg pointed his spear at the man. "What've you come here for, you pervert knight?!"

"Masked knight!" he corrected. "I have told you this dozens of times! Why can't you get it right?!"

I heaved a long, drawn-out sigh. How many times had we been through this? "How long are you guys going to keep up this stupid charade?"

"I empathize, Master," Luxion said, similarly exasperated.

Jilk aimed the barrel of his gun at the masked knight. "You keep popping up again and again. Who are you, exactly? If you don't intend to reveal yourself, I would ask that you leave."

"I am your ally," said the knight. "The five of us have fought together countless times, haven't we?"

Brad had his hands ready to call upon his magic if the need arose. He looked warily at the knight. "I'll admit you've assisted us repeatedly, but we ought to

keep uncertain elements to a minimum in a battle of this magnitude. We can't rule out the possibility that you're actually an imperial. In fact, we can't trust you at all with your face hidden like that."

The four idiots were deeply suspicious of the masked intruder. Brad had voiced their worst fear: that the man could be an enemy spy who would betray us in the heat of battle.

What a ridiculous notion.

Chris had his sword raised. He was willing to cut down the knight if he made any wrong moves. "Why not take off that ridiculous mask and show us who you really are?"

Sick of the theatrics, I plopped down on a nearby wooden box. "Luxion, I'm starving," I said. "Can't you get me something to eat?"

"I would prefer you not eat anything too heavy before the battle," he replied.

I rolled my eyes. "This could be my last meal. Come on, don't you have anything?"

"It does not sound like you are joking," he snapped. "We have rice in the storeroom, so I will prepare rice balls for you."

That brought a grin to my face. I hadn't expected I'd get to have rice balls. "Awesome. This'll be the best last meal of my life."

"Master, I advise you to cease making humorless jokes like that in the future. Now, I must go prepare the meal." He promptly drifted away.

With Luxion gone, I turned my attention back to the idiot brigade and their little comedy show. They still had their weapons turned toward the knight, who'd given up trying to convince them at this point. I didn't know what benefit there was in continuing to disguise himself to begin with.

The knight reached toward his mask. "Your fears are completely understandable, so allow me to demonstrate my sincerity." He lifted the mask and shook his head, letting his hair dance around his face. Hidden beneath the disguise was none other than Julius.

There were audible gasps from the rest of the idiot brigade.

Jilk spoke first, his voice thick with disbelief. "It was you all along...Your Highness?" His jaw dropped.

Julius smiled at him. "Yes. I was the masked knight all this time."

Chris grimaced, feeling awkward now. He lowered his sword. "I'd never have guessed, Your Highness."

Had they really not caught on? What was wrong with their heads? Or was this all part of an act? If so, I wished someone would let me in on it. I was starting to think I was going crazy.

While I inwardly questioned their sanity—and mine—Brad relaxed his posture and reflected on their past encounters with the knight. "Now that I think about it, the prince was never around when the masked knight arrived. No wonder he knew so much about us and always showed up at the most opportune time to help us."

Yeah. You're right about that, at least. At the same time, I wished they'd realized sooner; it was ridiculously unbelievable that they hadn't noticed. Part of me wanted to believe they'd just pretended out of consideration for Julius. But no, that was wishful thinking. These morons always managed to betray my expectations in the most mind-bending ways.

"Wait, Julius was the masked knight this whole time?" Greg was so shocked he dropped his spear. "No one coulda seen that coming."

Oh, come on. The possibility should've entered your mind at least once.

Julius beamed, bolstered by his friends' surprise at the revelation. He ran his fingers through his bangs and struck a pose. "I decided this time I'd remove my mask to fight beside you all."

"Hmph," grunted Greg, brushing the back of his finger over his nose. "Do whatever you want. At least, with things the way they are now, it won't cause problems if you join us."

I had no idea why they were spinning this into some heavy moment. To me, this was extremely absurd comedy. There was something odd about what Greg had said, though. Roland had disinherited Julius, so he was no longer crown prince, which effectively negated any political role he could've played. Still, he

was a *prince*. Although Greg said it wouldn't "cause problems" for him to join us, I'd have argued that it still presented plenty of issues. Diminished or not, he was royalty.

It didn't help that Julius's younger brother, Jake, had stopped seeking the throne. He'd abandoned it to prioritize his love for Erin, formerly a boy named Aaron. Gone was his intense ambition for power. He was head over heels for Erin now. With Jake's candidacy eliminated, Julius was in the running to be named crown prince once more. Thus, his participation in this battle could potentially cause many people issues.

In other words, it was odd Greg claimed otherwise.

Then again, given Roland's tendency to sleep around, he's probably got a couple other illegitimate kids who could sit on the throne if necessary. Once all this was over, the kingdom would need to carefully consider whom to appoint crown prince. I hoped they'd choose someone more prudently this time around; both Julius and Jake had been terrible candidates.

By the time their little act was over, Luxion had returned with my rice balls. He'd even prepared green tea to go along with them. *That's my partner for you!*

"Apologies for the wait, Master," he said.

"No, thanks for doing this. Mmm. Yeah, this is the stuff."

The rice balls had no filling, but he'd added the perfect amount of salt and wrapped them in seaweed. I could never forget the taste and familiarity of classic rice balls; nostalgia made me reach for them eagerly.

Julius and the rest of the idiot brigade were completely finished with their little farce, apparently. They watched curiously as I chowed down, my cheeks filling with rice.

"What?" I said, brows knitted. It was hard to eat with them all gaping at me.

"Nothing. I was just mulling over what an odd-looking food that is," said Julius. "What exactly is it?"

They all studied the rice balls, intrigued.

I continued chewing. "Rice balls," I answered between bites.

"Rice balls? Mind if we try?"

They circled me, each taking one to eat. Luxion had made plenty, so I didn't really mind sharing. *They're sure being awfully brazen, though.*

Jilk chewed a few bites, swallowed, and narrowed his eyes. "This is strange," he concluded.

Rude.

But he wasn't the only one. Everyone reached the same general consensus.

"It's all sticky," Brad complained, wrinkling his nose.

I scowled at them. "If you don't like it, don't eat it."

Greg practically inhaled his, but he cocked his head once he was finished. "Never had anything like it. Might as well eat bread instead of this stuff."

I reached for my third rice ball. "This is my soul food," I shot back. "If you guys want to make fun of it, I'll kick you off the ship."

Steam still rose from the rice balls, making Chris's glasses fog over as he ate his. "So you're saying rice balls are Marie's soul food as well? That's good to know."

Of course. Nothing matters to them unless it involves Marie. I went quiet and focused on eating.

"Leon," Julius said suddenly, examining his rice ball. "Have you had that important conversation with Angelica and the other ladies yet?"

By "important conversation," he meant telling them the truth about reincarnating here with past-life memories. Marie had already told Julius and the others about that, but I had no intention of ever letting my fiancées know. Okay, no—it was more like I didn't think this was the right time to tell them.

"They're a lot more sensitive than you guys," I said. "So I'm not telling them. Not right now. No sense giving them more to worry about when we've got enough on our plate already."

My response initially turned Julius's expression sour, and by the time I finished, he looked crestfallen instead. "If it were me, I'd want to know my

beloved's circumstances. I was very happy when Marie shared everything with us."

Sure, but realistically, how many people would believe someone who said they'd reincarnated and had memories from their previous life? I, at least, wouldn't buy it for a second.

"You guys believing Marie instantly was the exception," I insisted. "If you told a normal person that, they'd think you were crazy. I'm surprised how easily you accepted Marie after all that."

It was great that it had gone well, but I personally thought it was entirely unnecessary for Marie to tell them the whole truth. My mind hadn't changed just because they took it in stride either. That was why I also didn't see the point of following her example.

Jilk sipped the green tea Luxion had provided. "We love Miss Marie for who she is as a person. It was a shock to hear that she'd reincarnated here, but what difference does it really make? That's my stance."

Greg nodded, wolfing down his third rice ball. "You said it. I fell for Marie's personality!"

If you love her personality, you're a bunch of fools, I thought. I wasn't above telling them. "Hate to break it to you, but she has the personality of a nasty middle-aged woman. Are you guys crazy or something?"

They were obviously blind if they thought Marie was an amazing person. Actually, I was starting to worry that she'd really pulled the wool over their eyes.

"It has nothing to do with her appearance or mental age." Brad shook his head at me. "To put it simply, she's a good woman."

A good woman? Are they insane? I was both baffled and disgusted.

With flushed cheeks, Chris gushed, "She was captivating at first because she had this mysterious air, like she had a bunch of secrets. But it's so incredible that she actually remembers her past life. Marie really is something else."

Was it really "mysterious" that she'd been hiding her past life from them?

Nah. These guys are idiots, plain and simple. It was actually kind of a relief that they were so stupid.

"Yeah? Well, I'll trust you guys to look after her, then," I said. "And don't make too much trouble for her."

"We won't let you down in that regard. We'll protect her," Julius assured me, his cheeks reddening as he added, "I promise you that, Brother-In-Law."

"Did...did you just say 'Brother-In-Law'?!" I squeaked, eyes widening.

Julius blinked at me in confusion. "Yes. Isn't that what you are to us? If you're her brother, that makes you our brother-in-law. Glad to be part of the family, Brother-In-Law."

"Stop!" I screeched, my face contorted in utter disgust. "Hearing one of you guys call me that gives me goosebumps!"

At that, all five of them grinned.

"In that case," Brad said, winking, "we absolutely *have* to call you Brother-In-Law."

"You're a real piece of work, you know that? Malicious and a narcissist," I said venomously.

"I'm quite proud of how much I love myself," Brad said. "And at any rate, dearest Brother-In-Law, you of all people have no right to call others 'malicious.'"

I sneered.

Chris clapped me on the shoulder. "I promise to take good care of your little sister, Brother-In-Law."

"Stop calling me that! And don't give me a cheesy line like that until you're at least independent enough to make it on your own," I said. How could he make such an empty promise when I covered their living expenses? He had some nerve. On top of that, Marie was the one looking after them, not the other way around!

Tearing off his shirt, Greg bellowed, "I'll protect Marie with these glorious muscles, Leon—or should I say Brother-In-Laaaaw!" He posed, showing them

off.

"Don't scream in my ear, you dunce! Enough with this brother-in-law crap!" I snatched his shirt off the ground and hurled it at him. They had me so enraged that my shoulders rose and fell with each breath.

"What we call you is honestly trivial in the end," Jilk said, trying to placate me. "I'll protect Marie. You needn't worry about that."

"Of course you will; that's only common sense. And don't you dare call the 'brother-in-law' thing *trivial*! It's major to me!" I said.

It was all too obvious that they were messing with me.

Julius pressed his hand over his mouth, trying desperately to hold back laughter. "Pfft," he burst out. "It's not exactly fashionable to have a sister complex, Brother-In-Law. So why not find it in your heart to celebrate your sister leaving the nest?"

"Graaaaaah!" I cried, my voice echoing. I clenched a fist and swung it right at Julius's face, sending him flying back.

When he eventually climbed to his feet, he shouted, "You shouldn't resort to violence simply because we called you our brother-in-law! Just to be clear, our relationship with your sister is far purer than the one you insist on maintaining with my *mother*!"

He flung himself at me, and the two of us tussled as we kept bickering.

"Miss Mylene is a completely different story!"

"No, she isn't!"

The other four, exasperated by our squabble, gave us a wide berth.

"Nothing you ever say or do will get me to let you call me 'Brother-In-Law'!" I shouted at the top of my lungs.

Luxion floated in the air at a distance. "Considering that Marie was your sister in your past life, and reincarnated here, I see no issue with them referring to you as their brother-in-law," he said, his voice seeming to echo. "You are needlessly stubborn, Master. There is no reason not to be flexible and make this small concession."

"'Small,' my ass! I don't want them calling me 'Brother-In-Law,' period!"

"Does that mean you deem them incapable of looking after Marie?" he asked.

"No," I admitted. "I think they can. I mean, as long as she and they are okay with their whole dynamic, then... Yeah, sure."

It was a reverse harem, after all. One woman with five men. I didn't quite understand it, but it was none of my business if they were all happy with it.

Julius flushed. "My. You're being awfully understanding, Brother-In-Law."

The other four grinned at me too.

See, this is why I hate their guts.

Chapter 4: The Past

A SMALL BANQUET was being held for the troops from Vordenoit's fleet. High-ranking knights and commissioned officers were gathered inside Arcadia's large reception hall. Finn and the other Demonic Knights were present as well.

Food and alcohol were served to raise the troops' morale, since they'd reached the main landmass of Holfort Kingdom, and the battle would start soon. Seats weren't provided, as people were meant to stand and mingle. The participants did just that, enjoying conversation while they drank and sampled delicacies.

Finn stood against the wall, arms crossed. He wasn't partaking in the food or drink.

Lienhart Lua Kirchner made his way over. The young fifteen-year-old, a prodigious swordsman, had claimed the Demonic Knights' third seat. He had gleaming red eyes and long, fiery red hair separated into dozens of rows on his head. It looked like it must've taken him forever to groom it into that style.

"You seem awfully gloomy and depressed, sir," he said mockingly.

Finn remained perfectly still, only his gaze moving to Lienhart. "And you seem to be enjoying yourself."

Lienhart had piled a bunch of food on his plate. He tossed piece after piece into his mouth merrily, grinning back at Finn. His attitude made it clear how much he enjoyed the thrill of battle. "What's not to love about taking out powerful enemies? Rumor has it that Bartfort even gave you a run for your money. Don't worry—I'll kill him for you." He was posturing, confident that he could take out Leon. However, it was also meant as a challenge, since Finn had failed to assassinate the man.

Another young man made his way over, eager to join the conversation: Laimer Lua Kirchner, Lienhart's older brother, who held the fifth seat. He was tall, his own red hair cut short and swept back. He was also zealous and hottempered, which was why Finn avoided him.

"You guys talking about the Scumbag Knight?" asked Laimer. "Finn, you seriously couldn't bring him down, even though you've got the first seat?" Laimer was still young at only twenty-one years old, although that was still older than Finn, despite Finn's higher status.

"No," Finn confirmed. "He's strong."

Lienhart sneered at his brother. "For the newbie in the order, you're awfully cocky, coming over and butting into our conversation like this." Their family relationship did nothing to convince Lienhart to show Laimer any respect.

Laimer's forehead scrunched. He was probably seething, but he knew better than to say so; Lienhart was stronger than him and outranked him. Instead, he opted for a more innocuous response. "Is it really that big a deal for me to join the conversation?"

"Seriously? Of course it is. You're an amateur who got the fifth seat out of pity, and you're going to stand here and act like a full-fledged knight? You're a prime example of why I hate people with no natural talent." Lienhart looked down on those weaker than him, and since he perceived Laimer as lacking the talent he himself possessed, he despised his older brother. He probably found it even more infuriating that the two were related by blood.

Another man strode over to join the group. He held the fourth seat and had long black hair. His name was Hubert Luo Hein. He was particularly skilled when it came to coordinated team battles, so while his individual strength had forced him into the fourth seat, many gossiped that he would outclass even Finn in a real battle.

Hubert had a naturally relaxed air, and his voice was soft as he spoke to Lienhart. "It'd be a shame to bicker during such a nice banquet. You should let it go—you'll only worry the other guests."

Scanning the room, Lienhart noticed people flashing them anxious looks, wondering whether he and Laimer would break into a fight. They were all visibly relieved to see Hubert step in.

Finn noticed Hubert give him a look as if wanting to say something. "Do you need something from me?"

"I know you studied in Holfort, so I'd like to hear your opinion," Hubert replied. "We've slowed our pace, per Arcadia's strategy, but our scouts haven't reported any movement from the opposition forces. How would you interpret that?"

Finn sighed. "There's no point asking me. I'm not them."

"I'm interested in what you think Archduke Bartfort is planning, rather than the kingdom as a whole," Hubert clarified. "From what I've heard, he's essentially running things, isn't he?"

There was a long pause before Finn said, "He's a loose cannon. No one can predict what he's thinking."

"That's a shame," said Hubert. "But at least it tells me he's not the conventional type. I wonder what he makes of our slow pace." He fell deep into thought.

Laimer shrugged. "They're probably preparing for battle or fighting among themselves. Honestly, I don't think there's a country out there with a fleet large enough to withstand ours."

The empire was throwing all their military assets into this battle, but their main weapon was Arcadia. Laimer probably thought the extra ships and Armors were overkill.

"I don't care either way," said Lienhart. "If they don't meet us on the field, we'll just stomp them. If they do, we'll cut them down. I'll admit, I'd personally prefer the latter."

Finn's brows knit. "You're being awfully laid-back about all this. Have you forgotten what we're about to do?"

Lienhart pushed out his bottom lip, pouting. "Of course I remember. We're going to annihilate Holfort. That is, not just the nation but all its people as well. What about it?"

"If you're aware, then..." Finn trailed off. He was out of patience with Lienhart

finding any entertainment in what they were doing. He was about to raise a fist to knock some sense into the other knight, but someone interrupted.

"Let's leave things there," advised Gunther Lua Sebald, the second seat and eldest member of the Demonic Knights. He'd held the first seat until Finn beat him. He was a hulking beast of a man with bulging muscles and an authoritative presence. "No sense fighting our own when we're about to go into battle with Holfort." He glared pointedly at Finn.

Vexed, Finn relaxed his hands back at his sides.

Gunther sniffed at him. "You don't deserve to sit in the first seat, the way you are right now. If you can't behave according to your status, I'll be happy to take your position from you."

Finn plastered a sardonic smile on his face. "That desperate to have your seat back, are you?" he retorted. "Take it whenever you want, then."

Gunther balled his hands into fists, anger flaring. Ironically, despite coming over to prevent infighting, he seemed ready to throw a punch. He spun around, biting back his emotions.

As Gunther stomped off, Hubert smiled awkwardly. "He's as hot-tempered as ever."

There was no camaraderie among them, but they were each strong enough to wipe out a small country on their own. That, combined with Arcadia's participation in the battle, put everyone in the mindset that victory was a foregone conclusion. Finn didn't think they were taking the battle seriously enough.

His eyes wandered to Moritz, who was discussing something with his generals some distance away. Moritz's rise to the throne had been sudden. In his hand, he held the cane that the previous emperor, Carl, had wielded. It was a symbol of authority. Moritz maintained a smile, but his face had grown noticeably gaunt in recent days.

I guess only His Imperial Majesty sees the real gravity of what we're doing.

He was the one calling the shots—he'd ordered this attack—and he was also responsible for assassinating the previous emperor.

Despite his actions, Finn couldn't blame the man. The two of us are awfully alike, he realized. Say, old fart, if you were still alive, what would you say about all this?

He and Carl had often mocked and insulted one another, but they'd been thick as thieves and held the same ideals. Not having him here was lonely.

I know what we're doing is wrong, but I want to protect Mia's future at all costs. Even though you're not here anymore, old man, I swear to you I'll protect Mia to my dying breath.

Since the battle was nearly upon them, the empire cut their banquet short. Moritz returned to his quarters, chasing off the servants who normally looked after him so he could have solitude.

He settled on the edge of his bed. His hand formed a tight fist around his cane—the cane that had belonged to the father he'd killed with his own two hands.

"We'll invade Holfort soon, Father," he said.

Moritz had once overflowed with vitality, his behavior rough and unrefined. No one could have told that by looking at him now; he'd lost his former self, becoming timid and less spirited. Yet he'd agreed to Arcadia's proposal to annihilate their enemy, if only to secure a future for his people. He'd also betrayed and claimed the life of his father, who'd sought to ally himself with the enemy.

"If only you hadn't turned your back on us, things would be going much more smoothly," he said. "It's your fault for stabbing us in the back."

Moritz was telling himself that, as much as anyone, trying to relieve his agonizing guilt. But no matter how much he tried to blame Carl, that guilt kept eating away at him.

"Why is this happening? If I'd known it would feel like this, I never would've wanted to be emperor."

The tears flowed, and Moritz's nose started to run as he thought about his father and the patricide he'd committed. He'd never had the chance to ask Carl

what he'd been planning, why he'd tried to ally himself with Holfort.

"Father, why? Why did you do it? I never wanted to kill you!"

Back in the *Einhorn*'s hangar, I'd climbed into Arroganz's cockpit to make some final adjustments. Luxion was inside with me to help; he was explaining the improvements he'd made.

"I added more armor plating and weapons, so those will now restrict your mobility considerably. I could only do so much in such a limited time, so to merge with Schwert, you'll have to purge the additional plating."

More defensive *and* offensive capabilities. That wasn't bad. It fit a guy's image of a mobile suit ideally equipped for the final battle.

"What about improvements to Schwert?" I asked.

"I merely raised its base performance, but I assure you that will make a notable difference," said Luxion. "Would you like to conduct a test simulation?"

"I don't think I'll have enough time to run many simulations before we set off," I said. As much as I wanted to do just that, it simply wasn't in the cards. It seemed like we always did things at the last minute. Wish I'd prepared for all this sooner.

"Procrastination was always a habit of mine, even in my last life. Looks like I haven't matured at all," I said self-deprecatingly, exasperated with myself.

"You have matured," Luxion replied in a rare moment of praise.

"You don't normally serve compliments. Are you sold out of sarcasm and passive-aggressive barbs or something?" I grinned at him, hoping it at least looked more natural than it felt.

"You finally gave those five your approval," Luxion said, unfazed by my teasing. "When I first met you, you never would have done so."

"Nah, I'm sure I would've. I mean, they're good guys. Way more capable than me," I said.

"Those five?" Luxion shot back in disbelief.

I kept making adjustments to Arroganz. "I'll admit I hated their guts before I met them," I answered. "But once we met, and I talked to them, and we fought... I ended up realizing they were much kinder, better people than me. I was the jerk, not them."

My mind wandered back to those moments I'd spent playing the game and the way I mocked Julius and the other love interests. It was only in retrospect that I realized I was the biggest idiot of all. They truly loved Marie from the bottom of their hearts. Meanwhile, I'd made Angie, Livia, and Noelle cry countless times just because I didn't want them getting wrapped up in my problems. When Marie came forward with the truth about her past, the guys had accepted her and believed her. I was the one always whining and complaining. They were way better than me.

"I really am a failure," I said. "I'm only now realizing how much of a fool I've been. I really want them to survive this battle—to find happiness with Marie after this is done." I paused a second and mulled that over. "Okay, well, I'm not convinced happiness is what they'll achieve. But you get what I mean."

Call me closed-minded, but I just didn't see how one woman and five guys could find happiness together. I didn't envision those relationships surviving. Whether they were doomed or not, though, I wanted all of the idiot brigade to make it out of this.

"I hope Angie, Livia, and Noelle don't die," I continued. "Same for Dad and Mom and—I could go on forever. I don't want anyone I know to lose their life out there. Isn't it selfish of me to say that when we're about to go into battle?" It was hypocritical; I was going to kill people, but I didn't want them killing me or my loved ones. I knew it was natural to feel that way, but it was cowardly too.

"In this particular case, the empire made the first move. There is no need for you to feel any guilt about this, Master. If anything, I am the root cause," said Luxion.

"Why would you be the root cause?"

"Because I dragged you into this war between old and new humanity." He gazed away, his robotic voice conveying his vexation at how his presence had

impacted me.

"This was probably bound to happen from the moment I claimed you," I replied. It had been kind of shortsighted of me, really. I hadn't thought much about the consequences of having all the power that came with Luxion; I was just eager for the security he'd give me.

"Shall we run? There is still time," he told me.

I forced a smile. "Absolutely not."

"You truly are stubborn."

Finishing the first round of checks on the adjustments I'd made, I breathed a small sigh of relief. Then I glanced over my shoulder at the small pack I wore, gesturing to it with my thumb. "Enough idle chatter; I've got a question. You sure I can use this stuff fine?" The small bundle, only a few inches thick, sat right at my shoulder blade. Stowed inside was my trump card: a supply of powerful strength-enhancing drugs.

There was a small stretch of silence before Luxion replied, "According to Cleare, they are perfectly usable, but you will only be able to administer them three times. Your athletic prowess and magical abilities will increase immediately upon your doing so, but the effects have only a ten-minute duration. After the drug wears off, I will immediately inject you with a neutralizer to mitigate the side effects. That said, I predict it will still strain your body significantly."

"Only ten minutes, huh? There's no way to extend that?"

These drugs were intensely effective, but their major downside was that they didn't last for long. The neutralizer intervals between uses would make it even trickier to find the ideal time to take them.

"Your body will not withstand much more," Luxion warned. "In truth, you should not use these at all."

"I guess having superhero powers for ten whole minutes won't be so bad." At least the effects bestowed upon me—inhuman strength and speed—would be instant, albeit at an unfortunate cost to my life span.

"I recommend you not use them heedlessly," Luxion said, displeased that I was going into this expecting to administer the drugs.

"Don't worry; I'll save them for when it's absolutely necessary."

I would have to use them, though. We were up against Arcadia and the whole Empire. If other Demonic Knights with skills like Finn's were in the wings, I'd probably have no choice but to turn to these drugs.

"Still, it's not exactly reassuring to know I can only use them three times," I added.

"Please do not consider using them a third time," Luxion warned me. "Even a single use could endanger your life. You should assume that your body will be unable to endure a second or third use. Moreover, if I deem the risk too high, I will forbid you to use them at all."

That certainly wouldn't work.

"Well," I said, "I hate to break it to you, but I don't plan to part with my trump card. This is an order, Luxion: Don't give me any restrictions on taking these performance enhancers."

"Master?" he replied questioningly, a tinge of sadness in his robotic voice.

Luxion had an awful lot of emotion for an AI, I thought. The two of us had been companions for three years now, and he'd changed a lot during that time.

"Don't stop me. Not this time," I told him.

Realizing I wouldn't bend on this, he seemed to resign himself. "Just this time?" he teased. "I have a hard time trusting that, considering your track record of lying."

"There, see? You're back to your normal self." I grinned; that was the Luxion I knew. "If anything happens to me, I'd like you to look after everyone. I'm worried about that."

"I refuse."

I hadn't expected that response; it threw me off-balance. Anger seeped into my voice as I snapped, "I'm your master. Shouldn't you respect my wishes?"

"If anything were to happen to you, Master, that would necessarily mean I likewise no longer existed. Therefore, if you truly wish to protect everyone, your only option is to survive," he said, sounding perfectly calm and rational.

I gawked at him, then slapped a hand over my face and burst into laughter. What nerve, claiming he wouldn't outlive me! "What, are we making a suicide pact here or something?" I joked.

His lens moved side to side as if he were shaking his head in exasperation at me. "That is the last thing I would wish to do. However, I assure you that, if the worst comes to pass and we both perish in this battle, Cleare will take care of things in our absence."

"Yeah? That's reassuring, at least." It gave me some peace of mind. "Then I guess all we need to do is take down the enemy's cheat-tier weapon and wrap this all up. I feel bad dragging you into it, but you'll be with me to the end on this one."

This time, unfortunately, Luxion wouldn't get out of the battle unscathed. The way he spoke indicated he realized that too. Realized it, and planned to follow me into battle anyway.

"Naturally," he said. "If I weren't with you, you couldn't fight at your full capability."

"Oh, come off it. Can't you read the mood? You're supposed to say something more suave and badass at a moment like this."

"Being so serious does not suit you, Master," he retorted.

"Can't argue about that!"

It might've worked for Julius and the others, since they were handsome love interests, but a boring background character like me trying to act like a suave hero would come across as comedic.

I sighed, enjoying the return to our usual banter. "All that said, I'm sorry I got you caught up in this."

"I do not mind. You are my master, after all."



Chapter 5: Departure

"SOMETHING SHADY IS going on with the empire's movements?"

"Yep. They're taking their sweet time advancing toward us," Cleare said. "Fact and the others think it's suspicious how slow they're going."

It was midnight when Cleare gave me her report. The Vordenoit forces had already departed and were making their way here, but their pace was eerily slow. That fortunately gave us more time to prepare, but it was hard to believe a Demonic Creature like Arcadia had reduced their speed without good reason.

I sat at the edge of my bed with my hand on my chin, thinking this news over.

Angie, who was wearing her hair loose at this point, said, "Don't you think they're just being cautious to avoid surprise attacks?"

I certainly thought that was possible, but the two Als didn't.

"Nah," said Cleare. "No chance."

"A surprise offensive would pose no threat to Arcadia at his current power level," agreed Luxion.

All of old humanity's Als had been on standby. That is, until Arcadia's reawakening. Then they'd commenced what was basically an ill-advised offensive against him. The empire probably thought of their surprise attacks as random, but they were actually calculated sacrifices that had gathered all the data we now possessed on Arcadia. That data was what allowed Luxion and the others to calculate the enemy's offensive capabilities.

Noelle had also let her hair down, having finished in the bath only moments earlier. She gently dabbed at her hair to soak up moisture from it. "Do you think maybe the rest of their ships are just slow, and he's matching their pace?"

"We looked into the speed of their warships already," said Cleare. "Even accounting for that, they're still moving way too slowly."

Livia stepped out of the bathroom. Having finished dressing, she made her way to the bed. "Do you think they're trying to give us a chance?" she suggested. She'd apparently been able to hear our conversation the whole time.

As of right now, the most powerful Lost Item in the world was the one new humanity had left behind—Arcadia himself. Even Luxion would find it almost impossible to take Arcadia down alone. Given his immense advantage, it made sense Livia might think the empire had underestimated us so much that they weren't putting a lot of effort into this invasion.

Luxion was quick to shoot that down. "No," he said. "Arcadia is not the type to be so conceited as to willingly provide us with more opportunity."

Cleare added, "Agreed. He'd more likely charge ahead of everyone else and invade alone to wipe us all out."

Angie sighed. "You and these Demonic Creatures are awfully extreme about this. You absolutely hate one another."

The opponents' two civilizations had been wiped out long ago, but somehow old hostilities and hatred had carried on.

"We were created to exterminate new humans," Cleare explained, as if she thought all the blame lay with the enemy. "We would do anything to make that happen, and I do mean *anything*!" she added with great emphasis.

None of us knew quite how to react, although her voice sounded cheerful enough. Were we supposed to mirror her happiness? Or should we be terrified?

Noelle forced a smile. "Well, if that's what this is about, you don't have any personal grievances, do you? You're just doing this because old humans told you to. If they asked you to stop—"

"New humans who'd become arrogant due to their magical abilities wiped out all the executives capable of handing down that order."

"Oh, um... Well, uh..." Noelle's eyes darted toward me. "Leon, help!" She couldn't find a rebuttal on her own.

"But I'm your master now, right? So give up your grudge and follow my

orders," I said.

"Meanie! Do you have any idea how much those jerks made old humanity suffer? You're heartless!" Cleare cried.

I shook my head. "That happened eons ago. It has nothing to do with us."

"Yes, it does! And in a big way too! It's the whole reason the imperials are coming after you!"

Livia wrapped her arms around herself and blurted out, "I just have to wonder why it came to this. It would've been so much better if both sides could have looked for a more peaceful way to solve their differences." Her voice was heavy with sadness. Angie approached her from behind and embraced her.

I flipped onto my back and stared up at the ceiling. "You said it. I don't know how we even got here."

Who was really in the wrong? Or was this all preordained by the game developers—merely an element of the world's lore? I'd worked hard to get past the idea that this was all just part of the game, but I couldn't shake the urge to grumble about how ridiculous and unfair it was.

"A peaceful, happy, dreamlike world would've been better than this," I said. "Now I look back fondly on how carefree I was when I first came to the academy."

Luxion drifted closer to me. "Oh, indeed. It was about this time during your first year when you had that absolute failure of a tea party trying to land yourself a fiancée. Is that what you are so nostalgic about? You wish to return to that?"

At the mere suggestion, Angie, Livia, and Noelle glared daggers at me.

I'd better watch myself here, I thought. I was normally pretty dense at times like this, but my instincts were ringing alarm bells. I had to choose my words carefully now. "I've only got bad memories when it comes to bride hunting. I'd rather go back to the time when I got to enjoy tea parties in peace. What I wouldn't give to buy a new tea set, leaves, and sweets to go with them."

At that, Livia brightened and giggled. "An excellent idea. I'd love to sit and

enjoy tea with everyone again."

"You'd like to buy another tea set?" Angie asked, sounding cheerful despite her show of exasperation. "You're certainly obsessed."

Noelle leaned forward, interest piqued. "Ooh, having tea in the afternoon is super posh, like what the highest-ranked aristocrats do—although for us it just means enjoying drinks and snacks after school. Not that I dislike the way we do it, of course."

The more we talked about the subject, the more happy memories flooded back to me.

"I can just picture it—looking for perfect tea leaves and snacks on the weekend," I said. "And sometimes needing to plan well in advance and make a special order at a shop for the snacks to be ready on the day of the party. Then I'd spend time and effort on..."

Setting up a tea party in this world was more time-consuming than in Japan, given the lack of conveniences. Tons of preparation was involved, but I enjoyed that part. It was a hobby for me.

The three girls sat quietly and let me continue to ramble.

"...then I'd turn to Master for advice. Make sure that I'd put together a perfect combination of tea set, leaves, and snacks. It'd be nice to have him instruct me on the finer points of those aspects. In fact, it would be perfect if the two of us could have a party together." I closed my eyes as I spoke, picturing it. The more I talked, the more excited I got.

"Master, you are an utter fool," Luxion interrupted, ruining the bit of happiness I'd found in my imaginary scenario. "It seems I cannot expect you to mature at all on the romantic front."

"Why not?" I asked, opening my eyes and heaving myself upright.

Angie and the other girls were smiling at me, but their mirth didn't reach their eyes.

Angie's crimson glare pinned me in place. "What a cruel man you are, Leon, to ramble endlessly about your Master despite our situation."

"I assume this means you would invite him before you would think of inviting us?" Livia asked, hands pressed together in front of her mouth and a smile plastered on her face.

Noelle had balled her hands into fists. "Forget your fiancées, it's all 'Master this' and 'Master that.' Didn't it at least occur to you to lie to us and pretend you'd put us first?"

Well, crap. Speaking frankly pissed them all off.

I attempted a placating smile. "I just don't want to lie when it comes to tea, you know?"

All three of them inched toward me, each with a hand raised.

"Oh, Master, you are such an idiot," said Cleare.

"Indeed," Luxion agreed. "I see no other option than for you to reform your defective personality, Master."

When I met with Mr. Albergue the next morning, both my cheeks were red and swollen. He was overseeing the forces sent by the Republic to aid us, and he'd brought Miss Louise along.

"What happened to your face?" he asked, immediately concerned.

"I was smacking my cheeks to energize myself for the battle, and I did it a little too hard," I lied. I was too embarrassed to tell the truth—that my three fiancées had slapped me.

"Oh, uh, all right," he stammered, not sounding entirely convinced. "If that's all, I suppose it's fine."

"In any case, I appreciate the Republic's assistance. When this is all over, I promise to see you duly compensated." I grinned at him.

"Of course. We'll be looking forward to it. Having said that, are you sure about you-know-what?"

I blinked at him. "'You-know-what'?"

He opened his mouth to explain further, but Miss Louise quickly cut in.

"Father, Leon's awfully busy. Let's not waste time with idle chatter, all right?" She was smiling, but something in her tone brooked no argument.

Mr. Albergue hesitated, as if he wanted to pursue the matter further. Yet she had a point—I was very busy—so he seemed to think better of it and resigned himself. "I suppose...you're right about that. In that case, we can discuss it more once this is all over. I've been thinking I need to have a long discussion with you anyway," he told me.

"Sure. I don't mind." But who knows if I'll even survive this? I thought. I knew better than to voice that, though. Dense as I was, I realized it wasn't an appropriate thing to say. Plus, I'd feel awful displaying my own insecurity in front of an ally who was going out of his way to join us.

Miss Louise grasped my right hand in hers. "You have to come back alive. Don't leave me like my little brother did." The Guardian crests on the backs of both our hands let off faint light as if resonating.

"Of course," I said with a fake smile before parting with the two.

As I headed toward the royal harbor, Luxion alerted me, "Master, Hertrude is up ahead. It appears she has been awaiting you."

Miss Hertrude was clad in a black dress, looking casual enough that I had a hard time believing she'd come here intending to wait for me, as Luxion suggested. A small gathering of knights stood at a distance. I assumed they were her bodyguards—House Fanoss's knights. Although they eyed us worriedly, they hung back.

Miss Hertrude brushed a hand through her hair, the long, silky black strands billowing almost like a cape behind her. She hadn't grown any taller since our last meeting, at least not as far as I could tell, but she did seem more mature somehow.

"You weren't waiting for me specifically, were you?" I asked.

She sniffed, eyes moving away from me. "I wish I could say that you're being too self-centered, but that's exactly right."

Why would she be waiting for me? We weren't particularly close to each other. I had to assume this was about compensation. "If you want to ask about remuneration in case this venture is successful, you'll need to talk to Cleare and __"

"That is an important matter, to be sure," she interrupted, "but I have something more important to discuss with you."

"Oh. Uh, okay."

She inhaled deeply. "Make sure you come back to us. It would be inconvenient for both me and for my dukedom if you became a dead hero rather than a living one."

"So you're not worried for my sake, but for your own and your house's, huh?" I chuckled. It was just like her to frame it that way.

Miss Hertrude scoffed at me. "That is a given. I benefit most if you come back alive. You must return and fulfill your promise to me."

Promise? Oh, right. I had sworn to give her whatever she wanted. I wasn't entirely sure I'd be able to see that through, but I went ahead and nodded anyway. "And you're asking this of me even though you plan to go out on the battlefield yourself?"

House Fanoss's general would hand out orders to the fleet, but I'd heard that Miss Hertrude would accompany them as a representative of her house. I personally didn't think she needed to risk her life going to battle, but she'd apparently refused to budge on that.

"Unlike you, I know when to retreat," she said. "You are the one I am worried about."

"You've got me there."

Miss Hertrude spun, turning her back to me, and started walking off. Her voice was quiet as she said over her shoulder, "Try not to break the hearts of the people who love you. Don't forget it's difficult for the ones left behind as well."

Her words stabbed deep. I opened my mouth to say something, but no

answer came forth. Soon enough, she was out of earshot. I scratched the back of my head and finally managed, "Guess she saw right through me, huh?"

"She was probably trying to warn you against dangerous behavior. She knows you tend to push yourself far past your limits," Luxion said.

"Makes sense."

It was odd having a former enemy worry about me like this. Felt like something straight out of a shonen manga.

As I neared the harbor, I found government officials lined up along the path on either side. Minister Bernard was among them, his face sallow and gaunt.

"They are civil officials," Luxion told me.

"That's pretty obvious, but thanks."

Ink from all the paperwork they'd been tackling stained their hands and sleeves. Exhaustion was plain on their faces, but they stood a little straighter as they noticed my approach. It would be a stretch to say they looked perfectly groomed, but still, their show of support was heartwarming.

"This is a little embarrassing," I told Minister Bernard as I approached him.

His cheeks turned ruddy. "I admit I'm not used to gestures like this either, but this is all we can do, since we aren't fighters."

He and his men had been drowning in paperwork as they got ready for the battle ahead, and they'd probably still have their fair share to do out on the field. Worse yet, if we got back safely, they'd most likely have even more waiting for them. They looked like they wanted (and desperately needed) to dive into bed and get some sleep, but they'd gone out of their way to come see me off.

After I'd made a bit of lighthearted conversation with the minister, Miss Clarice and Miss Deirdre approached us. They had to be fatigued as well, but they'd dressed for the occasion and used makeup to hide any circles beneath their eyes.

Miss Clarice tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "Please return to us alive."

She bowed her head politely. She hadn't spoken in the tone I'd expect from an academy alumna speaking to an underclassman.

Miss Deirdre snapped her beloved folding fan shut and followed Miss Clarice's example, lowering her chin. "I wish you luck on the field."

I was surprised none of the men there glared in envy at me for having two gorgeous women come see me off. The officials' faces were all hard lines and edges, not a smile in sight. Honestly, I wasn't used to having no one disparage or deride me. It made me uncomfortable.

Minister Bernard gently slapped my back. "Well, off you go, then. It's about time for you all to depart, right?"

"Yes, I guess it is." I hesitated and then asked, "Uh, did you see anyone else off? Like those five morons?"

At the very mention of them, he and the rest of the officials burst into exaggerated laughter, but it quickly died down. The blank looks that came onto their faces afterward were unnerving.

"I wouldn't subject myself to that even if someone asked me to," said Minister Bernard.

As if to reinforce this, some nearby officials started venomously grumbling about the idiot brigade.

"All those nincompoops do is make more work for us."

"I won't soon forget how I resented the way they ruined all the hard work that went into arranging and formalizing their engagements. Not until the day I die."

"Jilk is a bastard for betraying Lady Clarice. He's the only one I hope doesn't come back alive after all this."

Yikes. These guys hate their guts. Honestly, I couldn't blame them. "Oh, erm, all right," I said, unable to come up with anything else.

When I finally reached the harbor, the idiot brigade was there waiting for me with an extra guest. It's a whole sausage fest here. Wonderful.

"Milaaady!" Loic screeched, throwing himself at Marie only for Julius to hurriedly block him. Well, he did more than block. He kind of punched Loic. Several times, in fact.

"Don't come near her!" Julius howled.

Loic grappled with Julius, seizing him by the collar and swinging his fist in return. "I am here as a representative to greet her on behalf of the Alzer Republic!"

Honestly, they're like children. I glanced at Marie. Her face was twisted into a bitter smile, suggesting she shared my opinion.

As the Saint, Marie was clad in a white outfit complete with the holy relics. A high-ranking priest and a group of temple knights stood immediately behind her.

"I guess you told the truth when you said they'd finally recognized you as Saint," I remarked.

She blushed and kept her gaze averted. "Well, I just have this aura that I can't hide. It was kind of a given that they'd name me Saint." She was obviously getting carried away and exaggerating, but that was her personality. I was relieved she was being her usual self.

"Just try not to make any big mistakes and piss them off again," I said.

She puffed out her cheeks and stared up at me. "I'm not going to make any mistakes." She did seem much more composed than the five idiots and the bonus idiot quibbling with them.

"Okay, then. I'm leaving the Licorne to you." I gave them a wave.

A little flustered, she waved too. "Yeah. Um, Big Bro..."

I paused to glance back at her. I wouldn't waste time scolding her for calling me that in public. Not this time.

Marie smiled. "Make sure you wrap this up cleanly."

That was probably her way of wishing me good luck. Seeing this battle through would be easier said than done, but I got the idea.

"Come on. You hardly need to tell me that," I shot back teasingly.

I marched up the *Einhorn*'s gangplank, stopping midway to look back at the idiot brigade. "If you aren't getting on, I'll leave you behind!" I bellowed at them.

They scrambled to grab their luggage and hightail it up the ramp behind me.

As Julius and the others headed into the ship, Marie shouted after them, "Make sure to look after my big brother, you guys!" Tears welled in her eyes as she clenched one fist in the folds of her skirt.

They each turned to look back at her with reassuring smiles.

Julius bobbed his head. "We will."

"We'll drag him back home safe and sound," Jilk promised, running a hand through his hair.

Greg flexed his arms, showing off his muscles for her. "No need to worry with us on the job, Marie!"

"Indeed, there's no need for concern as long as we're with him," agreed Chris, sliding a finger up the bridge of his nose to adjust his glasses.

The last idiot, Brad, winked at her. "For you, we'll give this all we've got."

Leon hovered at the entrance to the ship, waiting for them to join him. Marie stared at him, wiping a stray tear. Loic, who stood beside her, yanked out a handkerchief and offered it.

"Here," he said.

"Thank you." She took it and dabbed her cheeks. She refused to budge from her spot until they disappeared inside the ship and its door closed after them.

Loic stayed with her, watching the *Einhorn* fire up and take off. "There they go," he said.

"Time for us to be on our way too. Be careful not to overdo it out there, Loic," responded Marie.

Her concern delighted him, but he forced his lips into a straight line, intent on

taking this seriously. "Of course. I'm not planning to die any time soon. You be careful too, milady."

Marie only smiled forlornly, not responding.

Chapter 6:

The Enormous Fleet

SO WE'RE EVEN BRINGING Leon's island along," Angie remarked sadly from the *Licorne*'s bridge. She gazed through the glass down at the island she had such fond memories of. It had been turned into a runway for battleships, complete with a simple harbor where repairs and adjustments could be made.

Livia pressed her hands and forehead to the window. "It used to be so beautiful. It looks nothing like I remember."

When the island belonged to Leon, it'd had its own hot spring. Luxion's robots had cultivated the natural environment to create fields, making it lush and beautiful. All those had been trimmed away in preparation for the battle with the empire. The island looked more disorderly now, with a haphazard runway and rudimentary buildings. What Angie and Livia remembered was almost entirely gone, and they struggled to hide their sadness and disappointment.

Cleare hovered close to the transplanted Sacred Tree Sapling, watching as the two were swept up by deep emotion.

"We made some special adjustments to the island long beforehand, which unfortunately rendered it pivotal to this mission," she explained. "There was no way around that."

They had, in fact, brought *three* floating islands for the battle, each fitted to a different purpose. One was designed to accommodate downed supply ships, and one was even equipped with a fortress-like structure.

Angie clenched a fist and pressed it to her chest. "I understand that, but I can't help feeling sad, seeing a place I have such fond memories of turned into something unrecognizable." She would never forget the walks the three of them had taken around the island and how novel the experience was.

"Will it be able to go back to the way it was after the war?" asked Livia, who shared Angie's sentiments.

"But of course!" Cleare cheerfully replied.

Angie and Livia glanced at each other, both forcing smiles. For the moment, all they could do was accept Cleare's assurances.

Noelle studied the two. She'd just finished using the *Licorne*'s onboard transmitter, which was why she hadn't inserted herself into the conversation, although she'd listened to it all.

"I heard before that Leon had his own island," she said. "Such a shame what's become of it. It even had a hot spring, right? Wish I could've taken a dip."

"If we win this thing, I'll be happy to set up a whole bunch of hot springs. So for now, help me by fixing up the Sacred Tree," said Cleare.

"Sure thing." Noelle folded her arms behind her head and shuffled toward the tree, which emitted faint light as she neared it.

"The Sacred Tree always amazes me," Cleare gushed. "The way it absorbs demonic essence from the air and converts it into energy is mind-blowing. I don't know who made it, but we ought to be grateful to them."

Noelle tilted her head. "You mean the Sacred Tree didn't develop naturally? Alzerians see it as a normal plant that adapted to protect the people."

"Nah. It was cultivated and developed eons ago," said Cleare. "We've got to thank Ideal too, although I know we ended up on opposite sides."

Noelle's face softened. "Ideal, huh? He saved me at the end there, didn't he?"

"Yep," answered Cleare. "You survived thanks to him, Nelly, and you're the reason we can use this Sacred Tree. It's too bad we couldn't have teamed up, though. Who knows what would've happened if we'd combined forces?"

Ideal was an AI that had been implemented aboard a supply ship. He'd placed such intense importance on the Sacred Tree that it put him and Leon at odds. He'd ultimately lost to Leon and Luxion's combined power and been destroyed in the process. His final act was to offer up the medically advanced capsule that ultimately saved Noelle's life.

On the other hand, Ideal's rampage had led to immense casualties, which probably complicated whatever gratitude Noelle felt. Especially because her

twin sister, Lelia, had lost two men she loved during the conflict.

Noelle pressed her right hand against the tree. "Being of some help to Leon is all that matters to me. We can tackle complex questions like the nature of the Sacred Tree once this is all over."

Cleare's lens bobbed. "Sounds great. We don't have free time to waste thinking about other things right now. All that can wait until we're done with this war."

"Agreed. Until after we've won," said Angie. She folded her arms across her waist, just beneath the swell of her breasts. "Anything that isn't urgent can wait till we've survived this whole mess."

Livia clasped her hands as if in prayer. "That's right. Let's survive this and come out victorious. However arrogant it is to hope we accomplish that, I'll do everything in my power to make sure we do."

With the odds stacked so high against them, it was optimistic and perhaps even selfish to assume they'd all survive this and claim victory. It would take a miracle—which was precisely what Livia desperately prayed for.

House Redgrave's warship was occupied by both its duke, Vince, and his heir, Gilbert. Ordinarily the two would never share the same ship, for if they were shot down, it would deal an incredibly heavy blow to their family and its legacy. Gilbert was only dropping in for a brief moment before the battle began.

The two stood in front of a window, enjoying the impressive view before them—the array of ships, the islands, all of it.

"What a thrilling sight to behold," said Gilbert. "Whether we win or lose this battle, Father, it will surely be written of in the history books." Excitement leaked into his voice—excitement at participating in what would be a monumental turning point.

The crew and attendants on board whispered about how brave and dependable Gilbert was for showing no weakness, but Vince knew better. *He's bluffing*.

A commander couldn't show fear, or his anxiety might spread to those under his command. Gilbert had steeled himself, trying to appear as undaunted as he could.

Vince placed a gentle hand on his son's shoulder. "I'm sorry, but I want you to fall to the rear line. My ship and crew will be the ones leading in front."

"Father?!" Gilbert choked out in disbelief. "You can't! You're the head of our house. If something happened to you, then—"

"You greenhorns can watch the fight from the back and learn a thing or two from us veterans," said Vince. "I'm trusting you to lead the rear line ships."

Gilbert's eyes widened, a strangled grunt slipping from his lips. There was a short pause, but he finally said, "Very well."

Vince wanted his son at the rear to give him the best possible chance of survival. If we both fell to the back, it would damage the people's faith in Angie. I must lead in front, even if the risk of death is impossibly high. But there's no reason Gilbert must come with me.

They'd both joined the fight for Angie's sake, of course, but if Vince fell in battle, that would be a devastating loss for House Redgrave. In any other situation, he'd have taken the rear to safeguard his own life; as a father, however, he couldn't stomach letting his son remain on the front line while he watched from a safe distance.

"If anything happens to me," said Vince, "it'll be up to you to take care of our house. Angle has matured immensely, but it worries me that she's still so shortsighted. You need to be at her side to support her."

"Y-yes. I will be." Gilbert must've sensed his father's intentions, since he didn't argue the point.

Holfort's patrol ship sped as fast as it could toward an ally ship, accelerating to its very limit, but its captain and crew were most concerned about what lurked behind them.

Visibility outside was poor, thick clouds hanging in the skies and shrouding the

enemy. Numerous drones, all in the form of legless Armors, surrounded the Holfortian ship to act as weapons safeguarding them. Despite the added protection the drones offered, the sheen of cold sweat covered the captain's face.

"We can't shake them off, huh?" His face contorting with panic, he barked orders into the speaking tube. "Deploy the Armors! Do whatever you must to ensure our allies get all the details we gleaned about the enemy!"

An unusual spherical metal ball carrying an AI inside it floated in the middle of the patrol ship bridge.

"We are experiencing heavy communication system interference due to the presence of demonic essence. Data transference is therefore impossible," reported the AI. "The pilots must relay the report details directly."

"That's what I intend," snapped the captain.

"It appears the enemy has caught up with us."

No sooner had the AI delivered that devastating news than the drones around them began to explode. A black blur whizzed past the side of the ship.

"Shoot it down!" said the captain, passion turning his voice into an angry shout.

"That is futile," said the AI.

What had been a black blur at first turned out to be a Demonic Suit. It swung around, approached the patrol ship bridge directly, and lifted one of its enormous curved swords.

"I found you!" its pilot declared in a childlike voice.

When the Demonic Suit swung its blade down, the resulting shock wave sliced the entire ship in half.

"That's all the kingdom's military has to offer? What a disappointment."

The kingdom had chosen to lead the enemy over the ocean to commence battle a safe distance from the continent. That would prevent their opponents

from invading and causing casualties. They had towed multiple floating islands along to serve as facilities to repair and resupply ships, and final battle preparations had already started.

One of those islands—the one Leon had previously found and claimed for himself—had afterward come into the royal family's possession, then been repurposed to serve in the battle with the empire. Dozens upon dozens of ships swarmed around it; among the enormous fleet was the Bartforts' own battleship.

Balcus and Nicks peeked from a bridge window at the fleet. Since Leon was participating in the battle, they naturally were too.

Nicks shook his head in disbelief at the army's sheer size. "Incredible," he managed to blurt out in his awe. "So many battleships."

They dotted the air above, below, and to both sides, seemingly blocking the sky. Nicks had been in a number of battles by this point, but it was his first time seeing so many allies join them.

Balcus was similarly taken aback, drinking it all in with wide eyes. "I've never seen this before either."

The crew around them were all sailors who'd long served the Bartforts, and they were no less astonished than their two leaders.

"Well, on top of that," said the man serving as captain, "I never dreamed little Leon—er, sorry, His Grace—could lead this many battleships."

Balcus raked a hand through his hair, unable to hide the bitter grimace on his face. "Given our lineage, I've got to assume he's some kind of spontaneous mutation. I definitely never thought a child of mine could do all this."

"Spontaneous mutation" was a cruel way to put it, but the whole crew understood where Balcus was coming from. Leon was the son of a rural baron, hardly the type one pictured leading a massive fleet against an empire. His accomplishments were impressive enough to end up as minstrels' songs and legends that would be passed down through generations.

Nicks heaved a deep sigh, managing to fend off some of the nervousness creeping in. "With this many people on our side, I'm starting to think maybe we

have a fighting chance." He reached for the locket hanging from his neck, fingers circling tight around it. "And more are still pouring in."

Battleships took off from Leon's island one after another, their tune-ups having been completed. Luxion's robots were undertaking all the work, fitting superior armor plating and brand-new cannons to each ship. Thus, their task comprised more than just repairs—they were adding improvements and extra supplies, all free of charge, in the final hours before the battle.

From beneath the island, old humanity's weapons made their appearance as well. One warship was so enormous it caught the attention of their allies, who chattered anxiously through their transmitters.

"I heard rumors about that ship! The Partner, right?"

"Nah, that looks bigger than what the rumors said about the Partner."

"Yeah. The Partner was already deployed."

Nicks's smile became strained at their gossip. The ship in question didn't look like the *Partner* in the least. Its metal exterior had noticeable rust patches, and its enormous size dwarfed the other ships. This was the aircraft carrier *Fact*. After he joined them, dozens of similar ships spilled from the island as well.

Balcus pressed his fingers to his forehead, trying to wipe away the sweat that beaded there. "These are all ancient weapons, huh? Our ancestors were something else, creating unmanned machines like those."

"Ancestors, huh?" Nicks suddenly recalled something. "Dad, when I was young, didn't you tell me I wouldn't want to hear about our ancestors, because it'd just make me feel miserable?" Despite his father's warnings, he hadn't given up on hearing the story; he was too curious to know the reason for such a warning. The last thing he wanted was to go into a battle to the death puzzling over it. "Things could start looking grim out there, so tell me the story. I won't be able to focus if I'm still wondering about it when the fighting starts."

Balcus sighed at him, his upper lip curling in a show of reluctance. "Just when I was thinking you'd finally matured into a proper adult, here you are acting immature."

"Come on. Better for us both if we have no regrets, right? We've both been

deployed to the front lines," Nicks reminded him.

"You know we have to lead the charge. It'd hurt morale if we didn't."

At Balcus's insistence, the Bartforts' battleship had been placed toward the front of their formation. "We're Leon's family," he'd explained. "It'd reflect poorly on him if we weren't the first ones out there." But their positioning also meant their odds of dying were much higher than those of the people bringing up the rear. That helped explain why Nicks was so insistent on hearing about his ancestors now.

"If I survive, I can pass the story on to my kids when they get older," he reasoned. "Tell them how incredible our ancestors were."

Balcus's eyes briefly squeezed shut in a show of acquiescence. "Truth be told, our ancestors weren't the sort who found success as adventurers. You know that much already, don't you?"

"They climbed to their position in battle, right?" said Nicks.

"No. I'm talking about the *founder* of the Bartforts. He was actually an adventurer who stumbled into the kingdom as an outsider."

"I've never heard that before."

Adventurers were prized and highly respected in Holfort. Aristocrats normally took pride in their heritage if their ancestors had been adventurers, but there was a good reason Balcus wasn't so proud.

"At the end of a grand adventure, he was betrayed by his companions. That was why he found his way to the land we now occupy. He said he was sick of adventuring and quit, dedicating himself to farming and living his life quietly and comfortably in the countryside."

The first thing that popped into Nicks's mind was how familiar that sounded. "Reminds me of Leon."

"Yep. That's why I wonder if his 'spontaneous mutation' comes from our founder," said Balcus.

"Next to the enormous fleet we can see out there right now, I guess that story seems pretty underwhelming. Sure, our founder was an adventurer. But if he

quit in disgrace after being betrayed by his companions, it's kind of..." Nicks trailed off and pulled a face.

Betrayal by one's companions was a mark of shame for adventurers in Holfort. The ones doing the betraying were the worst of all, of course, but their victims were assumed to be partly responsible for whatever mutiny occurred against them.

It was believed that a proper adventurer should be wise enough not to team up with people who might later turn on them. One put one's life on the line when adventuring, and someone too green to find proper companions or command their loyalty wasn't mature enough for the profession at all.

Balcus understood that reasoning, and the stigma that came with it, which was why he'd avoided telling his children much about their family's founder. Despite the shame of the tale, it was still a valuable lesson, so it had been passed on through the generations of the Bartforts.

"That was why I didn't want to tell you out here just before the battle," Balcus grumbled. "At any rate, I doubt he was much of an adventurer, considering that none of his descendants have been adventurers either."

"True," said Nicks. "The only Bartfort adventurer who's ever distinguished himself is Leon."

Balcus crossed his arms and chuckled. "Yeah. Who'd have thought he'd be the most accomplished of our family? He might be like our founder, but I still think he's a mutant."

"Got to agree with that."

While the two were busy chatting, a wailing siren erupted from the intercom loudly enough to make their ears ring. A panicked voice followed shortly. "We've received a report from our patrol unit! The empire's fleet has been spotted! They have over three thousand ships!"

Murmurs broke out on the bridge. The crew's eyes opened wide, sweat trickling down their faces. It was little wonder they were all so taken aback; the empire's military was said to outnumber them twice over, and that wasn't even an exact number. The report had been a vague estimate. In the worst-case

scenario, it was perfectly possible that Vordenoit outnumbered them three to one.

"Don't let it faze you!" Balcus's gruff voice pierced the air. "As long as we follow the plan, we'll be the victors!"

Nicks brushed a trembling hand over his forehead, wiping away the perspiration that had formed. "Guess it's almost time, then." He again reached for the locket at his neck, which held a picture of Dorothea.

Back on the *Licorne*, Noelle had finished prepping the Sacred Tree to absorb the demonic essence in the surrounding air and funnel the converted energy into the ship. The sapling emanated faint light in the process. As Noelle handled the sapling, Cleare took charge of controlling the *Licorne*.

Angie's brow wrinkled when a report came through that their patrol ship had been shot down. "They say that the empire is heading to war with us, but are we certain they'll come straight for us and attack?"

"According to my predictions, odds of that are high," Cleare assured her.

"And we're sure they won't divert their advance to go around us?"

Angie was worried that they might continue past the kingdom's forces and make for the continent those forces shielded behind them.

Cleare, on the other hand, doubted they'd take that route. "Yep, I'm sure," she said. "I mean, I have to say, this is the perfect chance for them to wipe out all our military assets in one go. From Arcadia's point of view, us gathering in one place makes things much easier. If they can wipe us out, nothing and no one will be left to stand against them."

All the Als were taking part in this battle. Once the empire destroyed those, along with the ships of the kingdom and its allies, it would be easy pickings.

Frustrated, Angie flexed her fingers but said nothing else.

"And we're sure Arcadia's coming with the empire's forces, right?" Noelle asked.

"No doubt about that," Cleare answered. "The increased levels of airborne

demonic essence signal his approach. The information our allies gathered also indicated that he was spotted with them."

The *Licorne* was storing the energy all that demonic essence provided. Yumeria was also aboard the ship to help control the Sacred Tree alongside Noelle.

"What are you planning to do with all the energy you're storing?" Yumeria asked nervously.

"We could use it for any number of things," said Cleare. "That's why we brought Liv and Nelly here to the battlefield." Her gaze turned to Livia.

Up until that point, Livia had been staring out the window. Only when she felt Cleare's attention turn to her did she spin around. "We'll use it to power that device that was aboard the royal family's ship, won't we?"

They'd used that ship during the war with the Fanoss, but no one had seen the vessel itself as a threat, so much as the device implemented aboard it. Combined with Livia's unique powers, it made for a deadly weapon, which was why it had been kept under lock and key until now. In use, it could potentially put people—allies or enemies—under Livia's control. Depending what they decided to do with it, they could conceivably conquer the entire world.

Alas, that wouldn't benefit them this time around. They couldn't hope to win by using it the same way they had during the previous war.

"It does have deadly power, but it won't work against Arcadia," Cleare stated with certainty. "So we won't use it against the enemy; we'll use it on our allies." Her blue lens gleamed, projecting a 3D map centered on the *Licorne* that illustrated the device's range. "The most convenient thing about it is that it isn't hampered by the concentration of demonic essence in the air."

Yumeria blinked and cocked her head, not understanding that explanation. "Um, can I have that in layman's terms?"

"Cleare is saying that we can use the device to create mental connections and communicate despite the interference," Kyle said, trying to summarize for his mother.

"Mmental connections?" she stammered back, still visibly confused.

"It means we'll hear each other's thoughts, basically."

Realization dawned on her face then, and she quickly nodded. "Oh, I get it now. That's amazing!" Her joy quickly fell away, however. "W-wait! That means we'll even hear each other's most embarrassing thoughts, right?! Oh, goodness, this is troubling. I'm always thinking about how much I love my darling Kyle, and now everyone's going to hear about it!" Blood rushed to her cheeks.

Kyle was similarly embarrassed by the revelation, his face going pink all the way to his ears. "M-Mom?! Stop blurting out weird stuff like that—we're on the cusp of battle!"

Their adorable interaction sapped some tension from the air.

"Actually, it's not your *thoughts* that will reach people, just the words you want to communicate," explained Cleare. "We'll serve as a conduit, gathering and forwarding transmissions from other ships. I'll help sort through incoming information, but the biggest burden will be on Liv's shoulders."

The interference in their communications system was a huge disadvantage, but fortunately, they could circumvent it as long as Livia was there. Accurate, speedy communication was a powerful weapon on the field. Unfortunately, providing it would drain a lot from Livia.

"I'll be fine," she insisted, simply pleased to be such a vital part of the fight. She smiled.

Angie reached over and squeezed her hand. "Are you sure about this?"

Livia squeezed back. "I'm just happy I can help. I'm glad of the burden." Her words were spoken out of deep-seated guilt toward all the people who would be at the front, fighting with their lives on the line.

Angie grabbed both of Livia's hands in hers. Clasping them tightly, she lowered her gaze, silently lamenting the fact that she couldn't be any help out here. "I'm sorry," she said. "All I can do is be here with you and watch. I'm useless on the battlefield."

"No." Livia shook her head. "You did all the hard fighting before we got this far. It's our turn to help now. At long last, I can actually contribute."

Angie's eyes glistened with tears, which she quickly brushed away. "All I did was assist with the preparations. I can't help Leon directly, like you can."

"That's the thing—I couldn't have helped at all with those preparations. We only have so many forces out there because you stepped up, Angie."

Watching the two from a few feet away, Noelle sighed. "I love how they've forgotten I'll be helping out too. Not that I want to butt into their conversation. I know that'd be insensitive."

"Well, for what it's worth, I'm expecting a lot of you, Nelly," Cleare cooed at her.

"Yeah, yeah," Noelle shot back, unimpressed.

Cleare turned her attention to the one person wearing a dark, haunted expression—Marie.

"What's the matter, Rie? Does your tummy hurt? That's why I warned you not to eat too much," said Cleare.

Marie scowled at her. "Is that what you think of me? That I'm just an uncontrollable glutton?"

"What? Was I wrong? I made you those rice balls, and you ate ten—"

"Nine!" snapped Marie. "I didn't eat *that* many! I-I was just feeling a little nostalgic and stuffed my face more than usual, that's all."

Cleare moved her lens back and forth. "No, you ate ten. I'm sure, because I counted each one. Anyway, there's not much difference between nine and ten."

"There is when you're a woman!"

Thanks to Cleare's timely intervention, Marie was finally back to her feisty self. Carla and Kyle's faces were awash with relief at the sight.

"I'm glad to see Lady Marie acting like herself again," said Carla.

Kyle nodded but then said, "Anyway, those—what were they called, rice balls?—were awfully strange. Mistress eagerly wolfed them down, though. Will her stomach be all right?" He assumed that she wasn't accustomed to such

exotic cuisine and that it might in turn upset her system.

Marie flushed and mumbled, "I'll be just fine. I'm feeling even better than usual right now."

"That's good to hear." Kyle smiled at her. "But if it does happen to upset your stomach, please let me know. I brought medicine along."

"Lady Marie, why don't we visit the bathroom before the fighting begins?" Carla offered worriedly.

"Oh, enough, you two!" Marie snapped at them, embarrassed by all their fussing even as she felt equally grateful for their concern.

Sensing that the three had finished speaking, Cleare said, "Rie, I'll redirect some extra energy to you. Use your Saint powers to build us a barrier, okay?"

Cheeks still red, Marie proudly puffed out her chest. "Gladly. I'm perfectly capable of rising to the challenge when I need to."

"I wish you'd take that attitude even when it's not absolutely urgent," Cleare said with some exasperation, "but I guess I shouldn't be surprised you'd say that."

Marie frowned. "You Als sure like to make snarky comments, don't you? Why can't you just pay me a normal compliment?"

Before Cleare could answer, an urgent transmission came through from Fact.

"A heat signature has appeared on radar," he said.

"They're here," said Cleare. "Deploy shield at full strength."

Several layers of faintly glowing light formed a flat force field, almost like a transparent curtain, directly in front of the *Licorne*.

Angie's eyes widened as she peered at the horizon. "There they are." Something glimmered in the distance, and in the next instant, blinding light flashed through the windows. Violent turbulence rocked the entire ship.

Fact had sensed the enemy before the humans could spot it with their naked eyes.

"So, they can aim their weapons accurately at us even from this distance," he said to himself. "I shall positively adjust my evaluation of Arcadia's capabilities."

Several Als were accompanying Fact in a support capacity. They quickly reported the damage.

"Shield Ship One is down."

"The kingdom fleet has sustained no casualties."

"Deploying next shield ship to the front."

A large spaceship moved to the vanguard of the fleet formation. Ships had been prepared beforehand to act as barriers; they could use their own onboard force fields to deflect Arcadia's main cannon, protecting allies from the impact. Withstanding even one blast, however, would exhaust the ship's full capacity. At that point, its system would overload, fires would break out across the ship, and it would sink in the sea below.

"Estimated time until the enemy's next attack is eighteen hundred seconds."

"The empire's fleet is leading the charge ahead of Arcadia."

"Monsters under enemy control are approaching at high speed."

Scrutinizing all the incoming information, Fact issued his orders. "Return fire," he said. "Deploy the mobile weapon squadron."

At his command, the aircraft carrier released dozens of drones, and all the ships with AI onboard assembled in formation to aim at the beasts.

"Fire," said Fact.

Lasers and rockets shot forth, followed by a missile barrage. The few shots that pierced past the monsters, however, were blocked by magical force fields protecting the enemy ships charging ahead of Arcadia.

"Enemy shields detected."

"Presence of Arcadia's magical barrier confirmed."

"Our ballistics and lasers are completely ineffective."

Fact collected all the data they provided and proceeded to analyze it. More monsters were manifesting in the air around Arcadia, who could manipulate the

concentrated demonic essence in his surroundings to conjure and control them.

"So Arcadia managed to incorporate monsters into his arsenal," Fact observed grimly. "I shall positively adjust my evaluation of his threat level."

The data suggested that Arcadia could produce a nearly inexhaustible quantity of monsters to employ as weapons. As much as Fact and his allies had prepared for this battle, and for Arcadia himself, Arcadia had also endeavored to find as many modern military assets as possible to incorporate into their forces.

Fact and his fellow Als had themselves undergone emergency repairs in advance of the battle, but given their short window of time, they weren't at full operating capacity.

"We are proving less capable than originally forecasted," Fact realized. Then he promptly ordered, "Charge Arcadia head-on. Have the whole fleet speed forward."

His message went straight to the *Licorne*, which was acting as a conduit, before being relayed to the other ships in the fleet. Unfortunately, since most of their forces were manned by humans rather than Als, their scattershot timing disrupted their formation. They were less synchronized than Fact would've liked. On top of that, it was evident that none were accustomed to moving within a fleet of this scale.

"I shall negatively adjust my evaluation of the Holfortian army," Fact concluded. "Have two AI-manned ships take to the rear and assist in overseeing command."

The ships' inability to move in the way Fact had envisioned would disadvantage them against Arcadia—especially since the empire, as the conflict's instigators, had a much more robust fleet far outnumbering theirs. Fact had assumed that would mean the empire would practice synchronization before launching their assault, providing them an advantage.

But no.

"I shall negatively adjust my evaluation of the imperial army."

The enemy was proving less coordinated than expected. They'd had

considerable time to prepare for this battle, but they were arguably on the same level as the Holfortian army.

Nearby support Als erupted with reports.

"The wave of monsters has broken through our allies' fire."

"The Holfortian army is decelerating substantially."

"Our fleet has deployed mobile suits against orders, further decreasing our speed."

By "mobile suits," the AI referred to Armors, which were being sent to deal with the monsters. Fact's lens gleamed bright, anger infusing his robotic voice. "Command all ships to prioritize acceleration," he ordered. "Inform them that, if we cannot close the distance between ourselves and Arcadia quickly, he will blast us all from the sky."

The Holfortian army had no choice but to charge through the waves of monsters and accompanying shots from Arcadia's main cannon. If they hesitated, they'd make targets of themselves.

Inside the command room set up within Arcadia, Moritz grimaced. "This is it?" he said, disappointed to find that Arcadia's main cannon was far weaker than he'd expected.

Moritz had thought they'd sink a significant section of the enemy fleet before direct contact, but Arcadia had only downed a single ship. The cannon itself was sufficient to eliminate at least a hundred ships at once, but its results were less impressive than the optics suggested.

"Those junk machines with their oil stench are sacrificing spaceships to protect the rest of their fleet," Arcadia spat venomously. "Well, they may have blocked my initial shot, but if we continue blasting them, we will win eventually. They only have so many spaceships, after all."

"The problem is, if they make contact, your main cannon will be useless."

"Fair point," Arcadia conceded.

Moritz deemed it too dangerous to use Arcadia's cannon if the imperial and

royal armies broke into an all-out close-range melee, given the risk of catching allies in the blast. If they couldn't destroy—or at least substantially hamstring—the enemy forces prior to direct contact, they would suffer considerable losses.

Arcadia didn't seem the least bit panicked about the situation, though. The foe's Als in particular didn't daunt him, since they weren't in optimal condition. "Their Als only recently awoke," he said, "and don't seem to have undergone full repairs. That's why their only strategy for handling my cannon is to sacrifice themselves."

Moritz crossed his arms. "How long until you can fire the cannon again?" "Fifteen more minutes."

"That's too slow! You should be able to fire sooner than that. Our original calculation was every ten minutes."

"It requires additional energy to produce monsters and maintain shields to block their lasers," Arcadia explained, "which reduces the amount channeled into powering the main cannon."

"The royal army is advancing," Moritz reminded him through gritted teeth.

"I'll reduce their numbers before they make direct contact," Arcadia replied, sounding mildly annoyed at Moritz's attempts to pressure him. "Or do you actually think that our superior numbers will lose to the enemy? We'll do this exactly as we discussed. There's no need for concern."

Even if Arcadia couldn't fire his main cannon, they'd have the advantage of numbers. That wasn't enough for Moritz, however. He couldn't shake the anxious gnawing in his gut, although he was careful not to show that in his expression, of course. The Demonic Creatures on their side hadn't yet reported Leon's—or Luxion's—locations on the field, and those two were the royal army's trump card. Not knowing their whereabouts unsettled Moritz.

Unable to withhold his curiosity, he asked, "What about the enemy's main force? Where is *he*?"

Moritz didn't speak a name, but Arcadia surmised easily enough whom he was referring to. "Luxion still hasn't been spotted," he said. "He's probably hiding somewhere, watching us."

"Find him, now!" Moritz snapped. "If what you and your fellows were saying is true, a single shot from his main cannon could substantially damage our fleet!" Despite his earlier attempts, he wasn't managing to hide his wariness of Leon.

"Luxion is indeed a threat," Arcadia said placatingly. "But as long as I can block such an attack, there won't be an issue. Besides, even without my main cannon to fell enemies, we can wear them down until they are fatigued enough for our forces to wipe out." The edges of his mouth stretched into a twisted grin. "No matter what happens, we will be the victors."

Moritz leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling. "I hope you're right." His thoughts wandered elsewhere. Based on what Finn told me, this Leon fellow doesn't seem the type to let this battle play out conventionally. He'll have some sort of trick up his sleeve to use on us.

"Luxion was originally intended as a migratory ship," Arcadia pointed out.

"Perhaps some of their people defected and boarded him to leave for the safety of outer space."

Moritz lowered his head and averted his gaze from Arcadia. If so, that would make everything much easier for me to stomach. These beasts surely wouldn't chase them all the way to the stars, at least. He didn't actually want to annihilate all Holfort's citizens, but his position wouldn't let him show mercy. As emperor, he was determined to choose the path that best guaranteed his people's survival.

Moritz's face was hollow and sunken from stress, his voice lacking the same strength it had previously possessed. Nonetheless, he tried his best to sound composed and dignified as he ordered, "Commence a full retreat. Don't allow the royal army to make contact." He planned to maintain the distance between the two armies by falling back.

Chapter 7:

Twin Priestesses

 ${f N}$ ICKS STOOD on the bridge, fingers clenched tight around the railing. An intense shock wave had rocked their ship; outside, enemy monsters were everywhere.

"Is this what this war will be like? It doesn't look like the kind of war I've known," he grumbled.

The Als were unleashing their own ballistics and lasers to shoot down the beasts. Yet however many they managed to destroy, the empire's production line continued unimpeded, and monsters kept assailing the fleet.

"Continue to accelerate," a robotic voice ordered through their communications network. "There is no need to combat them."

Balcus, who'd taken a seat, smashed his clenched fist against the railing. "You want us to keep charging through these creatures?!"

Instead of responding to his question, the AI merely said, "All ships, continue to advance."

Standard protocol was to slow down and deploy Armors to deal with such beasts, for if they weren't handled quickly, they'd continue to attack and take down allied ships. Fact and the other Als didn't care about that, though. They insisted on maintaining speed, and that—if they didn't—everyone would be wiped out.

"They make it sound so simple, but the enemy's retreating now," Nicks spat angrily. "We can't keep charging toward them like this!" The imperial army was so far away at this point that he couldn't spot them even with binoculars. Part of the problem was that the monster swarm outside obscured the view, but the bigger issue was how quickly the empire was moving.

Although Arcadia was still facing them, he was managing to withdraw as quickly as he'd advanced, presumably thanks to his magic. It defied all common

sense—at least, the common sense ingrained in Nicks.

Swallowing any objections, Balcus bellowed, "You heard them, men! Follow orders and advance at full speed! If we hesitate, so will our allies. We must forge ahead as fast as we can!"

Their ship was at the front of the formation, so slowing down would have a domino effect on allies behind them. That was precisely why Balcus was intent on following orders and pressing forward.

As further shock waves ran through the ship, Nicks clung to the railing. He turned his head to look at his father. "Are you seriously ordering us to charge full speed into this monster swarm?! Didn't you just—"

Before he could finish his question, bright light flashed in the distance.

"Everyone, brace yourselves!" cried the captain, eyes wide.

The ensuing turbulence was more powerful than anything they'd experienced before. The spaceship in front of them deployed its shield, blocking the enemy attack, but it was rocked with explosions in the process. It plummeted as the Bartforts' ship whizzed past.

Nicks watched the ship fall, cold sweat trickling down his forehead. "They've already sunk two ships exactly like Luxion." He was glad that they'd blocked an attack powerful enough to swallow the fleet whole, but it was terrifying to advance knowing what they were up against.

Tears streamed down the crew's faces as they turned to Balcus in a plea for mercy. "My lord," one man said on behalf of the rest, "it's too dangerous to keep going! Please, let us fall back!"

Their appeal fell on deaf ears. Balcus folded his arms and stared straight ahead. "No," he said. "This is the strategy Leon chose, and I trust he did so for a reason. He's always thinking up some way to come out on top. Let's trust him and charge ahead!"

However much they sped up, though, the imperial army remained distant and out of view.

Nicks started to panic. Leon, is this really part of your plan?

Meanwhile, although Fact and his companions ran and reran their calculations, they all came out the same: With this strategy, they would lose.

"If we proceed as planned, we will run out of ships to shield us before we reach Arcadia," surmised Fact. If that happened, the battle would be as good as over.

The AIs around him continued making calculations, but it was futile. Just as Fact decided to switch to an alternate plan, Cleare's voice came through the communications network.

"We're in a real pinch," she said.

"Cleare, what business do you have here? You are supposed to be a mere communications conduit," Fact reminded her.

"My, how cold of you. And here I was, thinking I'd helpfully offer a plan to break out of the current stalemate."

"A plan, you say?"

"I sent you the necessary data," said Cleare. "You can take care of the calculations and all that rigamarole. We'll handle the rest. Oh! Before I forget, the *Licorne* will be moving to the front of the formation!" She promptly cut the line.

"Don't you dare move the *Licorne*—it is vital that it continue as our communications conduit! Cleare, are you listening?!" Fact bellowed, though he knew full well she couldn't hear him anymore.

The surrounding AIs turned to look at one another. "We agree with Cleare's proposed plan," they were quick to say.

Visibly irate at this unexpected turn, Fact barked, "We will employ Cleare's plan, then! Nevertheless, I shall negatively adjust my evaluation of her capabilities dramatically!"

Back on the *Licorne's* bridge, Noelle unfastened her cape, folding it and handing it to Marie. Clad only in her pilot suit, she did some basic stretches to

prep for what was coming.

Marie sighed in exasperation but still managed to smile at her. "I seriously have to question the design of your outfit. Is that something Leon is into?"

"Maybe," Noelle laughed quietly as she stretched. "When we showed him our suits, I caught him checking us out."

"Yuck. I didn't really want to know that," Marie said with a grimace. "So, are you seriously going to do this?"

Finishing her preparations, Noelle stood up straight, her face set in grim determination. "Sure am."

"I think maybe I should handle it," Livia said worriedly.

Noelle waved her off. "It's fine. You're already busy enough with your own duties, right? This is for me—for *us*—to look after. Our time to shine." The mark on the back of her hand began glowing faintly, its light piercing the fabric of her glove in the shape of the Priestess crest.

Livia tried to argue the point, but Angie put a hand on her shoulder, making her snap her mouth shut.

Angie turned her gaze to Noelle. "Alzer's known for its unbeaten defenses. Show us what your people are made of."

Noelle smiled wanly. "You should add that they were unbeaten until Leon showed up. Or are you taking a potshot at us?"

Angie snickered. "Maybe a little. But I *am* expecting you to pull this off, Noelle."

"You got it!" Noelle moved to the front of the bridge, where Cleare promptly displayed a hologram of Lelia. Although the two weren't aboard the same ship, it looked as if they stood next to one another. Lelia's voice came through as well, allowing them to communicate.

The twins faced each other.

"You ready for this, Big Sis?" asked Lelia.

"Of course," said Noelle. "You'd better not cry uncle halfway through."

"You've got no business poking fun at me when you're in that kind of getup."

Noelle recoiled. "Wait! Just so we're clear, it's a high-performance suit, all right?! And Leon loved it!" Her cheeks were beet red.

"Ugh. Don't brag to me about your love life in the middle of battle!"

"Ready for you two to do your stuff anytime," said Cleare, indicating that all her preparations were complete.

Noelle snapped her eyes shut and took a deep breath. Lelia mirrored her actions, although the two hadn't planned this beforehand. After a moment, they slowly opened their eyes.

"Bestow upon us your power, Sacred Tree," said Noelle.

"Emile," called Lelia, "lend us your strength."



The sapling on the *Licorne's* bridge emanated green light that washed over the entire ship. Monsters lunged toward their vessel but were destroyed the moment they came near.

"If you think our Sacred Tree's weak just because he's still a sapling, you're in for a world of hurt," said Noelle.

The power filling the air around her lifted her ponytail, causing the strands to billow. The same phenomenon occurred around her sister.

"You monsters have no more business on this battlefield," said Lelia.

When the monsters were gone, the entire fleet sped forward.

The imperial army's command room went into an uproar as the royal army destroyed all their monsters. Bathed in green light, royal ships surged toward them, right through the swarm of beasts Arcadia had produced. How exactly had they done it?

In the din and clamor of the room, Moritz's men tried desperately to find an answer. Only Moritz remained stock-still, arms folded as he stared at the monitor.

Arcadia's enormous eye narrowed. He studied the enemy fleet. "That white ship that moved to the front of their formation must be the source of this faint light," he concluded. He'd noticed the *Licorne* the instant it pulled ahead.

The staff officers in the room had likewise pinpointed the cause.

"Was an Alzer battleship really spotted among the enemy forces?"

"Yes, their presence has been confirmed."

"Then could this be the power of the Sacred Tree we've heard so many rumors about? Still, it's strange. Those powers shouldn't work unless the Sacred Tree is nearby."

Arcadia listened as they tried to puzzle out this mystery. An unsettling grin spread across his face. "Ah, the tree that absorbs demonic essence? So, they call it a Sacred Tree, then? What an exaggerated name."

With that, he set his own attack in motion. This time, he didn't use his main cannon; instead, numerous magic circles manifested in the air around the fortress.

"Time for a little investigation."

A concentrated beam of magical energy exploded from each circle, stretching toward the royal army. Even a single beam was devastating enough to destroy a battleship merely by grazing it, and Arcadia had released several hundred.

Noelle and Lelia raised a barrier using the power of their Sacred Trees, shielding their allies from Arcadia's barrage. Each blow placed enormous strain on the girls. Sticky, uncomfortable sweat beaded on Noelle's skin.

"Miss Noelle?!" Livia cried.

Noelle shook her head. She tried to smile, but through the pain, it came out weak and unnatural. "This is nothing," she said. "Don't you dare underestimate us."

Lelia wrinkled her nose at her twin's bravado. Yet, exasperated as she was, she looked happy too. She was suffering just as much as Noelle, but she also shared her sister's determination.

"Having a rough time, aren't you, Big Sis? You haven't had much of a chance to wield the Sacred Tree's power," said Lelia.

Noelle scoffed. "Aren't you the one at her limit? I don't mind. You can lean on your Big Sis to take care of the rest if you need to."

"And here I was thinking you'd matured a little," Lelia grumbled back at her. "You're pissing me off now as much as you ever did."

They were as determined as they were competitive.

Noelle thrust her fists out in front of her. "You'd better not think you can get through our defenses so easily!" she shouted at Arcadia, who was now visible in the distance.

Arcadia's eye widened, but it didn't last long. He was only mildly surprised by the enemy's ability to deflect his attack, and his usual calculating expression soon returned. "I see. So, that's not enough to knock you down. Still, I somehow doubt you can keep these defenses up forever."

Since the royal army had only utilized this method when they were at a disadvantage, Arcadia surmised that the Sacred Tree had limitations.

"Either there are certain prerequisites for using the tree, or that was your trump card to accelerate closer to us. But will you be able to block this?"

A single enormous magic circle manifested in front of the fortress, several smaller circles appearing belatedly around it. Together, they gathered all the power from the ship's main cannon for a larger-scale attack.

Once Noelle and Lelia activated their barrier, Fact and his fellow Als busied themselves with their calculations.

"I shall positively adjust my evaluation of Lady Noelle and Lady Lelia's abilities considerably. Thanks to their efforts, we are much closer to victory," Fact muttered to himself.

With the threat of the monsters gone, they could move at full speed, shrinking the distance between themselves and the imperial army.

"Our newest calculations suggest we can reach Arcadia before our last shield ship falls," said a nearby AI.

Assuming nothing unforeseen happened, they would retain more military strength than Fact had initially predicted, greatly increasing their odds of victory.

"Maintain speed and fix any deviations in our formation," Fact ordered.

"Arcadia is powering up his main cannon for an attack," reported one AI. "His target...is the *Licorne*."

Fact promptly alerted the *Licorne* that Arcadia was going after them directly.

That sent Cleare into an immediate panic. "That rotten jerk! He wants to get rid of us because we're blocking his attacks!" Rage bled into her voice.

Perspiration beaded on Noelle's brow as she poured herself into controlling the Sacred Tree's power.

"Lady Noelle," Yumeria murmured, tears welling in her eyes.

Noelle flashed her a smile. "It's fine. We're the ones at the fore right now. If I don't give this my all, I won't be able to hold my head up proudly in front of Leon." Her gaze swiveled to Lelia. "You'd better not make a run for it just because you're scared, Lelia."

"Ha! I should be warning you not to pass out," Lelia huffed.

Despite the pressing threat of Arcadia's main cannon, they kept a lighthearted attitude, bantering with each other. It was all bravado. Both were thinking the same thing: If we don't pretend this is a walk in the park, then when the blast hits, holding steady will be that much harder. We've both got to step it up right here and now.

Steeled to see this through, Noelle glanced again at her sister, who seemed to sense exactly what she wanted to say. Lelia nodded, and Noelle grinned. "Tell Fact not to send out a shield ship."

Cleare spun around. "You can't be serious. You're planning to shield us against his main cannon? There's no reason to push yourself that hard."

"When should I ever push myself, if not now?" Noelle shook her head. "It'll be fine. You might not know it from looking at me, but I'm made of pretty tough stuff." She grinned.

Livia clasped her hands tightly and began to pray. "Good luck, Miss Noelle."

"I told you, I've got this. Besides, if Leon were here in my place, I'm sure he wouldn't want to hold anything back. He'd want to show 'em what he's worth." Knowing him, he'd drive himself past his limits too. That was why she had to push through it.

Noelle and Lelia held out their right hands. Both their crests manifested in the air in front of the *Licorne*, creating a layered barrier over the ship.

"Have our allies stay behind us! We'll stop this blast right in its tracks!" shouted Lelia.

Cleare cried, "Here it comes!"

A second later, red-black light exploded forth and slammed into the *Licorne's* barriers. Lelia received the impact first. Her face crumpled, contorting in agony.

"Lelia?!" Noelle gasped out her sister's name.

Through sharp breaths, Lelia gasped out, "I'm alive, thanks to Emile, and I'm not going to waste that miracle here!" She summoned all her strength, withstanding the blast until it completely overpowered her. Then her barrier shattered, and it was Noelle's turn to shoulder the burden.

"This is...rough," she squeaked out. The blast was powerful enough to knock her back through the air, but she braced her legs and kept her footing through sheer willpower. "I have...to keep living, for Leon, and for everyone else...so I can't let myself die here!"

The crest on the back of her hand glowed brightly. Outside, her crest and barrier managed to outlast the attack.

Behind her, Carla and Kyle jumped up and down in excitement. They threw their arms around each other and squealed.

"They did it! They did it, Kyle!" enthused Carla.

"They did!" he cried in agreement. "They held out against the enemy's attack!"

Noelle collapsed onto her bottom, her whole body drenched in sweat. She drew gasping breaths, finding it hard to get enough oxygen. "Did you...see that?"

Livia and Angie raced to her side. They were joined shortly after by Marie, who paused briefly to glance at the hologram of Lelia. "You did an amazing job too," Marie murmured to her.

Noelle craned her neck, following Marie's gaze to where Lelia sprawled on the floor, eyes closed. Those with her had rushed to her side and were helping to lift her up. It seemed she was at least still breathing, just unconscious.

"You were a big help," Noelle told her younger twin. "Thank you." With that, her heavy eyelids shut, carrying her into darkness to join her sister.

Angie and Livia kept holding her. "You did amazing, withstanding that attack," Angie said.

"Yes. Thanks to your efforts, we're even closer to the imperial army," added Livia.

The enemy was easily visible nearby.

On the bridge of the Alzer Republic ship, Clement cradled Lelia in his arms. He was with her to serve as her bodyguard.

"My lady!" he cried desperately. "Lady Lelia!"

Lelia's eyelids finally fluttered open, and she winced in pain. "D-did we manage to block the attack?"

Clement settled down. "Yes. Yes, thanks to your efforts, our allies are as yet unharmed! We're also significantly closer to reaching the imperial army."

That proximity was an enormous boon for the royal army, and it was thanks to the twins. Those in the ship with Lelia had newfound respect for her after her accomplishment. The soldiers with the wherewithal to salute her quickly did so.

Lelia smiled back at them, relieved to have carried out her duty. Her clothes were drenched in sweat. "I'm glad to hear it," she said. "And I'm sorry to ask, but please let me rest. I'm worn out." She went limp in Clement's arms, falling back into unconsciousness.

Clement held her tight. "You and your sister have blossomed into incredible young women."

Chapter 8: A False Understanding

SHALL NEGATIVELY ADJUST my evaluation of Arcadia," Fact muttered to himself as fellow Als nearby were busy conducting their calculations.

"This has reduced consumption of our resources," one reported.

Another added, "We anticipate two more blasts from the enemy's main cannon before making direct contact."

"Three shield ships remain."

Simple math revealed that they had enough shield ships to get within range of the enemy and engage their forces.

"It helps immensely that the Sacred Trees' defenses saved our shield ships for a little longer. Still..." Fact trailed off.

Despite their success in deflecting the enemy's main cannon and magical attacks, the whole ordeal had had an unfortunate side effect. It had damaged the morale of the royal army; the troops were now terrified by the strength of Arcadia's arsenal. Many had slowed down as they approached the enemy. Even if Fact explained the intricacies of their present situation, few of their commanders would've understood him.

The fact of the matter was that the royal army could win, so long as they kept charging ahead. But who would believe that?

Fact's calculations indicated that, at this rate, their entire formation would collapse before they even reached the enemy. "We will be unable to maintain our fleet," he said. That, in turn, would damage their chances of coming out victorious.

While he was consumed with finding a way to address the matter, one ship on the front line pulled ahead of the rest. It belonged to House Fanoss, or what had formerly been the Principality of Fanoss. "What is going on?" Fact demanded, his words reaching the entire fleet thanks to Livia and Cleare's assistance. He'd prefer that the humans follow commands, rather than attack on their own.

Hertrude's voice answered. "It seems our comrades in arms are losing their nerve in front of the enemy." There was a challenge in her voice intended for their allies; she was obviously trying to antagonize them. "I suppose, if you're all too craven, House Fanoss will lead the charge. How disappointing that all the gentlemen in Holfort are pure bluster and can't back up their bravado. If that's how it's going to be, I guess House Fanoss should take the glory for itself, hm?"

Are you really such cowards you'd rather be outshone by a girl than stand up and face the enemy? That was the implication of her words, which stirred indignation in many of her allies.

Fact struggled to understand what happened next. "What? How could that trivial antagonism coax so many into speeding up?"

The only humans he'd ever known were those of old humanity—and only members of the military, at that. Thus, it seemed absurd to him that this army could so easily be spurred into action, especially since the only battles he'd faced were life-and-death. Each side had struggled for their respective race's supremacy; pride was irrelevant to them.

The Alzer Republic was quick to join House Fanoss at the front, Albergue commanding the ship.

"You have some courage, young lady," he said, "but we cannot let our priestess's contributions go to waste. What do you think, my heroic countrymen?"

"Hate to break it to Lady Fanoss, but those of us from the Republic will be the ones leading the charge!" Loic declared from inside his Armor's cockpit.

"My brave fellows!" bellowed Albergue. "This is nothing compared to the nightmare we endured before! Charge forward confidently and show them what the Alzer Republic is made of!"

The "nightmare" he spoke of was the incident when their former Sacred Tree had gone berserk. Incomparable fear had gripped them then. With that

experience behind them, they eagerly answered Albergue's call and sped forward.

"You just want to look good in front of the Saint, don't you?" Hertrude teased Loic.

"I'd most certainly be honored for milady—er, ahem—I mean, for the Saint to witness my heroics. Regardless, we are the fearless Alzerian army. We aren't so weak that we would lose our nerve against the empire!"

That very statement implied that the Holfortians were weak enough to lose their nerve. Any who'd still hesitated after Hertrude's needling and Albergue's call to action quickly let it be known that they wouldn't endure further disparagement from someone as young and green as Loic.

"Don't get ahead of yourselves, Fanoss!"

"The Alzerian army is fearless, huh? Don't make me laugh! You guys've just been holed up in your own country all these years!"

"Don't let them show you up, men! It's time for us to demonstrate what Holfort's all about!"

Any ships that had previously been lagging behind surged forward, the whole fleet accelerating.

"I fail to comprehend this," Fact said. His confusion notwithstanding, the important thing was that—at this speed—they'd reach the imperial army sooner than expected.

When the royal army managed to block Arcadia's main cannon, all the generals, military staff, knights, and soldiers in the room with Moritz broke into anxious chatter and shouting.

"The royal army has entered visual range!"

"They're really picking up speed."

"Aren't they scared at all?!"

While the imperial army slowly crept backward, the royal one charged

fearlessly toward them.

"We've held back enough," said Moritz.

Arcadia nodded. "The enemy has no idea what our trump card is. Or rather, they're operating in ignorance of our capabilities."

Moritz lifted himself from his chair and bellowed, "All ships, prepare for battle!"

Their fleet had paused, waiting to meet the incoming enemy. None moved in front of Arcadia, which probably made him look vulnerable to their foes.

Unfortunately for the royal army, that was all part of the empire's strategy.

"I didn't think we'd have to use our trump card," Moritz muttered.

"It's fine," Arcadia assured him. "At any rate, their efforts won't be enough to sink me."

"I'm sure you're right. And they have no idea we've been pretending this whole time."

Arcadia snickered. "No. I'm sure they'll be surprised when they realize."

"Misleading them into thinking that your main cannon only fired at fifteenminute intervals... You Demonic Creatures are awfully malicious."

The idea that Arcadia's main cannon couldn't fire continuously was a lie they had cultivated.

Arcadia's eye bent into an upside-down crescent, his lips curling upward into an enormous grin. "They're probably expecting the next attack to come fifteen minutes from now. Too bad! There are no restrictions whatsoever on how frequently I can fire."

It had simply been a deception meant to lead the AIs down the wrong path, depriving them of accurate information on which to base their calculations. This way, the empire could unleash their most powerful attack when the enemy least expected it.

Moritz's voice boomed through the room. "All ships, fire your missiles! Deploy your Armors!"

On the Redgraves' flagship, Vince's shoulders slumped with relief once they were finally close enough to engage the empire in combat. "Now that we're this close, Arcadia or whatever he's called can't fire that main cannon of his."

Once the royal army was locked in melee combat with the empire, Arcadia wouldn't be able to use that powerful beam for fear of killing his allies. At least, Vince assumed they wouldn't sacrifice their own men like that. I can't entirely ignore the possibility that they're prepared for some collateral damage, but all we can do is charge toward them.

Vince was at the very front of the formation, the most dangerous position. Despite the very real possibility of death, he felt heartened by the advantage their close proximity gave them.

I'm glad I had Gilbert fall back. As long as I'm here in front, we can maintain our house's dignity. Even if I should fall, the Redgraves will still have Gilbert and Angie to carry them forward. Our line will continue.

That was a common sentiment within the aristocracy—that it was important to maintain the family image and have children who could carry on one's legacy. Those two concerns had compelled Vince to head to the front.

"The enemy has deployed their Armors!" one of the soldiers on board shouted, peering through his binoculars.

"Then it's time for us to deploy ours to engage them in combat!" ordered Vince. "Don't let the enemy get close to our ship!"

At his command, the battle began, allied and enemy Armors clashing against each other. Cannon fire erupted from ships on both sides.

Vince gritted his teeth, face wrinkling in displeasure. I knew the enemy would have a considerable advantage over us, but it seems I underestimated its extent.

The empire's cannons weren't fashioned in the old stationary style that limited them to firing from the side; they had full directional aim. They were also automatic, so they didn't need to be manned to fire. Even their Armors were more impressive, well-crafted models than the royal army's.

"I suppose I should've expected this from a military superpower," Vince muttered. "Still, even with the odds stacked against us, we don't intend to buckle so easily."

He narrowed his eyes as he gazed out at the allied ships and Armors on the battlefield. The emergency repairs and upgrades Luxion and the other Als had made before the battle had helped put them on a level where they actually stood a chance against the empire. They also had a more compelling reason to fight in the shape of the homeland that lay just behind their fleet.

"We won't let you trample us," said Vince.

They had Holfort's full might on the field with them, which helped bolster their morale; Vince was sure the empire sensed that.

A violent force racked the ship, the tremor knocking people off their feet and sending them flying. As it abated, Vince barked, "Wh-what just happened?!"

The ship's captain shook his head, scrutinizing the bridge. "I-I have no idea. There was this sudden flash of light, and then..." He trailed off.

Vince peered outside through the glass. Up above them, Arcadia had unleashed an attack, bathing their forces in blinding light. It'd pierced right through their allies' magical barriers, taking down one ship after another. The blast must also have hit their ship; they were slowly losing altitude.

"You heartless imperial bastards!" Vince roared, forehead furrowed.

Arcadia must've fired a beam above them that expanded and transformed into a shower of light. It was still raining down upon them, and Vince's ship was directly in its range.

As explosions erupted all around him, Vince glanced behind him, toward where he knew his children must be. *Gilbert, Angie... I leave our family's fate to you.*

Flames enveloped the ship as it nosedived toward the water below.

Angie watched through the Licorne's monitor as Vince's ship went down.

"Father!" Her voice came out in a strangled cry, her hand shooting toward the

screen. Her eyes tracked the ship as it plummeted into the sea.

"Hey now!" Cleare snapped at Fact through the transmission. "We weren't told the enemy could attack like that! That beam *expands* after it's fired—and it's from his main cannon!"

Firing that cannon upward, Arcadia had managed an attack that dispersed over a wide range and rained down upon the royal army. Even with its reduced strength, the surprise assault had been enough to sink their ships. They'd lost over a hundred vessels. The *Licorne* had deployed a shield to protect itself and the nearest ships, but by then, it had already been too late; Cleare couldn't protect their other allies.

"Our data was based entirely on his attack's previous limitations. It appears we operated under a misapprehension of his capabilities," Fact blurted quickly, a small measure of panic seeping into his voice.

"You told us he couldn't fire repeatedly!"

"Based on the updated data, I still don't think he can do so," Fact argued.

"But he basically did just that!"

There was a short pause. "Based on what we know now, I believe it is highly likely that Arcadia was storing energy while he and the imperial army made their way toward the battlefield," Fact explained. "Their delayed pace was for that singular purpose."

"Stop analyzing your data and start coming up with a counterattack! We might be able to manage, but our allies can't withstand that!"

"I am currently calculating a possible solution."

"You worthless piece of junk!" Cleare snapped at him.

While the two argued, events unfolded on the battlefield.

Carla jabbed a finger toward the window. "Our allies are being attacked!"

"Now that they've been weakened, and can't do anything to defend themselves, the enemy is falling upon them," said Kyle, color draining from his face. The royal army had had all the momentum on the field until Arcadia launched his attack and upended everything. Now their vanguard was crumbling, while the imperial forces were fighting at full strength. The empire had so fully captured the advantage that the battle was now entirely one-sided.

Marie struck the bottom of her crystal staff, one of the Saint's holy relics, against the floor to grab Kyle and Carla's attention. "We still have allies fighting on the battlefield!" she reminded them, hoping that might help them compose themselves. Her gaze focused on their comrades. "House Fanoss and the Alzer Republic are still out there. Hertrude and Loic haven't given up."

Fanoss's ship had withstood the attack by a hairsbreadth. The Republic's ship was unharmed thanks to Ideal's expert craftsmanship. Both were taking the lead at the center of the vanguard, engaging the enemy.

"Send reinforcements immediately!" Angie commanded Fact. "If we don't, our whole front line will fall!" Her eyes filled with tears, and there was a tremor in her voice. No doubt she was concerned about her father. Under any other circumstances, she would want to divert some forces for rescue efforts, but she knew they didn't have resources to spare.

"Even if we sent reinforcements, that would just expose them to Arcadia's cannon. We need to maintain our distance and continue attacking," said Fact.

"Are you saying we should abandon our allies?!" Angie snapped back.

As their argument was about to heat up, Livia lowered her gaze and noticed a familiar ship. "W-wait!" she burst out. "That's...that's the ship Mr. Leon's family is on." Her voice trembled with the realization, for the ship was currently sinking.

When the shower of light hit the Bartfort ship, it gradually began to sink. The crew shouted back and forth, trying to coordinate procedures for a sea landing.

"I'm telling you, slow down our descent!"

"And I'm telling you that's impossible!"

"Just look after it! If you don't, the force of the impact will kill us all!"

The ship trembled violently. Nicks managed to climb to his feet, still slipping a bit as he did so. "D-Dad!" His eyes swiveled to find his father, who had blood running down from a forehead wound. "Dad, are you all right?!"

"Yeah. I'm fine," Balcus said.

"That's a relief. Let's hurry up and retreat, then. Most of our allies on the front line have already been sunk." Nicks scanned the air around them. Other ships were losing altitude too.

Balcus grabbed his son by the shoulders. "Nicks, get to the water and save as many of our allies as you can."

"Dad?" Nicks's face tensed. He'd suggested they run, but his father was commanding him to focus on rescue efforts.

"We've already been hit, so it's a strategic retreat from the front line—a viable excuse," reasoned Balcus. "You focus on rescuing all the people you can and then get out of here. I mean it. Run once you get the chance."

"As long as you're coming with me!" Nicks protested, worried; his father was phrasing his words as if he planned to remain.

Balcus just smiled at him. "If I ran too, I'd never be able to face our fallen allies," he said. "Take care of our family." He turned and strode off the bridge.

"Dad!" Nicks lurched forward, about to chase after him, but the captain grabbed him before he could get far. "Let go of me! My dad's...!"

"Young Master—no, Lord Nicks—please try to see it from your lord father's point of view."

The strength drained out of Nicks. He slumped to his knees on the floor. As he sat there in a daze, his father launched from the ship, piloting one of their family's Armors. He was followed by a platoon of loyal knights, all returning to the battlefield. It was incredibly dangerous for such a small group to charge back into the fray, since the empire still held an unshakable advantage.

Tears ran down Nicks's face. He threw his head back and screamed, "Leon! How long are you going to keep hiding?! You're the one who started this war, you idiot!"

"Young Master! Look below us!" one of the crew cried.

Nicks climbed to his feet and looked out the window. The prow of Luxion's main ship was peeking up through the water, almost like a surfacing shark. Waves crested over his surface, spraying foam everywhere as his main cannon aimed at Arcadia. No sooner had Luxion surfaced than he prepared to fire, shooting an enormous beam of bluish-white light toward Arcadia. It slammed into his magic barrier; even at this distance, the collision was so earsplitting that Nicks and the rest of the ship's crew heard it.

As the force of Luxion's blasts continued pummeling Arcadia's barrier, more vicious sounds crackled and echoed.

Nicks let out a strangled laugh. "You're late, you bastard!"

Luxion was attacking from directly beneath Arcadia, likely hoping to pierce the fortress's barrier. If Luxion's main cannon blasted through that, it would surely be enough to sink their most formidable opponent in this battle. Everyone, Nicks included, was convinced the royal army could claim victory once Arcadia was out of the way.

Arcadia's barrier took on a reddish-black hue, and a cluster of similarly colored energy manifested at the base of its fortress, swelling bigger and bigger. Even Nicks could tell that, whatever it was, it was dangerous. Only a few moments passed before that cluster burst forward, forming a compact sphere. It ripped through the bluish-white beam that Luxion had unleashed and pierced straight through his ship.

"What...?" Nicks's jaw dropped. He couldn't believe what he'd just witnessed.

An explosion erupted from the hole left in Luxion's ship. It sank back beneath the waves and disappeared. The apparent defeat left Nicks and most of their allies devastated.

Chapter 9:

A Three-Pronged Attack

ALTHOUGH ARCADIA had successfully countered Luxion's attack, he wasn't completely unharmed by the process. A violent tremor ran through the fortress, setting off warning sirens in its corridors and alarming the people in the command room. Defending against the blast consumed a substantial amount of energy.

Moritz watched on the monitors as Luxion sank beneath the waves. His fists trembled on the arms of his chair. Frantic, he ordered, "Fire another blast at him! Make sure he goes down!"

It didn't matter that the initial blast had been enough to rip a hole through Luxion, or that he'd been swallowed up by the ocean. That wasn't enough for Moritz to relax.

"I would love to do just that," said Arcadia, no less anxious about their predicament. "Unfortunately, we have already used too much stored energy. It would be dangerous to further drain our reserves when there are still AI enemies on the battlefield."

"Khh...!" Air hissed through Moritz's clenched teeth.

Arcadia had already channeled the maximum possible amount of energy into his blast to take down Luxion, which had been a wise call. They'd at least driven Luxion from the field.

Still, Moritz couldn't rest easy. "Is that really it? Will this battle end so simply?" It was a letdown—far too anticlimactic, considering how Finn had hyped up Leon.

Arcadia's eye moved from side to side. "You have overestimated the power of old humanity's weaponry. Luxion is a formidable opponent, but a migratory ship could never beat a fortress such as I."

Moritz sank back in his seat. He sucked in a deep breath. "Perhaps. I suppose

all that's left is to finish them off."

With Leon down for the count, the rest of the royal army would quickly lose morale and disperse. Luxion no longer posed a threat either, which meant no one would be left to impede the imperial army.

"Please leave exterminating the civilians to me. I promise to snuff out each and every one, no matter where they try to hide," said Arcadia.

In his eyes, all Holfortians were old humanity's descendants. The very idea of annihilating the last dregs of his mortal enemies visibly elated him.

A chill ran down Moritz's spine, but however reprehensible he found this part of their mission, he knew he had to carry it out to ensure his people's future.

"That seals it. Victory is ours," Moritz said, sure the royal army would fall to them quickly.

Several of the Demonic Creatures present in the room to assist Arcadia provided updates on the situation.

"That attack strained your shield past its limit."

"The fortress's barrier has weakened."

"It taxed the ship's interior as well. It will take time to recover."

The damage from Luxion's attack was more substantial than they'd anticipated. Even Arcadia hadn't expected it to be that bad; his mouth twisted in displeasure. "His flimsy blast had that much impact?" That would've been impossible if Arcadia were in full working order, but since he'd only just awakened, Luxion's attack had proven devastating.

Moritz shook his head to refocus himself. We can't let our guard down until we finish off the enemy completely, he decided.

The monitor in front of him displayed the enemy's entire fleet. It would be too dangerous for Arcadia to fire his main cannon again, so Moritz opted to have his army take over the rest. "Send out all the Demonic Knights who've been on standby. Tell them to destroy the enemy in front of us and end this nightmare of a battle."

One of his generals nodded. "In their current state, the royal army will be no

match for our highest-ranking Demonic Knights."

"Wait," Moritz interrupted. "Have Finn remain on standby here."

A wrinkle formed on the general's forehead. "You aren't sending out the first seat?"

Moritz glanced at Arcadia, who answered on his behalf. "Finn is Her Imperial Highness's favorite. There's no need to make her anxious by sending him."

Not deploying their best soldier because Imperial Princess Miliaris wouldn't like it was absurd reasoning. Everyone's expression soured, but nobody bothered to argue the point, since they were confident that victory was already theirs.

"He'll be insurance for us, in case the worst comes to pass," Moritz muttered under his breath.

Aboard Arcadia was a special room where Demonic Knights stayed while on standby. Finn and Brave were inside, left behind by their fellows who had received orders to deploy. Finn sat with his arms folded over his chest. He didn't say a word.

As worried as he was for his partner, Brave tried to put on a cheerful front. "The top brass must be idiots if they're not ordering you onto the field," he said. "With you out there, this whole thing would be over instantly."

"Yeah." Finn sounded disinterested.

"W-well, still, I guess it's good you don't have to go," Brave continued. "This way, you won't have to fight Leon and the others." He was striving to comfort Finn, although he obviously wasn't very good at it.

"Sorry for worrying you, Kurosuke."

"It's fine; we're partners, after all! And I see you're still stuck on calling me that. You sure are stubborn, Partner."

Finn grinned, and Brave laughed.

Mia burst into the room, followed by her maids and several Demonic

Creatures. She had been put under heavy guard to keep her safe. The moment she spotted Finn, her worried expression broke into a smile. "Sir Knight!"

"Princess Miliaris? What are you doing here?" Finn asked, bowing to her.

She stared at him in surprise, eyes round. It took only a moment for her expression to crumple with sadness. Finn sensed instantly what she wanted from him.

"Apologies, but I'd like to speak with Her Imperial Highness alone," he said to the contingent of maids and Demonic Creatures who'd followed her into the room.

The maids glanced at one another and shook their heads. "We cannot leave. We've been ordered to stay at Her Imperial Highness's side at all times. Even if it weren't our duty, we couldn't leave her alone with a man. That would be inappropriate." If anything improper took place, they'd be the ones punished, and none wanted to shoulder that risk for him.

"Unacceptable," said one of the Demonic Creatures.

Another agreed. "We cannot allow it."

"There is no reason we can't stay with Her Imperial Highness."

Unlike the maids, their insistence wasn't borne of duty but rather of stubborn insistence on being with Mia. After all, they were willing to sacrifice their very lives to keep her safe, which made them that much harder to convince.

Finn frowned, unsure how to proceed.

"Oh, shut up, all of ya!" Brave shouted at them. "Get outta here quick, or I'm gonna lose it!"

There would be considerable damage if a fully functioning Demonic Core like Brave went berserk. Reluctantly, albeit for different reasons, the maids and Demonic Creatures exited the room. Soon only Finn and Mia—and Brave, of course—were left.

Finn guided Mia to a nearby couch and sat down beside her. "What have you come here for?" He spoke more casually this time, the way he normally did.

Mia visibly brightened, but her expression clouded just as quickly. "Sir Knight,

I don't want you to fight," she said. "This whole war is a mistake. It's too cruel that some of us have to destroy the others for the fighting to finally end."

Her argument was a childish, idealistic one.

Finn smiled thinly. How many times had he explained this to her? We have no other choice. He almost let those words slip out of his mouth but managed to swallow them at the last second. Mia's kindness and innocence reminded him too much of his little sister from his previous life.

Instead, he said, "You don't need to let it weigh on you. His Majesty and I—along with the rest of those involved—will shoulder this sin until our deaths."

"Sir Knight?" Mia spoke his title questioningly, a nervous crease on her forehead. She seized a fistful of his clothing, clinging to him. "Why does it sound like you plan on leaving me behind? Didn't you promise you'd protect me forever? There's no reason you have to take part in the fighting."

He smiled gently at her and peeled her fingers from his clothing, taking both her hands in his. "I can't be the only one shying away from responsibility. Besides, my duty is to keep you safe. To make sure this world remains one in which you're healthy enough to run around outside as much as you want."

Whatever else happens, I'll protect her. I'm not the weakling I used to be. In his past life, he'd regretted being unable to do anything but watch as his little sister passed away. His desire—his need to be in control, to do something—was what drove him.

```
"Sir Knight," said Mia, "I...I..."
```

"None of this is your fault," Finn interrupted. He couldn't let her finish. It would shake his determination to see this through. "The rest of us—His Majesty, the other knights, and I—will finish this."

```
"But—"
```

"It'll be all right. I'll protect you."

She squeezed his hands. When she lifted her chin, her eyes were dewy with unshed tears. "At least promise me that you'll come back to me no matter what happens, then. You *have* to promise."

"Yeah, I prom—"

Before he could finish, Brave interjected, "Partner, above us!" His gaze was directed at the ceiling, and there was panic in his voice; he must've sensed something.

The command room was in chaos. Something was plummeting toward them from far, far above, originating outside the planet's atmosphere.

"From outside the atmosphere?!" Moritz cried when he heard the report, jumping out of his seat.

Having been outwitted, Arcadia scowled. "So that's what your plan is." The monitor inside the command room showed an unidentifiable blur heading straight toward them. From what they could tell, it matched their data on the *Partner*.

"It's Archduke Bartfort's ship!" Moritz realized. He was in obvious panic over the encroaching vessel. The generals and military staff in the room with him were similarly flustered. None had anticipated an aerial attack like this.

"Trajectory identified," said one of the nearby Demonic Creatures. "It's on a collision course with Arcadia's fortress."

Arcadia's eye narrowed with fury. "It figures you machines would resort to your special kamikaze-style attacks. You're as boorish as ever."

The *Partner* measured over seven hundred meters long. Bursting through the atmosphere would lend it incredible destructive power as its mass plowed straight toward them. Even Arcadia wouldn't come out unscathed.

"You went to the trouble of leaving the atmosphere, only to reenter and attack, hm? Sadly for you, tactics aren't as effective once I've already experienced them." All Arcadia's previous displeasure disappeared as a smile curved his lips, his eye narrowing into a slit.

Moritz was sweating bullets. "Move the fortress, quickly!"

"That's pointless," said Arcadia. "If we moved, he would only adjust his trajectory. I know where he originated from, so I simply need to ensure my

barrier is thickest where he makes impact." As he spoke, he began concentrating his energy so that the shield's thickest point was directly above him. That would weaken the rest of his shield, but such was the cost of defending himself. As an extra safeguard, he decided to use his main cannon after all. "The best way to handle this would be to shoot him down before he can reach me."

Arcadia drew from his energy stores, and a reddish-black ball manifested in the air above him. As soon as all preparations were made, he commanded, "Fire."

The blast shot upward. The *Partner* attempted to swerve away from it, but it couldn't react fast enough. Arcadia's blast cleaved through its hull, shaving off a chunk. If Arcadia's predictions were correct, the ship was probably stocked full of blasting powder. That would be the best way to inflict the maximum possible damage on Arcadia, so long as the *Partner* hit its target. If it carried that much powder, it should explode from the damage it sustained.

Not that it mattered, since with half its body gone, the *Partner* had slowed considerably. It didn't seem like it would even make an impact.

"Oh? So, you don't have blasting powder aboard, as I anticipated," remarked Arcadia. "Did you not have enough time to prepare it?"

When he saw the *Partner*, Moritz had initially been relieved but soon drew his brows together. "So the royal army, and the spaceships with it, were a diversion. Archduke Bartfort certainly planned this out."

The *Partner* sped closer to them, flames bursting from it. Arcadia gradually began moving the fortress, trying to prevent a direct hit. However, the *Partner's* Al immediately corrected its course, keeping its aim on Arcadia.

"How pitiful," said Arcadia. "Even if you manage to strike the fortress, that will not be adequate to take me down." He flashed his pearly-white teeth, grinning in delight at having outmaneuvered the machines. "However much you struggle, you cannot stave off our inevitable victory."

The *Partner* slammed into Arcadia's barrier, the vessel's body crunching and exploding in a fiery blast. Shrapnel and whatever remained of the ship itself slowly tumbled into the sea.

There was a slight tremor within the fortress, but that seemed to be the attack's only impact. Everyone in the command room heaved a sigh of relief.

"Give me a report on the situation!" Moritz barked at the others, redirecting his attention to the war effort.

His subordinates scrambled back to their positions.

"R-right! Um, there's no damage to Arcadia."

"The magical barrier managed to fully withstand the attack."

"B-but due to all the energy it required, we no longer have a barrier at all."

Arcadia ignored them, his mouth cracking open in maniacal laughter. "Hya ha ha! Has the rust gotten the best of you after all these years, you filthy machines? If you really wanted to bring me down, you should all have launched a collective attack from outside the planet's atmosphere. But you couldn't do that, could you? That's why you settled on this pitiful excuse for a battle plan as your last resort."

As much as Arcadia ridiculed their efforts, he knew there was nothing they could've done differently. Even if Fact had them launch a collective attack, their chances of succeeding would've been far too low. The kingdom's disadvantage in this battle was staggering.

"You never had a chance of winning," Arcadia spat at them smugly.

That attack really had me on edge, Moritz thought, mopping sweat from his brow. At least now we've sunk both of Archduke Bartfort's ships. He froze. Hm? No, wait. Where's his third ship?

The *Partner* was no better than scrap metal after the blast when it struck Arcadia's shields, and Luxion had disappeared beneath the waves. They'd all assumed that, with Luxion's main ship out of commission, no other vessel could stand up to Arcadia. But one ship was unaccounted for and had yet to be spotted on the battlefield.

"Watch for the Einhorn!" Moritz ordered, his voice shrill with renewed panic.

With Luxion and the *Partner* gone, the *Einhorn* was all that remained.

Arcadia quit laughing and spun around, facing the rear of their army. "What's

that thing approaching us at top speed?!" There was a tremor in his voice.

The object in question—which was blasting straight toward them—was, in fact, the *Einhorn*.

The intense turbulence and gravity inside Arroganz's cockpit made for an unbearably uncomfortable ride. I was plastered to my seat, the cushions flattening beneath me. But something else concerned me far more than that agony.

"For the love of everything, just don't let this plan end in failure. Then I'd really look like an idiot," I said.

The *Einhorn* had taken off ahead of the rest of the army, opting for a long detour around the battlefield so that we could surprise the enemy from the rear. Once we were in position, the boosters Luxion had attached to the ship for extra speed started firing on all cylinders, accelerating straight toward our destination. I'd been suffering in the intense gravity from that point on.

"Please swallow your complaints. I reduced the gravitational impact considerably. It could be worse," Luxion told me, nagging at me the same way he always did.

"Seriously? *This* is reduced gravity?" I only managed to speak with great effort, but Luxion talked smoothly, as if this had no effect on him. Maybe that was a given, since he was a machine, but it still pissed me off.

"I sorted through the information Cleare and Fact sent us. According to them, Arcadia has no offenses left to use against us."

That had been the whole purpose of our strategy—to wear Arcadia down.

"Looks like it was worth sacrificing the *Partner*, then," I said, grinning through the agony.

Luxion moved his lens up and down, nodding. "Yes. The *Partner* accomplished its final mission successfully. It is almost time, Master. Soon we will be the ones fulfilling our duty."

"Make sure to get us there as safely and smoothly as you feasibly can," I

added. I knew what I was asking was impossible, but I had to try.

"I will do my best," Luxion said without really meaning it.

My teeth sank into the mouthpiece he had prepared for me. It was meant to keep me from biting my tongue.

"Thirty seconds until impact," Luxion announced, beginning the countdown.

Violent tremors, likely caused by incoming fire, racked the ship.

"Ten seconds until impact." And after a few more seconds, "Five, four, three..."

The imperial army's ships began firing on the *Einhorn*. The monsters had shifted position, flocking to Arcadia's rear in an attempt to act as shields against the enemy vessel. However, they hoped to shoot the *Einhorn* down before the need to physically block it arose.

"How dare you?!" Arcadia howled. "And with that sad excuse for a ship!"

Whatever they tried didn't slow down the *Einhorn*. It ignored their attacks, plowing forward and smashing right past the wall of monsters like they were nothing.

Moritz's brow furrowed at the sight of Arcadia's panic. His eyes darted back to the monitor, where he watched the *Einhorn*. "A three-pronged attack," he muttered to himself.

Luxion's main ship and the *Partner* were mere diversions to weaken Arcadia so the *Einhorn* could make its move.

The name "Einhorn" fit the ship perfectly, since it had a single horn on its prow. From its containers, it launched several hundred missiles which pelted the monsters in the air around it. Their attempts to shoot it down proved futile; worse yet, the return fire sank a number of their ships.

"We can't stop it." Moritz stood firm with his arms crossed over his chest. He hollered at his men, "Brace for impact!"

None of the tremors they had experienced compared to the violence of the

one that followed.

Arcadia's intense fury left his eye bloodshot. "You filthy, oil-covered piles of scrap!" he screeched in a high-pitched voice.

The empire's victory had been all but assured up to this point, but this surprise attack had tipped the scales. Who would win was anyone's guess.

That's fine, Moritz decided, welcoming this development. It's for the best, really. Come at us with everything you've got. Whoever survives until the end will rule this planet. Don't hold anything back!

He'd been plagued with guilt at the thought of murdering innocent civilians who couldn't even fight back, but he wouldn't feel so bad about it after a battle to the death in which both sides fought tooth and nail.

The command room descended into confusion.

"Have the army keep fighting the enemy forces," Moritz commanded, reining everyone in. "Tell them there's no need to worry about the attacks on Arcadia. Call back the Demonic Knights!"

The multifaceted attack on Arcadia had shaken their army already. Ordering them to continue the assault would keep them from hesitating in front of the enemy, wondering whether they should double back to protect their emperor and Arcadia. Moritz was summoning the Demonic Knights again because they'd be needed to deal with the *Einhorn*. Its horn had punctured Arcadia deeply, providing an infiltration point a number of intruders were already taking advantage of.

Arcadia's enormous eye twitched with irritation. The monitor switched to the intruders, and he glowered at them. "You have some nerve, breaking into my fortress."

These intruders piloting Armors boarded Arcadia. One Armor had a particularly unique design, as well as a gargantuan container on its back.

Moritz and his men grimaced.

"That's Arroganz."

"The archduke himself came to attack us."

"He must be out of his mind."

Five other Armors accompanied him, followed by a veritable army of drones whose camera lenses gleamed eerily.

Arroganz paused and turned its rifle toward one of the cameras. A voice filtered from its cockpit microphone. "Hey there, everyone from Holy Magic Empire of Vordenoit," Leon greeted those watching in the command room. He fired at the camera; the monitor went black, but even without visuals, they still heard him. "And a special hello to the man responsible for this whole war—His Imperial Maj-ass-ty, the sad sack of crap calling himself your new emperor."

Those around Moritz erupted in fury at the archduke's impudence, but the emperor himself found Leon's candid greeting rather pleasant.

Gentle tremors ran through the ship, indicating Leon and his comrades had begun their assault on the fortress.

Moritz burst into laughter. "He's as crude as Finn said he'd be. There aren't many in the world who would dare insult me like that."

Everyone in the room froze, confused by his reaction.

Moritz sobered, the emotion draining from his face. "Let's give our new guests some entertainment," he ordered.

"A-as you command, Your Imperial Majesty!" His men scurried to carry out his orders.

The whole time, Arcadia trembled with rage and indignation. "Never in all my battles with old humanity have my inner walls been breached. You shall pay for this. You will suffer before this is through!" Veins bulged across his body, but his incandescent fury ebbed quickly, transforming to panic. "Where is Her Imperial Highness? Send guards to protect her, quickly!"

Exasperated, Moritz sighed at the creature and its intense mood swings. His gaze fell on the cane in his hands. Father, the man you sought to join hands with has boarded our fortress. We'll win this, however, as long as we can take him down. I'll shoulder all the blame when this is over by forfeiting my own life. When I do, I expect you to tell me why you betrayed us in the first place.

Chapter 10:

The Kingdom's Greatest Swordsman

THE AZURE EXPANSE where the royal and imperial armies battled was now stained black with smoke from all the explosions.

Amid the chaos and fighting, where men put their lives on the line for their respective sides, a Demonic Knight chortled. His laughter echoed around him. "That's fifty done," he declared. "Weak. You're all too weak. It's laughable to think this is the best you can do."

Lienhart had donned his Demonic Suit and was wielding a pair of sabers. Each was far too large for an ordinary Armor to manage two at once, but his Demonic Suit brandished them with practiced ease. Practical skill, not brute force, backed his attacks. His blades cut through the royal army's Armors as easily as a knife through butter.

Lienhart's Demonic Suit spread its wings wide, allowing him to maneuver gracefully through the air. Many an opponent scrambled to escape when they faced his unmatched strength.

"Someone save me!"

"You can't show your back to the enemy," Lienhart rebuked them. "It's like you're begging me to kill you." And so he did just that, thrusting one saber right into his fleeing opponent's back.

Lienhart relished the thrill of battle like a lone hunter, rather than as the cog of an enormous army. In fact, he treated battle exactly like a hunt.

"If I can't find anyone stronger, this'll be boring," he said.

The imperial army had the upper hand to begin with, but the Demonic Knights were distinguishing themselves on the field above and beyond that. The order's highest-ranking members were particularly devastating, putting up extreme resistance against the royal army.

Having identified Lienhart as a threat, the AI destroyers charged toward him, firing lasers and deploying drones to surround the Demonic Knight. They had him closed in on all sides, hoping that superior numbers might finish him off.

"Maybe you'll turn out to be a little tougher than the others, hm?" said Lienhart, not the least bit panicked by his situation.

His batlike wings stretched wide, flapping powerfully against the wind. Accelerating at incredible speed, he shot forward through the air toward the destroyer, lifted his swords, and sliced straight through the ship's plating. The destroyer was swallowed by the ensuing explosion.

"Ha ha! How are you this weak?" Lienhart watched in amusement as the ship's wreckage plummeted toward the ocean.

His deranged glee invoked fear in the royal army. The way he fought even disturbed his own allies.

"So that's the youngest Demonic Knight!"

"They say he's a genius swordsman—the Sword Saint of this generation."

"Um...is it just me, or is he really enjoying fighting?"

Lienhart ignored their comments, busy scanning the battlefield for further prey. "Now, who's going to be next? I'd prefer to fight the Kingdom's Sword Saint, if possible, but the Scumbag Knight is the one I'm pursuing."

In his heart of hearts, he desired a battle with the enemy hero more than anything. His favorite activity was battling and beating strong opponents. He was like an innocent child, eager to test his strength by finding the most challenging opponent he could on the field.

An enemy Armor suddenly approached him, the pilot hollering, "I won't let you continue your reign of terror!" Judging by the man's voice, he was probably a middle-aged knight.

From what Lienhart could tell, the man was an experienced veteran. The suits accompanying him appeared to be manned by similarly battle-hardened fighters. What Lienhart liked most about them all was their courage in coming to fight him.

"You've still got some brave men among you, eh?" he said.

Scratches covered the first enemy Armor, suggesting he'd already cut down a number of imperial troops. Lienhart's intuition assured him that this man was tough, but he wasn't the sort of opponent Lienhart preferred.

Lienhart clicked his tongue. "Too bad your fighting style has no flair. You're just a washed-up old knight, aren't you? You should've gauged the difference in our strength before charging at me like a fool." He flew forward in the blink of an eye, jamming his foot into the enemy Armor's head and sending it reeling backward.

"Guh!"

The men accompanying the enemy Armor covered for him quickly, shouting, "Lord Balcus!"

Lienhart assumed they were his retainers. Their care for him was touching, but that gave Lienhart no pause. "Ha ha!" He let out a strangled laugh and raised his blade. When Balcus's men charged him, he sliced right through them.

"You bastard, killing my men!" Balcus howled at him. Now recovered, he charged once more, but Lienhart's saber parried him without difficulty.

"It's their fault for dying so easily," Lienhart told him. "Now, it's time for you to—"

Before he could cut down his enemy, an enormous explosion split the air behind him.

"What the hell?" Lienhart glanced backward. His sword missed its original target, slicing through the arms of Balcus's Armor instead. Without looking, Lienhart swiftly plunged his sword toward the cockpit, but again his aim was off, and he narrowly missed.

"Guh!" Balcus groaned, his suit skewered by Lienhart's sword. "You're one tough bastard."

He tried to struggle, but Lienhart ignored him, his gaze focused on Arcadia. The fortress had been struck by something; a column of smoke rose from it.

"Something got through Arcadia's shield?" Lienhart couldn't hide the shock in

his voice.

Several low-ranking Demonic Knights sped toward him. "Lord Lienhart! His Imperial Majesty ordered us back to Arcadia to combat the enemy infiltrating the fortress!"

If it was a direct order from the emperor, Lienhart had no choice but to obey. He yanked his sword from Balcus's suit, which began to lose altitude.

Lienhart pointed his saber at it. "I'm sick of hearing all your screaming and crying." A ball of compressed air formed at the point of his sword and burst forward, slamming into Balcus's Armor and sending him flailing.

"Graaah! Nicks! Leon! The rest is up to you..." At first, his voice echoed in the air, but explosions drowned it out as the Armor lost all propulsion and plunged toward the sea.

Lienhart had no more interest in it. He flexed his wings to return to Arcadia, and the low-ranking knights followed.

"These infiltrators ought to be fun to play with," Lienhart said, licking his lips.

"Arcadia's fortress was breached?"

A Demonic Knight stood on the deck of an enemy ship as flames devoured it. Fire burst from the exhaust pipe of the pack on the Demonic Suit's back. The Demonic Knight—Gunther—was accompanied by numerous lower-ranking knights. All around him and his men, enemy vessels were sinking.

Another Demonic Knight, Laimer, had come to deliver that message to him. "From what I hear, we've all been ordered to return to the fortress," he told Gunther. He couldn't provide further information, since he himself had only heard that through the grapevine.

Gunther's brows knit. He glanced at the royal army. "We could've dealt a more devastating blow to the enemy if only we had a little more time." Still, he shot off from the deck, followed by his subordinates.

Laimer sped along behind him. "Well, all I've heard is that the Scumbag Knight boarded Arcadia. If we don't get back quickly, the command room will be in

danger." Laimer was still young, and his voice hitched.

Gunther didn't share his panic. As much as he detested acknowledging it, they still had the first seat—Finn—at the fortress. Gunther intended to reclaim that position eventually, but he wasn't so proud that he couldn't recognize Finn's strength.

"Calm down," he told Laimer. "Arcadia has Finn to protect everyone. His Imperial Majesty and the others won't be beaten so easily."

"Y-yeah, you're right."

"Anyway, what about Hubert?"

Hubert's Demonic Suit was slimmer and taller than those his comrades piloted. Its T-shaped head was topped with a circular decoration. Team battle was Hubert's specialty.

"Lord Hubert! Squadrons one through three successfully dispatched the enemy's assault troops!"

"What a pain this is," Hubert muttered to himself.

The emperor had ordered them all to return to the fortress, but he and his men had penetrated far into the enemy lines, and navigating back out was proving difficult. If they turned their backs, the royal forces would swoop in to take advantage. Hubert's forces could beat the enemy in an outright battle, but they couldn't simply ignore them to retreat.

Hubert oversaw eight squadrons of three Demonic Knights each. He excelled as a commander, which was why he'd been put in charge of twenty-four knights —to best utilize his unique skill set in battle.

One of his subordinates approached and told him, "Lord Gunther apparently already returned to Arcadia ahead of us."

"He beat us there, hm? I guess that means either he or Finn will claim the Scumbag Knight's head. They're stealing all our glory," Hubert chuckled.

Laimer suddenly appeared beside him.

"Hm? You didn't go back with Gunther?" asked Hubert.

"I'm supposed to be under your command, so no. But if you don't get moving soon, Finn'll snag this battle's greatest accomplishment for himself."

"Indeed. Let's hurry along, then." Hubert and his men finally shook off all their pursuers and started back toward the fortress. As they did, Hubert thought to himself, They already have Finn there to protect them, so if they need us in the fortress too, perhaps His Imperial Majesty and the others there are in more danger than I realized.

The corridors inside Arcadia leading to the fortress's power reactor were incredibly spacious, likely in order to accommodate pilots in Demonic Suits traveling through the complex. I'd expected Demonic Knights to be protecting this area, but instead we came up against the imperial defense forces. They piloted Armors equipped with machine guns, bazookas, and tower shields. Their level of preparation suggested they'd anticipated us breaching the fortress and fighting them in this spot.

"Aren't any of them going to charge us with swords? They're ruining the whole medieval fantasy vibe," I grumbled from within Arroganz's cockpit.

"Their fighting style suggests they don't honor the knight's code in the same way as Holfort Kingdom," Luxion explained matter-of-factly. "That's more realistic and practical of them, though I hesitate to compliment them too much, given their connections to Arcadia and the other Demonic Creatures."

They're more about winning than upholding knightly values. Makes sense. "Well, that doesn't make a difference to us!" I replied.

"Indeed not, Master."

Arroganz sped along the corridor, feet gliding across the floor. Its right hand carried a battle axe, which I used to cleave through the shields of any enemies standing in our path. In its left hand was a rifle with which I pelted imperials from a distance. I was using brute force to get through, so we took quite a bit of fire, but Arroganz's thick plating deflected it completely.

"Hate to break it to you, but your attacks are pointless. Luxion custom-made

this whole Armor." I glanced briefly at a fallen enemy before speeding along, Julius and the rest of the idiot brigade hot on my heels.

"Leon! You're speeding too far ahead!" Julius barked at me.

"Yeah, because we've got to locate the reactor as fast as we can!"

That was the heart of our mission here: destroying Arcadia's power reactor. The reactor was what fueled Arcadia, feeding him energy and allowing him to produce demonic essence. Without it, his functions would shut down. There would be no more floating fortress, and no more demonic essence polluting the air. The whole reason I concocted this plan to breach Arcadia was because it would give us the best chance of accomplishing our goal.

"Anything from the drones, Luxion?" I asked.

"They are currently blocking enemy reinforcements and scouting out a possible route to the reactor. The high concentration of airborne demonic essence makes it impossible to rely on radar to find it. Please allow me more time to locate it."

The drones we'd brought along had dispersed down other hallways to help look for our target, but quite a few enemies were positioned down here, which complicated our search.

"Well, this fortress is the source of all the demonic essence," I said lightly. "Guess the reactor won't be so easy to find, huh?"

When we boarded Arcadia, Luxion had laid down a number of communication relays, ensuring that we could receive drone data. That gave Luxion a way to communicate with the drones too. Still, that hadn't yet been enough to help us pin down our target.

Luxion's lens flashed red.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A drone squadron has been destroyed. According to the last data packets they sent, their opponents were Demonic Knights."

"Demonic Knights, you say...?" They were tougher than the defense forces, so they were likely guarding the route to the power reactor. "Lead us to where the drones last made contact."

"This way."

I sped up even more, following the route Luxion showed me. Julius and the others matched my pace.

"Finn and his Demonic Suit are on par with Arroganz, right? Are the others just as strong?" Julius asked.

"That's a terrifying thought," said Jilk. "Our Armors have enhanced capabilities, but who knows how far those will take us in battle against such fierce opponents."

"If they're as strong as Arroganz, then we have nothing to fear," Brad said with all the confidence in the world. "Beating Arroganz was our goal all this time—the very thing we've been training to accomplish."

"Yep, you've got a point," agreed Greg, sounding particularly pleased with Brad's opinion on the matter. "This is our shot at proving that we ain't busted our butts these past three years for nothin'!"

Strictly speaking, "three years" couldn't be right. It had to have been less time than that. More importantly, I was surprised they'd put so much effort into training to outdo me. They were either tenacious or ridiculously obsessed. Either way, I was impressed they hadn't given up on beating me after all this time.

While I was lost in thought, something—or rather someone—cut a jagged hole through the wall in front of us. The debris slammed into the drones leading the way.

"I found you," said a Demonic Knight in a singsong voice, blocking our way forward. "You've got some guts, coming all the way here to our fortress." Wind whipped around his Suit. There was something dangerous about his presence. Judging by his voice, he was still pretty young, but he was awfully condescending.

"Not Finn," I said, heaving a sigh of relief. I took a stance with my weapon readied, prepared to fend him off.

"I didn't expect you'd come here yourself, Archduke. You really are a loose cannon, just like Sir Finn said!" The Demonic Knight's voice brimmed with unbridled excitement, almost like it belonged to a child. It unsettled me.

Two lower-ranking Demonic Knights slipped in behind him through the hole he'd left in the wall.

"Three of you, huh? Guess we can take you out together," I said, ready to brute-force my way through once again.

Chris's blue Armor stepped in front of me. He had a grim, determined air. "Leon, I hate to ask this, but I'd like you to leave this opponent to me."

I shook my head. "What're you talking about? It'd be better for us all to take them on at once."

Chris braced himself, ready for battle. "See the crest on that suit's armor? He's the empire's Sword Saint."

Chris's words caught the interest of the enemy in question, who wielded two sabers. "Oh? You know of me?"

"I'm best suited to face him," Chris reasoned. "You and the others should keep going. There's no time to waste."

So you want us to go ahead without you. That was foreshadowing if I ever heard it—that is, Chris was foreshadowing his own death. I wasn't about to let that happen.

"Are you stupid or something?! We should gang up on them, knock them down, and keep going as a team!"

"That'll only waste time," Chris argued. "It's more efficient to let me handle this alone." His tone allowed no further discussion of the matter. He wasn't about to change his mind.

Much to my annoyance, even Luxion said, "Master, we should do as he says and make haste."

"You stupid buffoon!" I cursed Chris under my breath, although I resigned myself to doing as he asked.

Chris grinned. "Don't worry about me. I'm not planning on dying here. I

promise I'll catch up with you."

"I'm counting on that, Swordmaster."

"Good. I'm true to my word."

With that, we continued on without Chris.

"My name is Chris Fia Arclight."

"And I'm Lienhart," said the enemy Sword Saint, holding his sabers low. "But putting aside formal introductions... Isn't Arclight the surname of Holfort's Sword Saint?"

"Yes," Chris admitted. "But my father is the Sword Saint, not me."

"Oh." Lienhart sounded disappointed. "You're his son. I guess that makes sense. It sounded like the Scumbag Knight called you a Swordmaster."

"I'm here as my father's representative," said Chris. "There were...extenuating circumstances preventing him from joining the battle."

The truth was that, during their fight, Chris had beaten his father to a pulp. The Sword Saint's injuries were so serious that he couldn't participate in this battle. Chris wasn't going to share that information with the enemy, though, so he made an excuse.

"Can I ask you just one thing?"

"What is it?" Chris kept bracing himself, weapons ready.

"Why the hell are you using guns?!" Lienhart spat angrily.

Chris held a submachine gun in his right hand and a gatling gun in his left. The container on his back was stuffed full of ammunition, and a missile pod sat on his right shoulder. It did perhaps seem a little unnatural for a Swordmaster like Chris to be loaded as thoroughly as a mobile ammunition warehouse, equipped to blast enemies from afar rather than cut them down at melee range.

"Guns are obviously superior on the battlefield," Chris replied bluntly, as if that reason were the clearest in the world.

Lienhart was visibly dismayed, shoulders slumping. His voice was strained

with irritation as he retorted, "Since I heard that a swordsman bested the Black Knight, I hoped for a worthy battle with you. I can't believe you're packing so many guns. Frankly, you shouldn't even call yourself a swordsman." He lifted his sabers, ready to begin battle.

"I'm not the one who took down the Black Knight. That was Leon," Chris said. Seeing no need for further discussion, he pulled his gatling gun's trigger, pelting Lienhart and the area around him with bullets.

Lienhart somehow manipulated the air around his Suit, diverting the bullets away from him. One of the lower-ranking knights behind him was not so lucky. They had let their guard down and took fire as a result. They probably didn't expect it to cause much damage, but unfortunately for them, Chris's bullets were specially made to combat Demonic Suits. Their explosive force sent the knight reeling through the air.

"Tch. Morons," said Lienhart. "You were told before the battle started to be wary of the enemy, remember?"

Lienhart remained unscathed. The wind around him protected him from the regular bullets, and his sabers cut through the missiles. However many projectiles Chris unleashed on him, none dealt a killing blow. One missile did connect with the remaining knight; the ensuing explosion consumed him, engulfing both the Demonic Suit and its pilot.

"Tsk, tsk. They bit the dust so easily," Lienhart remarked callously. "Oh, well. They obviously weren't very good knights if they died so rapidly. Someone would've done them in sooner or later."

Anger lanced through Chris. "That's an awfully cold reaction to your comrades' sacrifice."

"Comrades?" Lienhart scoffed. "I never gave a crap about them. I didn't even know their names. Not that I would've cared about them in that case. I'm not interested in weaklings. No, the strong are the ones I care about. They provide me with adequate entertainment, and they add to my accomplishments when I defeat them."

"I don't like your attitude." Chris punctuated his words by firing his gatling gun at Lienhart. Such heavy weaponry was optimal for a closed corridor like this, but that advantage only lasted as long as he kept Lienhart at a distance. If they engaged in melee combat, Lienhart would gain the upper hand. Continuous fire was the best way to ensure he couldn't get close.

"A Swordmaster shouldn't be using guns," Lienhart repeated with great exasperation.

"Sorry," said Chris, "but I've long since abandoned my pride as a Swordmaster. Someone taught me how naive it is to rely purely on a sword in battle, you see."

Trust me, life would've been much easier if I could've beaten Leon with my sword alone. Since meeting Leon, Chris had learned a great deal. One of those lessons had, in fact, related to his greatest weakness.

In the past, Chris had battled using his sword exclusively, making him incredibly susceptible to ranged enemies. That wasn't a problem if he could close in and fight them at melee range, so he'd convinced himself that he just needed to focus on his swordplay. It wasn't until his duel with Leon that he realized how wrong he'd been.

A sword was a fine weapon in a regular duel—against someone other than Leon, that is—but relying upon it completely on the battlefield would cost him his own life. There was no battlefield where one could fight *solely* with a sword.

"Then shouldn't you abandon the 'Swordmaster' title as well?" said Lienhart.

Each of Lienhart's attacks was precise and lethal. Even Chris was envious of his immense talent with the sword. Once he got close enough, he wielded his sabers with such agility and grace that it looked like a dance, unleashing shock waves that reached Chris even from afar.

"Whoa, those are powerful!" Chris exclaimed in surprise. "But not good enough!" Despite his bravado, he could tell Lienhart was more skilled than he was.

Chris tossed his gatling gun at Lienhart, taking the opportunity to put more distance between them. He started unloading his submachine gun and firing additional missiles from his shoulder.

Even in the cramped confines of the fortress halls, Lienhart dodged skillfully,

but it took an obvious toll on him. The Demonic Knight's frustration was growing, partly because it was so hard to maneuver inside the fortress but also because he was tired of the gunfire barrage.

Once he'd used all his ammunition, Chris purged the container on his back. He tossed it at Lienhart, who promptly cleaved it in two and charged toward him.

"You can't win with a sword alone, huh? That's just because you're weak," Lienhart spat at him. "I can tell by the way you fight. It has no flair. It's pretty pathetic that you have so little talent, especially as the son of Holfort's Sword Saint."

Chris was unbothered by Lienhart's jibes. In fact, he forced a smile. "Strong words," he quipped. "But can you really claim to fight solely with your sword skills? It seems to me like you're only as good as you are because of that Demonic Suit you're piloting."

As he goaded his opponent, Chris tossed weapon after weapon aside, having spent his ammunition. His suit was much lighter without them, and Lienhart's shock wave attacks had already cut through his additional layers of armored plating.

"I guess the extra weapons were superfluous after all," he muttered to himself. He'd only recently begun firearms practice, so he was much worse at it than the other four. That was why he'd opted for heavy weapons that didn't rely on precise aim; he couldn't have hit a moving target anyway. Even with all his weapons and the extra rounds stored in his rear container, though, he wasn't able to take Lienhart down.

"I'll need to practice more from now on," he noted.

At Chris's insinuation that he would survive their battle, Lienhart simmered with barely restrained rage. "There's no need to worry about that. I'll kill you before you ever get the chance," he said coldly.

Lienhart sped toward Chris, closing the distance between them instantly and shaving some plating off Chris's Armor as he passed by. He spun to reorient himself. "Looks like I just barely missed. Still, this next attack will bring it all to an end."

Chris's fingers squeezed the control sticks. He narrowed his eyes, glaring at Lienhart through the monitor in front of him. "Come on, then!"

Lienhart lurched forward and raced toward him. "This is the end!"

Chris sucked in a sharp breath.

To a bystander, it would've looked as if the two barely brushed past each other.

Chris stabbed his sword into the floor, leaning against it like a cane. A large crack in the monitor fractured his vision, and debris littered the cockpit. Lienhart's blow had landed. But...

"No," came an anguished cry from behind him. "This can't be happening."

Through gasping, painful breaths, Chris forced himself off his sword and turned around.

Lienhart's suit was crawling along the floor. Chris's blow had also found its mark. Lienhart had already tossed his sabers aside; his hands were at a gash on his abdomen that was leaking fluid.

"Blood...blood," he rasped. "Coming from my stomach?! I-I have to get help quickly, or..." A sticky, wet cough interrupted his words. Chris had split his stomach open during their blades' exchange of blows.

Still panting, Chris raised a trembling finger to adjust the position of his glasses on his nose. "I never said I gave up the sword. You lost because you were reckless enough to enter melee range with me."

Lienhart had wrongly assumed from their conversation that Chris wouldn't use a sword at all. He'd let his guard down during his charge. Yet despite its lackluster nature, his attack was still powerful enough to have killed anyone else.

"I don't want to die," Lienhart sobbed. "This can't be happening. I'm the Sword Saint. I'm one of the empire's highest-ranking knights." He was in denial about the outcome of their match.

Lienhart was too obsessed with the sword and too naive for war. Chris stared down at him for a second, then closed his eyes. "There are no absolutes on the

battlefield. You arrogantly assumed you were invincible. With that mindset, you never belonged here." He went quiet for a moment as a realization hit him. "You're exactly the way I used to be."

He pulled his sword out of the floor and stepped closer to look at Lienhart's wound but could quickly tell it was beyond healing.

"I'll end your suffering now."

After ending Lienhart's life, Chris sank to the floor. His hands shuddered as he reached for the wound in his side. After Lienhart's attack, part of his suit had collapsed inward, and one shard punctured his pilot suit.

"How unfortunate. I swore I'd catch up with everyone...but I don't think...I'll be able to keep my promise..."

Chapter 11:

A Real Narcissist

AFTER LEAVING CHRIS BEHIND, the rest of us continued forward, finding our way to the hallway that ran along the fortress's inside wall. It felt like a convoluted detour.

Anxious, I finally asked Luxion, "Are you sure this is the right way?"

"Yes, though I admit that the interior design of this fortress is difficult to comprehend. It lacks simplicity and elegance."

I couldn't tell whether his judgment was genuine or borne of his hatred for new humanity. Either way, Arcadia's confusingly complex interior was quite literally a labyrinth.

"Think it's a countermeasure against intruders?"

"That is a possibility," said Luxion. "But if they were resorting to such tactics, they could at least have focused on incorporating a more convenient design." Not content to let that be the end of it, he continued, "It's too inefficient. They obviously aren't using all the space of the—Master!"

I leaped back instantly at his warning. A hole exploded through the wall where I'd stood, the result of an outside attack. Whoever had created it was obviously aiming for me. If Luxion hadn't warned me, I would've been caught in the blast.

Imperial Armors flooded into the hall. They weren't as powerful as Demonic Knights, but they had numbers on their side.

"There you are, intruders!"

"Hold up just a sec! Isn't this your fortress? And you're poking holes in it? Are you out of your mind?" I said mockingly.

"We can repair the wall as needed after we kill all of you!" one retorted.

Demonic Knights filed through the hole to join their comrades. They started to lunge toward me, but a red Armor blocked their path.

"You'd better not forget about us!" Greg shouted, thrusting his lance and impaling a foe right through the cockpit with pinpoint precision. It probably helped that Greg's Armor had enhanced capabilities. Still, that kind of accuracy wouldn't have been possible without a certain amount of weapon skill and piloting technique.

Sadly, even after we finished off the initial onslaught, it was far from the end.

Julius peered out the hole, observing the battlefield outside. "This spells trouble. A number of enemies are gathering to come in after us."

Battleships had returned to the fortress out of concern over the sudden crisis, and a swath of monsters and enemy Armors were joining them.

"There are a lot of them out there," continued Julius. "We can beat them, of course, but the process..."

Will take ages.

"Facing so many enemies would require substantial time and effort," Luxion agreed.

It was tempting to ignore them and keep charging blindly ahead, but they'd just catch us from behind. And now that some had spotted us through the hole, they were on the move.

Brad shouldered past us and burst through the hole. The lances on his back reached wide, almost like wings. He'd thrust both arms out like a celebrity taking the stage to meet fans. "That means it's my moment of glory," he said. "My Armor is best suited to taking on multiple opponents, so the rest of you can continue ahead knowing I have your backs covered."

Those lances were weapons he could control remotely, and since he had so many of them, they were perfect for engaging multiple opponents at once. Even knowing that, though, it was too dangerous to leave him here alone.

"Numbskull! You don't seriously think we can ditch you here? Of all of us, you're..." *The weakest.* I swallowed the words before they made it out of my mouth.

"I'm the weakest, right?" Brad finished for me. There was no anger or

annoyance in his voice; he was easygoing about it. "I know that better than anyone, but I can help by staying here and buying you more time."

"You're really pulling the same idiotic move as Chris?"

"It pains me to look like I'm copying him," Brad admitted, "but it wouldn't be wise for us to waste more time here than needed. That's why I'm going to stay. You have to make sure our mission succeeds, Leon. No matter what."

First Chris, now Brad. Why're these dummies so self-sacrificing? As much as I resented it, I was also grateful.

"I wish you guys could be half this badass all the time," I grumbled at him. "Just make sure you don't die out there."

"Pfft," Brad scoffed. "We were born badass. And you should at least encourage me to catch up later, even if you don't think I can."

Before we could entirely leave Brad behind, Luxion said, "I will have some drones stay to assist you. Use them as you like, Brad."

Brad hesitated, shocked but also pleased. "I never expected you to show me any concern...but thank you."

The drones in question followed him out of the fortress, positioning themselves around him to serve as support. While the rest of us started to pull ahead, Jilk stood frozen in his green Armor.

Julius paused, glancing back at him. "Jilk?"

"Leon. Your Highness. If we left Brad here by himself, I think we'd all be too worried, so I'm going to stay too." Since they'd shared the same nursemaid, Jilk was almost permanently attached to Julius's side. From a young age, he'd been raised to keep Julius safe. Despite that, he was volunteering to leave the prince and stay behind.

"If you think that's what you need to do, you should do it," Julius said. "Help Brad as much as you can."

"I will," Jilk promised. "We need to keep the enemy from spilling in through this hole."

The rifle he carried was perfect for sniping imperial forces from a distance. He

knelt at the hole, peering through his weapon's scope. When his finger found the trigger, enemies outside began dropping like flies.

Over his shoulder, Jilk said, "Sorry to ask this, but please look after His Highness."

"You're seriously sticking me with that duty?" I teased back.

He chuckled. "Yes, I am."

"Why are you guys treating me like a child?" Julius grumbled at the two of us. "Leon, let's get moving. There's no time to waste."

"You guys'd better not die on me!" Greg hollered back at them.

They both laughed.

"Same to you," said Brad.

"Be careful on the path ahead," Jilk added.

Cold sweat poured down Brad's back as he stood outside the hole in the fortress wall, swarms of enemies heading his way. "It's a little late to regret it now, but I kind of do." He shook his head. "No, I can't let myself regret it. That would reflect badly on me."

Brad fired his lances at the throng of encroaching monsters. The missiles flew and spun through the air, impaling creature after creature in the process. His Armor held the same type of lance in its two hands, but his real weapons were the six he controlled remotely.

"Don't assume you'll get past me so easily," he said.

He manipulated all six lances at once with such effortless precision that one might mistakenly assume each had a will of its own. They plowed through the monsters around him, clearing the air.

Soon enemy Armors joined the monsters, targeting him.

"We won't let you kill our families, barbarians!" an enemy knight bellowed. His superiors had probably informed him that losing this war would necessarily mean the death of his entire family, which explained his zealousness.

"Then you should understand we can't back down and sacrifice *our* families!" Brad shouted back at him.

As his opponent approached, Brad lifted his left hand. The gun built into it blasted through the enemy's cockpit at point-blank range. Its pilot gone, the Armor rapidly lost altitude.

While Brad dealt with the knight, his lances were still busy dispatching enemies around him. There seemed to be no end to them. Just the opposite, in fact; their numbers were increasing.

"This is insanity."

Jilk sniped at the enemies from his spot inside the fortress, prioritizing the most dangerous ones. One of his bullets had just shot through an enemy ship's bridge; the next pierced straight through its engine, sinking it. The drones Luxion had left behind engaged the imperials as well. Brad found the support from the drones and Jilk reassuring.

"Your sniping skills come in handy in this kind of situation," he told Jilk.

"Happy to be of service," Jilk replied. "That said, these numbers are a bit daunting even to me. All we can do is pray Leon takes that reactor out as quickly as possible."

Victory could be theirs if they held out long enough for Leon, Julius, and Greg to carry out their mission.

"I only hope that'll stop them," said Brad, anxiety twisting in his gut.

Destroying the reactor would stop *Arcadia*, of course, but the imperial army was a different matter. There was no guarantee that they'd back down once Arcadia was out of commission. That might galvanize them instead. Plus, Jilk and Brad weren't the only ones out here fighting with their lives on the line. According to Luxion's predictions based on information he'd gathered earlier, around two hundred royal ships had probably sunk already. Even if their mission succeeded, it would be pointless if none of the royal army remained.

"I figure we're only holding on because of the Republic and Fanoss. Not sure how I feel about Fanoss's help," said Brad. His family, the Fields, occupied territory at the border with the former Principality of Fanoss and had been saddled with the duty of defending against them. The Fields' struggles with Fanoss had gone on for decades. It was a cruel twist of fate that their very survival now depended on Fanoss.

"The Republic's putting up a good fight too," Jilk reminded him.

"Honestly, I didn't expect them to come help us out."

Brad's mind went back to his time in the Alzer Republic, where aristocrats had assaulted and tormented him. They'd treated Leon and the others horribly as well, yet here they were, fighting alongside Holfort as allies.

"Well," said Brad, "if they're putting up a good fight, we need to show them we're made of tough stuff too!"

As monsters closed in on him, Brad deployed several magic circles, launching wide-range offensive magic. Flames swallowed the monsters, which disappeared in puffs of black smoke.

We're up to our necks just dealing with the enemies in front of us. I feel bad for our allies, but for now, they'll have to find a way to hold out on their own, he thought. It was all he and Jilk could do to defend themselves. At least we can buy some extra time.

Just when he thought they could withstand the constant onslaught, a large group of Demonic Knights reached him, their forces separated into several squadrons. Brad's stomach sank. He had a bad feeling about this.

"Hey, what's with this? You guys have a completely different demeanor from the other Demonic Knights we've faced," said Brad.

The others had excelled at one-on-one combat, but this group moved with heretofore unseen cohesion.

As Brad's hackles raised, Jilk assured him, "They may be Demonic Knights, but remember, we have equipment made specifically to combat them. There's no need to be so worried."

Jilk wasn't exactly wrong about that. They were certainly well enough prepared to take on Demonic Suits in battle. But that didn't change how big a

threat the group in front of Brad presented.

"No," he said to Jilk. "These ones will put up a tougher fight than the rest."

The group's leader seemed to hear them. "So you recognize that we're a threat," he said, his voice intrigued. "You're right to be wary."

"Good to know."

"My name," continued the leader, "is Hubert. Hubert Luo Hein."

"Brad Fou Field," said Brad in turn.

They'd likely bothered to introduce themselves because they sensed a common thread between them: an affinity for fighting multiple opponents. Brad's intuition told him that their battle strategies were similar.

Brad manipulated his lances, keeping his guard up against Hubert and his knights.

"It seems the goddess of luck really does love me," he noted. "If anyone else had to face you, they'd be in for quite a tough time. I made the right choice staying behind."

Hubert scoffed, a sign of his disappointment. "Your arrogance is one thing, but the way you talk, it sounds like you actually think you can defeat us."

"I will win." Brad grinned. "Fate loves me too!"

"You're a real narcissist."

Back on the *Licorne*, Livia clutched her chest. Sweat ran down her brow as she gasped for air, each breath a struggle.

"Their voices," she rasped.

She was referring to the voices of the people on the battlefield, which rang in her head. Cleare was helping her, filtering out as much of the information pouring in as possible, but she couldn't completely quiet the voices of soldiers dying on the front lines.

"They're disappearing," Livia said. "Crying out that they don't want to die." Her face crumpled with pain, tears in her eyes.

Angie gently stroked her back, shooting Cleare a hard look. "Can't you do anything about this? Livia's heart won't hold out."

"I'm actually cutting out the worst of it already," Cleare said. As far as she was concerned, the trickle reaching Livia was nothing compared to the virtual typhoon she was suppressing.

Angie shook her head. She didn't think Livia could go on like this. "At least rest a little bit," she told Livia.

"Suddenly losing our communications network will throw all our allies into disarray," Cleare warned.

"Oh. Uh..." Angie's gaze drifted aimlessly; she was lost for words. As much as she wanted Livia to rest, she knew they couldn't risk that sort of disorder on the battlefield. The royal army was already fighting at a serious disadvantage. She didn't intend to make that worse.



Livia smiled at her. "Thank you, Angie, but I have to give this everything I have, or I won't be any help to Mr. Leon. I'm going to hold out." The tears brimmed over and trickled down her cheeks. Her body trembled, as if she might collapse at any second.

Marie glanced out the window at Arcadia. "Big Bro and the others will pull this off, right?" She and everyone else on board were praying desperately for their safety.

Suddenly, a hologram appeared on the bridge, displaying Gilbert from the waist up. His face was all hard lines and angles, his brow scrunched above his eyes. "I'm going to lead the ships in the rear to the front lines," he announced.

Angie gaped at him. "Wh-what?"

"What's with the vacant expression?" Gilbert snapped. "Father's ship already went down, and someone needs to move to the front and lead our forces. Surely you don't want us to rely on Fanoss for everything?"

"N-no."

It hit her that, if Gilbert went to the front like her father, he might never come home to her again. That gave her pause.

"You haven't come all this way to start hesitating now! This is the path you chose," Gilbert admonished her.

Angie shook her head, as if shaking off her reservations. "You're right. I wish you luck."

"Good. That's more like it." He smiled at her.

Peering out the window, Carla called back to them, "Our men are moving to the front!"

Gilbert and the ships under his command zoomed past. Together, those ships would give the vanguard much-needed assistance while combating the enemy. Those at the front of the formation began firing on the imperials immediately.

"If I die, you'll have to find an heir for our family," Gilbert told Angie. "If need be, one of your children can succeed me."

She inhaled sharply, alarmed.

Gilbert's expression softened, and his eyes filled with sadness. "You have a duty to protect our nation, even at the cost of your family's lives. Don't forget that."

Angie lowered her gaze and steeled herself. When she lifted her chin, there was no emotion on her face. "Rest assured I will take care of our family. I promise to protect our lineage."

"There. Now, that's more like my sister."

The royal army had lost close to three hundred ships, but the imperials had also suffered massive losses. Neither side could afford to back down, nor could they be conservative with their forces. If this were an ordinary war, Holfort would've admitted defeat and retreated by this point, but it wasn't. Retreating now would mean death, so they couldn't withdraw; neither could the empire.

Hands still clutching her chest, Livia stood straight, her gaze focused directly ahead. "Let's move to the front line too," she said.

"Liv?!" Cleare squeaked in dismay. "Nelly's at her limit already!"

After her earlier stunt with Lelia, using the Sacred Tree's power to shield them, Noelle was completely wrung out. But at the sound of her name, Noelle —who'd been lying down—tried to pull herself back to her feet. "Is it my turn again? It's tough being so popular." Her body couldn't support her, and she flopped back into Yumeria's arms.

"Lady Noelle, you can't," Yumeria said, her cheeks wet with tears.

Noelle let out a strangled laugh. "Why's it always times like this when my body won't work like I want it to?" Tears of frustration filled her eyes.

"Thank you for wanting to help," Livia said to her. "But please rest for now."

Noelle looked at her in confusion. "Olivia?"

Livia's eyes were still fixed ahead. "Please have the *Licorne* move to the front line. I'll protect everyone."

"No!" Cleare said. "You're already under enough strain. If you increase that load any more, you'll break down!"

"I have no other choice!" Livia's voice cracked, forcing her to pause for a moment. Once she recovered, she added, "I won't be able to live with myself otherwise. Right here, right now, I need to do everything in my power to help. So please...!"

While everyone else was intent on stopping Livia from going down this path of self-destruction, Angie instead cut in, "You're just like Leon, you know. You both take on more than you can reasonably handle."

"Angie?" Livia said questioningly.

"I'm saying that, if you're set on this, I'll stay with you to the very end." Angie scanned the faces of the others in the room. Hands on her hips, she added, "You heard me. We're taking the *Licorne* to the front. If any of you want to disembark, do it now."

Carla and Kyle looked at one another, but since Marie didn't speak up, they kept silent.

"Don't make me laugh," Noelle said with a pained smile. "I haven't come this far to quit now."

Yumeria nodded. "I'll stay too. Lady Noelle needs the support. More importantly, I know Kyle won't leave either." Her eyes darted to him, and she smiled.

Kyle made a face. He probably wanted his mother to leave the ship for her own safety, but he also knew how necessary she was to support Noelle and help her control the Sacred Tree, so he couldn't bring himself to ask her.

Marie rested her staff on her shoulder and puffed her chest out. "If you hadn't volunteered us to go to the front, I was ready to kick some butts in gear and make us charge the enemy myself."

Angie stared back at her, dumbfounded. After a moment, she cracked a smile. "I said we'd go to the front, but I never mentioned charging the enemy," she corrected in a gently teasing tone.

"Oh, same difference!" Marie grumbled, her voice cracking with embarrassment.

Jilk surveyed the battlefield through the scope on his rifle. "Looks like ships from the rear have moved to the front. Our side must really be feeling the heat right now."

He knew already that they were at a serious disadvantage. Even with most of the Demonic Knights off the field, the empire's regular forces were sufficient to outmatch Holfort's own. It was only thanks to the combined help from all the Als that they were putting up some resistance.

The drones handled the more fearsome enemies, which reduced the strain on the royal army, but even those drones were falling one after the other. The empire was winning through sheer numbers.

"Kill their sniper first!" bellowed an enemy.

Jilk had been sniping foes one at a time, and the successive shots had overheated his barrel. His gun was losing accuracy and efficacy; his most recent round barely grazed the enemy's shoulder.

"That's another gun down," he said to himself. As an enemy charged him to try and end his sniping spree, he tossed the rifle aside in favor of a handgun. His blast pierced right through the foe's cockpit, sinking them.

Jilk turned to the closest drone. "I need a new rifle," he told it.

The drone carried a container on its back similar to the one Arroganz used. At Jilk's request, it approached and pulled out a new rifle to give him.

He snatched it, leveling the scope so he could look through it via his monitor. Once he located an enemy, his breathing slowed to a pause. His finger squeezed the trigger. He'd timed it perfectly so that, as two enemies overlapped, the bullet pierced straight through both. Two birds with one stone. Without pause, he began searching for his next targets, pulling the trigger each time he found one.

"I really hate this," Jilk said. "The way people lose their lives so easily."

A few years ago, he'd known he would eventually become a knight, and he'd

been confident that he wouldn't fear battle or anything that came with it. Fighting was part of knighthood. If someone outwitted or outmatched him, he would die, and he was willing to accept that.

But everything had changed.

After serving alongside Leon these past couple of years, and fighting on numerous battlefields, Jilk had realized war was something to avoid. Moreover, he had realized how foolish he'd been when he was younger.

"I'm far better suited to desk work. I'd rather fire guns at targets than at people."

Assuming he survived this, he would avoid war as best he could in the future. Fortunately, the new king was a pacifist. *No, that's not quite right. He's more an idealist.* But Jilk was fine with that. *It's a retainer's responsibility to support their liege's weak points. That's exactly why neither Leon nor I can afford to die out here.*

Inwardly admonishing himself for his growing desire to run from the enemies pressing in on him, Jilk hunkered down, intent on carrying out his duty.

From the looks of things, we'd picked the right corridor within the fortress; we came upon a vast number of defense forces stationed along it.

"You're in the way!" I howled at them. I forced my way through, destroying one Armor after another until we reached a spacious room. There were dozens of Demonic Knights inside.

"Demonic Knights," Luxion remarked. "This place is suspiciously well guarded."

"It proves we're on the right path," I said.

The man who seemed to be their leader stepped forward. "I didn't really think you'd come here."

"You have an awful lot of people guarding this route. I'm guessing the reactor's just beyond this point?"

"Don't underestimate us," he scoffed. "Master Arcadia prepared Demonic

Suit Cores expressly for our use and appointed us all new Demonic Knights. No one can stand against us!"

The knights' batlike wings fanned out behind them. Each of the foes brandished different weapons.

"You've got to be kidding me. Arcadia can even create Demonic Suit Cores?" I grimaced at this revelation.

"I suspect they are not on par with those created by Brave," Luxion said. "The knights here are equipped with inferior replicas."

"Are you insulting us?!" their leader cried shrilly, having apparently overheard our conversation. "We're the Imperial Guard personally approved by Master Arcadia himself!"

I heaved a small sigh of relief that they weren't as strong as Finn. Inferior or not, though, they were still Demonic Knights. "They'll be a bit of a pain to deal with." And we didn't have spare time to waste here.

I took a battle stance, but Greg and Julius shouldered past me.

"Leon! Calm down a little, would ya?" Greg said. "You've been pushing yourself way too hard."

"Resupply and let yourself recover," Julius added. "We'll take care of these guys."

The two raised their weapons, ready to handle the enemy on my behalf. They were up against thirty Demonic Knights, though. On top of that, there were a number of regular soldiers in Armors—defense forces—behind those knights. They wielded enormous shields, intent on preventing us from passing through.

Given how much Julius and Greg had trained, as well as all their suit enhancements, I honestly figured they could find a way to take these forces down. But it would require time we didn't have. And I'd already put more on Chris, Brad, and Jilk's shoulders than I ever wanted to.

"Master," Luxion said, interrupting my thoughts, "the enemy's main cannon is preparing to fire again. If we take too long here, our allies will sustain significant casualties."

"You're right. Luxion, inject me with the performance enhancer."

"You must avoid that!" he cried. "I cannot approve!"

I knew he didn't want me to use it, but arguing about it would only waste more time.

"Luxion, it's an order," I told him firmly.

After I said that, he couldn't rail against me. "Very well. Injecting the enhancer now. You have nine minutes and fifty-eight seconds until I must administer the neutralizer."

A needle jabbed my skin through the pack on my back, forcing the liquid into my system.

"Nrgh!" I let out a strangled cry.

A wave of heat charged through my body, and my field of vision narrowed. The pain was so intense I was left gasping for breath, a droplet of drool running down my chin. I braced myself against the anguish for what felt like minutes, until my body finally began to acclimate and the strain abated. My limbs felt lighter, and my vision opened back up. A burst of energy overcame me—a sense that I could do anything I wanted. There was more power in my body than ever before. My pulse quickened, my heart thundering madly.

I wiped the drool from my chin. "You two, fall back."

"Leon, you didn't!" Greg gasped.

I shoved him out of the way and stepped past him.

"So you're going to face us yourself, Scumbag Knight? Master Arcadia will be most pleased when I offer him your head," the enemy knight said.

He seemed to feel awfully indebted to Arcadia for giving him and his men Demonic Suit Cores. They didn't really have any business calling themselves the Imperial Guard, in my opinion, since they never even mentioned the imperial family or their own emperor.

Not that it mattered. I didn't care about that right now.

"Sorry, but I'm not interested in what you have to say," I told him.

"Releasing Arroganz's limiter," Luxion announced.

The limiter was a safety measure. Allowing Arroganz to operate at its full capacity placed an unbearable burden on the pilot, which was why the limiter existed in the first place. If anyone released it and tried to pilot Arroganz, the cockpit would turn gruesome and bloody. Only the performance enhancers allowed me to withstand the strain. The drugs Marie had retrieved for me were just that powerful.

Arroganz blasted forward, closing the space between me and the enemy in an instant.

"Wha—?!" cried the knight.

Before he could turn his weapon on me, I grabbed the head of his suit and crushed it in my fist. Then the axe in my other hand cleaved him in two. The drug let me wield Arroganz's full power with ease.

"Sorry, but I'm in a hurry."

Time seemed to move in slow motion. The other knights yanked out their weapons in a panic, but I sidestepped the nearest one's incoming attack and pressed the flat of my hand against their suit. Anyone else would've found their movements agile, but not me, not with everything slowed down.

"Do it," I told Luxion.

"Impact."

With that, the second knight exploded.

The rest of the Imperial Guard crowded around me. They swung weapons and unleashed magic, doing everything in their power to fight back. I sliced through them with a simple swing of my axe. A countdown appeared on my monitor, warning me how much time remained until Luxion injected the neutralizer. Even the digital numbers seemed to slip by as slow as molasses.

"Thanks to you, Marie, it looks like I can complete this mission," I said.

I moved so quickly that, to the enemy, it probably looked like I was almost teleporting. I ripped through them with ridiculous ease, gripping the control sticks so tightly they creaked under my fingers' strength. But something felt wrong.

"Tears?"

There was something wet on my cheek. I dabbed the pad of my finger against it and came away with blood. Blood, not tears, was leaking from my eyes. That was to be expected, though. The more potent the drug, the more strain it placed on one's body.

I was so focused on destroying the enemy that I ran the clock out before I knew it.

"Master, the neutralizer!" Luxion's voice brought me back to reality.

I scanned the area around us quickly. "Right," I said. "Guess it's over."

In under ten minutes, I'd destroyed the Imperial Guard and the defense forces with them.

Chapter 12: The Masked Knights

JULIUS'S EYES WIDENED as he took in the battle's aftermath. Arroganz stood alone amid the carnage, completely unscathed. To Julius, there was something ominous and unsettling about it.

"Leon," he said, "what did you do?"

The way Arroganz had fought was unlike anything he'd seen before. His stomach twisted in knots. He could only pray that he was wrong to feel so unsettled.

Arroganz turned, glancing back at him. "Nothing," Leon said. "Anyway, I'm a little tired. Let me rest, okay?"

Its previous agility and speed forgotten, Arroganz struggled to stay upright or move at all. Or, more accurately, Leon had reached his limit and begun faltering, not his Armor. He was completely exhausted, wrung dry.

"You used those drugs Marie got you, didn't you?" Greg asked bitterly.

"Drugs?!" Julius cried in disbelief. "Did you really?!"

There were lots of performance enhancers on the market, but Leon had gotten his hands on a special one with significant side effects. It was a potent elixir that increased the user's physical and magical strength. And, the stronger an elixir was, the more strain it placed on the person consuming it. That was especially true of a fast-acting enhancer like this. Judging by how Arroganz had fought, this drug was extremely potent to boot. Marie had delivered it to him, and she'd regretted it deeply afterward.

Julius gripped Arroganz's shoulders. "You used it, didn't you?! Why would you push yourself like that?!"

"We don't have time for this," Leon interrupted, uninterested in listening.

"Let's get going. Move on. We've got to destroy that reactor, or this fighting will never end. Don't forget, Finn hasn't even shown his face yet."

Julius wiped away the cold sweat beading on his brow with the back of his hand. "And you said he's tougher than you?" Leon had told him that before, but Julius had a hard time believing that Finn could best Leon at the latter's current strength level.

After a pause, Leon answered with bitterness in his voice. "I'll take care of him."

Julius wanted to shoot back that Leon shouldn't push himself any more than he already had, but he knew he couldn't stop him. Not with the unbending, grim determination he heard in Leon's voice. I knew he'd made his mind up about going through with this, but I didn't realize how intent he was. He lamented that misjudgment.

As they pressed forward, Julius gently pushed Arroganz along. Although he knew it was futile, he said, "You and Finn were really close, weren't you? You don't have to force yourself to fight him. You can let Greg and me handle it."

He didn't honestly think that the two of them could defeat Finn, but he wanted to avoid Leon having to fight him if possible.

Leon seemed to sense Julius's intentions. He smiled wanly. "Not going to happen. Neither of us can back down, and we don't intend to."

"If you're sure."

Greg led the way forward. He glanced back at them. "Hey, Luxion, how much longer till we reach this reactor?"

After they'd breached Arcadia, it took a significant length of time to navigate the labyrinth of corridors inside. Far longer than they'd originally anticipated, which was probably what made Greg anxious. Julius suspected he was also worried about Leon, as well as Chris, Brad, and Jilk.

"It should be just ahead," Luxion answered. "I detect a strong presence that can only be the reactor."

The airborne demonic essence was becoming more concentrated, according to the meter on Julius's monitor. That had to indicate that they were finally nearing their destination.

"As long as we trash this reactor thing, this enormous fortress will go down, right?" Greg clarified.

"Yes, without a doubt," said Luxion.

"Seriously? That makes things pretty simple, then." Greg was forcing himself to sound more cheerful than usual, trying to drive away the gloom that had settled over them. "Makes me wonder what the hell our ancestors were doin'. Why couldn't they take this fortress down?"

"Had Arcadia been at full power, our group here would already have been annihilated. We wouldn't even have stood a chance," Luxion explained very matter-of-factly.

Greg gulped. "Oh. Uh, you don't say."

On the other hand, that information reassured Julius. "But since he isn't at full power, that's completely hypothetical, right? Greg, we should be grateful to our ancestors for giving us this opportunity."

"You're not makin' me feel any better about this," Greg shot back.

"That is an accurate assessment," said Luxion, sharing Julius's sentiments.

"Old humanity's military was responsible for bringing him to his knees. The only reason we have any chance of winning is because they fought so desperately."

As awkward as he felt about both his companions driving the same point home, Greg forced himself to remain optimistic. "Well, that just means we gotta put an end to him. That way, our ancestors can have no regrets."

Julius sensed something approaching rapidly from behind. He yanked his hands away from Arroganz, lifting his shield and bracing himself to meet their pursuers. "Looks like they caught up with us."

"Is Finn with them?" Leon managed to ask, voice still strained with pain.

Luxion analyzed the incoming data. "I do not sense Brave's presence among them," he reported. "The signals lead me to suspect our foes are a group of Demonic Knights."

Julius was grateful to hear Finn wasn't there, but that didn't make these enemies any less dangerous.

"Hey, hold up. Does this mean the enemy broke past Jilk and Brad?!" demanded Greg.

"Not necessarily," said Luxion. "They may have found a different route by which to enter and pursue us. Based on the data at hand, I cannot definitively say whether Jilk and Brad have yet been beaten."

In the short few moments during which they had that conversation, the enemy arrived: a number of Demonic Knights accompanied by men in regular Armors. As they spotted Julius and the others, they began firing.

Shield raised, Julius stepped in front of Arroganz to cover Leon. He studied the enemy. That's a lot of knights, and they have even more Armors with them. They don't look like they belong to the defense forces, so they must've come from the army outside. He glanced briefly at Arroganz, whose movements were still jerky and unnatural.

"Luxion, can Leon fight?" he asked.

"I already injected him with the neutralizer. He should recover soon enough. However, I do not believe he is capable of battle at present."

"But you're saying he will recover, right?"

"Correct."

Julius took a deep breath as he made up his mind. "Then I'll stay here and deal with these guys." He drew his sword and took a battle stance. The two cannons connected to his rear container hummed as they aimed at the enemy. Those weapons, which fired energy rounds that exploded on impact, had also been specially designed by Luxion. "Go," he ordered. "I'll do you the favor of staying behind."

"But you're a prince," Leon argued, shocked that Julius volunteered himself so readily.

"You're worth a lot more than I am at this point," Julius said with a self-deprecating half smile. "Now go. I can at least buy you some time."

"There's no way you can take on so many all by your—"

"Then I'll stay too!" Greg interrupted. "If you're worried about Julius staying

behind on his own, I'll join him."

Leon hesitated, obviously wanting to argue, but Julius gave Arroganz a shove. "I said go! You don't have time to waste here, do you?"

Arroganz turned away from the two, and Leon said nothing more as he took off, leaving them behind.

"That's more like it. We're trusting you to finish this, Leon," Julius called after him.

As he watched Arroganz leave, a Demonic Knight flew toward them. The pilot had noticed Arroganz and panicked, not wanting to let it proceed any farther.

"Sorry, but you're not getting past us!" Julius blocked the enemy with his shield.

"Grr! For the Scumbag Knight's useless tagalong, you've got some nerve."

Julius managed to deflect the enemy's charge. His enhanced Armor was plenty powerful enough to go toe to toe with the Demonic Knights. "If you honestly think I'm a 'useless tagalong,' you'll be in for a world of hurt," he warned.

The other enemies in the background were armed with guns that they aimed and fired at Julius, but his shield protected him from their bullets, and his cannons returned fire in kind.

Another Demonic Knight tried to dart past them, but Greg skewered them on his lance. "Julius, you'd better pace yourself, or you're gonna wear out too quickly!"

"I can take care of myself," Julius huffed at him. "Anyway, pay attention. Here they come!"

Thus, as they tried to thwart the enemy's attempts to pursue Leon, their battle began.

Finn brought Mia with him to the command room, which was currently the safest place in the fortress.

"Princeeeeess!" Arcadia wailed the moment he spotted her. "I'm so glad you're safe!" He turned to the others in the room and snapped, "Hurry and prepare a seat for her."

The other soldiers and staff present were busy with other matters, but they obeyed his command despite the inconvenience.

Brave ignored Arcadia's ridiculous antics. "Partner, Arroganz is almost at the reactor," he told Finn. "Our allies must either be dead or preoccupied, because they haven't been able to halt him. We'll be in big trouble if we don't step in and stop this."

Finn clenched his fists. "So that's what's going on." His face hardened, at least until Mia threw herself at him and clung to him. "Mia?" He blinked at her. As soon as he realized she was trembling, he wrapped his arms around her.

"Sir Knight, I beg you. Please, please...come back to me. Don't leave me alone!" Tears formed wet trails down her cheeks.

"It'll be all right. I promise I'll come back to you," Finn said gently.

"Really? You mean it?"

"Yes, I do," he said. "Please wait here for me."

"This is the safest place for you," Brave threw in. "As long as you're here, Partner can fight without holding anything back." He was doing his best to keep up a cheerful facade, hoping to ease her fears.

Mia's dewy eyes darted to Brave. "You'd better come back safe too, Bravey. I'd be devastated to lose you."

"You got it! But, uh, could you stop with the whole 'Bravey' thing? No one calls me by my real name. Even Partner calls me 'Kurosuke.'" Brave pouted.

Finn chuckled. "It fits you, doesn't it, Kurosuke?"

Mia grinned. "I think 'Bravey' is an adorable nickname."

"Neither of you have any sense," said Brave.

It comforted Mia to banter the same way they always did. She finally let go of Finn and stepped back, clapping her hands together as if in prayer. Staring up at

him, she said, "May you be victorious, Sir Knight."

He smiled back at her. "I will be."

The situation outside Arcadia was developing as well.

"Lord Loic, please fall back!"

Loic's Armor was a wreck, and his allies were trying their best to stop him from battling further, but he was still fighting monsters and enemy Armors alike.

"What good would it do to pull out now?!" he shouted back at his men. He was the one leading the Republic's forces on the field, making him the center their army revolved around. He feared everything would crumble if he withdrew now. "I have to hold out for milady's sake as well. And besides her, the archduke has saved me countless times. I can't fail them."

Loic owed Leon a substantial debt for all his help, and he intended to pay it back.

Despite his determination, his Armor refused to keep up. Its joints creaking in protest, it began falling to pieces right there in the air. The engine on its back went up in flames.

"Why now?!" Loic cried.

This time, his allies forced him to retreat.

"Fall back, Lord Loic!"

"Contact Lord Albergue, quickly!"

"Please don't endanger yourself recklessly!"

They were all admonishing him. As reluctant as he was to heed their wishes, he was relieved to see the rest of his men still fighting tooth and nail without him when he looked out at the battlefield. See? If you try, you guys are tough enough to pull it off.

From the bridge of House Fanoss's battleship, Hertrude monitored the

intense battle between the two forces.

"I am impressed by how well the Republic forces are holding out, given their overreliance on their crests," she said.

"We will soon reach our limit as well, Lady Hertrude," the ship's captain responded. "But Holfort's rear guard moved here, to the front lines, so we should be able to withdraw without issue."

Gilbert and the ships under his command having joined them had significantly lightened the front lines' load. Still, they were far from able to let their guard down.

"No," Hertrude said firmly. "I will not allow us to withdraw, no matter what." "But—"

"Besides, retreating would do us no good." This is a battle for our very lives.

She didn't get to say that last bit aloud. There was a visible change in Arcadia's fortress; it was powering up its main cannon to fire on them again.

"The enemy's about to attack!" bellowed one of the soldiers on board.

Hertrude closed her eyes for a moment. She figured this would probably be the end. Then she spotted a white blur whiz past them.

"That ship!" she gasped. She would've known its single horn anywhere—the *Licorne*!

On each side of the vessel were the last two remaining spaceships old humanity had left behind, the ones the AIs had adapted into specialized shields to combat Arcadia's main cannon. They proved unable to completely block the cannon's incoming attacks, so the *Licorne* pulled out in front, deploying a magic shield in the form of a curtain of light.

Staring at the *Licorne*, Hertrude shrugged. "You've come up with a ship even more daunting than the royal family's."

The royal family's ship had proven a formidable force in the war with the former Principality, but it was nothing compared to the *Licorne*, which Hertrude was even less inclined to pit herself against. She was lucky that they were on the same side and that the *Licorne* was defending them against Arcadia's deadly

blasts.

"I expect you all to fight with everything you have out there," Hertrude shouted at her men. "Make sure everyone remembers the name Fanoss!"

There were many reasons her house needed to pull its weight in this battle. Foremost among them was that doing so would ensure her dukedom's future prominence. That was why she couldn't easily order a retreat, knowing all that was at stake. But she also had a personal reason to insist on keeping her men out there.

Even now, I can't bring myself to leave our saint, Marie, hanging.

"Gaaaah! My precious Licorne!" Cleare wailed dramatically.

Although they'd managed to shield their allies, the *Licorne* hadn't come through unscathed. A violent tremor had rocked the ship, putting immense strain on it, which was the reason for Cleare's dismay.

Putting up a defense wasn't as simple as harnessing energy from the Sacred Tree Sapling to fortify their shield. Marie panted heavily as she stood on the bridge, hands clasped tightly around her staff. She had shared the burden of protecting their whole army alongside Livia. To be precise, Marie had shouldered the *majority* of that burden.

"Miss Marie..." Livia said worriedly, examining her face.

"Hmph. This is child's play," Marie sniffed. "You should save your power for later." Despite her bravado, her face crumpled in pain and exhaustion.

"Lady Marie, if you're that worn out, you should rest!" Carla fussed.

Marie smiled tightly at her, the edges of her lips straining with the effort. "I-I'll be all right. Don't worry."

Kyle carried over a bottle of water and a towel. "Mistress, if you push yourself too hard, you'll end up passing out."

"I-I told you, I'll be fine. I'm not so weak...that I'd pass out from something like this." Marie was gasping even as she spoke, only staying on her feet by clinging to her staff to support her weight on it. She grabbed the water and gulped it

down.

The voices of Leon's friends echoed in her ears. They had crowded around the *Licorne* to protect its passengers.

"Keep the enemy away from the Licorne!"

"Don't even bother aiming! Just shoot straight in front of you. There're enough enemies that you'll hit something!"

"Aaah! I knew I shouldn't have tried to act tough by fighting in this stupid war! Leon, you absolute idiot!"

Yes, there were cries of dismay among them.

Leon's friends had excellent ships and Armors because Luxion had personally seen to their construction. On top of that, they'd fought many battles over the past two years and become more coordinated under such circumstances. Since Leon had forced them to fight so often, they'd grown accustomed to it. Regardless, Marie found their presence reassuring.

She wiped sweat from her face. *Even his friends are giving this their best,* she realized.

Leon had been wise to gather such stalwart allies at the academy. They were proving integral to this battle. Leon had admitted to binding them with contracts, but as Marie saw it, they shared a strong bond of friendship too.

However reliable they were, though, the situation was too volatile for them to let their guard down. A few people's efforts wouldn't change the severe disadvantage at which the royal army found itself.

Cleare's blue lens flashed. "Tch! Some slipped past our allies' defenses!"

Having sensed the danger the *Licorne* posed, a swarm of monsters gathered around it. The beasts ignored the ships that encircled them to act as shields, charging right past. One was over twenty meters tall.

"Fire at them!" Angie shouted at Cleare.

"Sorry, but after the damage we just took, I can't. It'll take thirty more seconds to recover enough to fight. Don't worry, though; I have something prepared for just this occasion," said Cleare.

Marie's eyes flew open wide. "Wha ...?"

Someone had carved right through the enormous beast coming for them, transforming it into a burst of black smoke. She soon realized it wasn't just one person; there were two pure-white Armors outside. They looked almost exactly like Julius's Armor, with a few discrepancies, and masks had been fashioned over their suits' faces.

"You seem to be in distress, ladies," said one pilot.

Images of both pilots, who wore masks just like their Armors, appeared on their internal monitor.

"What do you think you're doing?" Angie demanded of them.

In response, the two adopted similar poses, almost as if they'd planned and coordinated this beforehand. As they spoke, their voices even overlapped.

"I am a nameless knight. For the moment, you may refer to me as the masked knight."

"I'll call myself the masked knight for now."

The two even sounded like Julius.

All Marie's strength drained away, and she crumpled to her knees. *Oh my God. Is this the power of genetics?!* Both masked knights' demeanors struck her as ridiculous, which clued her in to their true identities. Biology was a terrifying thing.

Alas, that wasn't the end of the ridiculousness. The two knights hadn't noticed each other until that point, and the moment they did, they began bickering.

"You there! I'm the Masked Knight, not you!"

"I could say the same to you! I pulled an all-nighter figuring out this getup. You have some nerve copying me!"

Neither seemed to realize who the other was, which was all the more awkward for those watching the spat unfold.

"That mask of yours is inferior to my own!"

"Oh, now you've done it! How dare you insult my mask? Eri assured me I looked dapper in it! Prepare yourself! I'm going to cut you down where you stand!"

Everyone bearing witness sighed in exasperation. The two masked knights were Roland and Jake.

Livia's face sagged with exhaustion, her features morphing into a blank mask. "You're both nuisances. Go home."

Roland recoiled, shocked at being treated so coldly by a woman. "M-Miss? That's awfully callous of you, don't you think?"

Jake, on the other hand, had no interest in Livia's feelings; Erin was the only woman who mattered to him. "I'd be a laughingstock if I went back now. Whatever—I get it. For now, I'll be the bigger man and fight as this loser's ally. Just try not to hold me back, impostor."

Flustered and indignant, Roland roared back, "I'm the original between us! Me! And your voice makes you sound like an awfully young man. If they gave birth to an arrogant swine like you, I bet your parents look like brainless clods!"

"You bastard," Jake replied through gritted teeth. "Two can play at that game. Am I right in assuming, from your actions, that you're a lowlife loser adult? Oh, no need to answer. I can tell I'm correct even without you admitting it."

"You...you worthless brat!"

Cleare ignored their endless squabbling, "These two came to me separately before we left, insisting that they wanted to take part in the battle," she explained. "I borrowed a couple of spare Armors Luxion had created and gave those to them. Intriguing that they both created similar designs." If what she said was true, she hadn't come up with their masks, *they* had. Father and sons unknowingly shared the same aesthetic.

Marie stared out the window at the two. "Genetics sure are something else." It was a bit disheartening to think that Julius had donned that same guise, putting himself on the same level as this pair.

Chapter 13: Swallowed in Flames

TAKE THIS!" Greg was out of breath. He gasped desperately for air as he braced himself, spear in hand, against the enemies who continued to charge him. "Haah...haah... There's no end to it."

Julius, who was fighting beside him, agreed. "The empire's frantic," he said, his own voice heavy with fatigue. "Still, we can't let any imperials past us."

Greg could more or less guess why Julius was intent on cutting them off. "You're worried about Finn, right? I'd rather Leon didn't have to fight him either." Especially because the two had once been friends.

Julius shook his head. He had no intention of stopping that anymore. In fact, he agreed with Leon's decision. "He's set on it. It'd be poor form to stop him."

"Yeah, guess you're right."

Drones behind Julius and Greg assisted them by retrieving new weapons from the containers on their backs. Greg stabbed his jagged spear into the floor, snatching up a new one. "All right, bring the best you've—hm?"

No sooner had he resumed his stance than another group appeared through the entrance of the spacious room. Eager celebration erupted from the regular soldiers facing Greg and Julius. These new reinforcements were Demonic Knights, and the soldiers now acted almost as if their victory was assured. Something about it struck Julius as odd.

"What's this?" he demanded. "They're acting strange."

Greg's gaze was fixed on a knight with wing-shaped flames spreading behind him and a halberd in his hand. The rest of the knights followed in his wake. His suit was slightly bigger than the others, and something about him suggested he was much stronger too. He had an intimidating presence.

Scratches and gashes covered the Demonic Knights he'd brought with him, indicating how desperately they'd fought to return to the fortress. Yet, oddly,

there wasn't a single mark on the knight with the flames.

"We've got a real tough one here," Greg muttered.

The man in question, who'd been hovering above the floor, finally lowered himself. "I commend your tenacity in breaching our fortress, but your journey ends here," he said. His voice was low and threatening, the sort that belonged to a storied veteran of the battlefield.

Greg lifted his spear just as the Demonic Knight's halberd crashed down on him. The impact was so powerful that his Armor creaked with the pressure. Now that he knew how tough his opponent was, Greg was sweating bullets, but he was equally excited.

"So, you withstood my attack," remarked the enemy.

"Is that really something to be so surprised by?" Greg hissed back through gritted teeth, trying to act composed.

The enemy withdrew his halberd. "I am Gunther," he announced. "Gunther Lua Sebald!"

"Greg Fou Seberg. You'd better remember that. It's the name of the man who's gonna take you down."

Gunther didn't seem bothered by his bluster. "I like your confidence. Alas, this is a war, not a duel."

The men presumably under Gunther's direct command surrounded Greg, cutting him off from his opponent. Greg clicked his tongue, and panic started to set in. He couldn't take on Gunther *and* all his subordinates at once.

Julius pressed his back to Greg's. "These guys aren't like the other enemies we fought, Greg. They're pros."

"Yeah, I figured. Anyway, Julius, I've got a favor to ask ya. Mind leaving that guy Gunther there to me?"

"You plan to fight him by yourself?" There was skepticism in Julius's voice. He'd surely realized by now how powerful Gunther was. That was why he'd come over, intending to fight alongside Greg.

The problem was that neither could fight with their full ability surrounded by

this many enemies. More likely than not, they'd lose the battle and their lives.

"My Armor's more suited to one-on-one battle," said Greg. "If this guy's the second seat of the Demonic Knights, then he's the second toughest, right? Let me handle him."

Anyone else might've interpreted Greg's words as demeaning, as if he thought Julius was too weak to do the job, but Julius didn't take them that way.

"You have a good point. I'm more an all-around fighter, so you've got a better chance taking him than I do," said Julius. The two fended off the Demonic Knights during this exchange, and at long last, Julius agreed to Greg's proposal. "I'll take care of the rest of these guys."

"Thanks, Julius!"

When Greg lurched forward, Gunther's men fell upon him. Julius fought them back, firing his cannons on them. "I'm your opponent!"

Thanks to Julius, Greg managed to dart forward and thrust his spear at Gunther, who parried it with his halberd.

"You think you can stop me by yourself? I'm beyond your skill level," Gunther said with a measure of exasperation. The way he spoke made it sound like he was underestimating Greg, but he was only stating facts. He was more skillful and experienced.

But although Greg realized as much, that wasn't enough reason for him to back down. "My best quality is my refusal to give up, no matter the odds. If you tell me I've got no chance of winning, that only makes me more eager to face you!" He launched another powerful jab at Gunther.

The Demonic Knight finally sensed how dangerous Greg could be if he didn't take him seriously. "Impressive. You have natural talent, but I see you also put in effort practicing. You're lucky to have a powerful Armor that keeps up with you too. However...!" Gunther's halberd slammed into Greg, hurtling him through the air.

"Guh!" he cried, all the breath rushing out of his lungs. He lifted his spear, hoping he could block any follow-up attacks.

Flames flared behind Gunther as he leaped into the air to approach. "When it comes to piloting skill..."

"Gah!" Greg managed to parry the next attack, but the momentum again sent him flying.

"...and an Armor's full potential..."

Air hissed past Greg's teeth in a sharp gasp. His Armor groaned and creaked as another heavy blow fell against his ready spear.

"...I outclass you!"

The final attack, carrying Gunther's full might, slammed Greg into a wall.

"Greg?! Pull yourself together!" Julius cried out to him. He was busy handling the other Demonic Knights and Armors.

The corners of Greg's lips quirked up. "You've got nothin' to worry about, Julius. I'm gonna take this guy down. If I don't, he'll end up in Leon's hair." Gunther reaching Leon would jeopardize their mission even further.

Greg reached for a lever inside his cockpit and pulled it down. An electronic warning echoed around him. "Shifting to mandatory overload state. Time remaining until overload causes full-scale explosion: three minutes."

The lever he'd pulled was the trump card Luxion had given his Armor. While upgrading it, Luxion had explained that Greg could utilize the Armor's full potential at the cost of its internal systems overloading. Of course, he couldn't wield that full potential for very long.

Seconds after Greg pulled that lever, fire blasted from his armor's joints, making it obvious even to Gunther that something was afoot. "What did you do?!" he demanded.

This time, it was Greg's turn to slam into Gunther with such incredible force that he sent the Demonic Knight reeling.

"What'd I do? Just pulled out my ace in the hole, that's all!" said Greg.

"Something unconventional, by the looks of it. No, it can't be... Are you overloading your Armor's internal systems?!"

The temperature in Greg's cockpit was skyrocketing. He ignored it, focused on his opponent. "I'd rather self-destruct to stop you if the alternative is letting you reach Leon!"

Gunther tried to put distance between them, eating up the precious little time Greg had to finish him off. It was obviously a calculated tactic to counter Greg's strategy.

"You seriously gonna run from me, you second-seat bastard?!"

"Judging by the state of your Armor, I'll win if I steer clear of you until your time's up. It's your own fault you used your 'ace in the hole' too early."

Greg's Armor couldn't withstand the energy building inside it. It was gradually falling apart. Cracks spiderwebbed through its plating as its joints slowly melted.

"I already told ya, I don't know when to give up," said Greg. He sped forward, slamming into Gunther and trying to skewer him. The heat radiating from his Armor had melted his spear, however. With no other choice, he seized Gunther with his bare hands.

Gunther struggled in his grip. "You can't seriously mean to detonate and kill us both! I should be the first seat—"

"No one cares, and I ain't letting you get past me." Greg's Armor, red to begin with, began glowing even brighter crimson.

"If you think this means you've beaten me, you're wrong!" Gunther howled at him. "You only won because of that crazy Armor!"

"Yep, I know. No one knows better than me just how weak I am. Why else do you think I had such a powerful Armor made for me?"

There was a brief pause before Gunther scoffed, "I'll give you this—at least you're honest, recognizing your own weakness." As flames lapped at the exterior of his Demonic Suit, slowly devouring him, he laughed. "Young man—no, Greg, you said your name was—take pride, for it is no small accomplishment to beat the second seat of the Demonic Knights! I'm glad I could fight someone like you before I—"

Before Gunther finished, the countdown on Greg's monitor hit zero. The

ensuing explosion swept them both up. As flames ravaged his monitor and sweltering heat consumed his cockpit, Greg forced a weak smile. He was both proud of his success in beating Gunther and vexed that he had to resort to this to achieve it. He hadn't wanted it to be over so quickly. He'd hoped he could fight alongside Leon and the others a little longer.

"Ah. Dammit. So, this is the end, then? Leon, I'm counting on you to finish what we all started."

Chapter 14: Love

THE BLAST FROM THE EXPLOSION swept through the rest of the room, flinging away the imperial Armors Julius had been fighting.

"Greg!" Julius roared desperately, throat raw. "Greg!"

Greg's suit had melted completely, leaving behind only a fragment of Gunther's Demonic Suit.

The one-on-one battle's outcome stunned the imperials.

"Lord Gunther lost?!"

"It can't be. There's no way he'd ever lose!"

"Your ancestors lost the war! How long are you puny descendants going to resist the inevitable?!"

As the Demonic Knights roared in dismay, their comrades piloting Armors struggled back to their feet.

Julius desperately wanted to check the wreckage to see whether Greg survived the blast somehow, but there was no time for that right now. He gritted his teeth and swallowed the urge, steeling himself to carry out his duty first.

"If I let a single enemy slip past me, everything Greg and the others worked for will be in vain," he reminded himself.

The few drones that remained with him took up battle stances at his side, ready to join the fight, but his enemies weren't paying him any attention at the moment.

"The Scumbag Knight made for the reactor. Hurry after him!"

"We must carry on for Lord Gunther!"

"Ignore the white Armor!"

The Demonic Knights tried to speed past Julius toward the corridor Leon had disappeared down, but Julius fired his cannons and knocked them to the ground. They changed tack quickly after that, apparently recognizing him at last as the threat he was.

"This one will be a real pain to deal with."

"Let's gang up on him."

Soon, they'd fanned out and surrounded him.

"If you're coming at me, you'd better do it with everything you have," Julius warned. "I'm ready to forfeit my own life to defeat you all, in the name of my love for Marie and my friendship with Leon." He purged his cannons, and white-blue flames blasted from his rear container. His whole Armor began glowing with similar white-blue light, its output meter shooting up.

"What's this nonsense about love and friendship?!" One of the knights roared with mocking laughter. "This is the battlefield, where the strong survive and the weak don't!" Battle axe in hand, the knight charged him.

Julius deflected the blow with his shield, stabbing his sword straight through the enemy's cockpit. He moved with such deadly agility and grace that the Demonic Knights didn't dare mock him further. After their comrade's death, they understood that he wouldn't be an easy match.

"You may find it laughable, but I'm entirely serious," Julius said. "I'm here because the woman I love asked me to be, and because I want to help my friend!"

As the words left his mouth, he thought back with some self-derision on the past—when he'd first dueled Leon, and Leon had handily beaten him to a pulp. I babbled on about my love for Marie then too. But the words didn't carry the same weight then. When he spoke of love and friendship here and now, there was genuine emotion behind his words.

The Demonic Knights launched their attack with impressive coordination. The imperial soldiers in their Armors provided backup, pelting Julius with bullets, while the knights swept forward and slashed at him with their weapons. Deep gashes covered his once beautiful pure-white Armor, a web of cracks forming

on the outer plating.

Despite the overwhelming numbers against him, Julius joined them in the air and gave chase, his sword finding its mark. It didn't matter that his Armor was a wreck; his determination to keep going remained unbroken, and his swift response to each attack began to unnerve his opponents.

Julius sensed their alarm and lifted his sword as he said, "I am Julius Rapha Holfort, the former crown prince of Holfort. You are sorely mistaken if you think you can claim my life easily."

The Demonic Knights charged him together, whizzing through the air toward him.

"I should thank you for making my job easier," Julius laughed. A slash of his sword cut through several of them. They fell one after another, slamming into the floor below, until only a single Demonic Knight remained by the end.

The final knight hung back. "We've nearly worn him down! Continue firing at him!" he ordered the other imperial soldiers. He thought it'd be best for them to keep their distance and that their guns could fell Julius.

Although dozens upon dozens of cracks spiderwebbed through his shield, which was only just staying in one piece, Julius lifted it to defend himself. The oncoming rain of bullets shattered it, leaving nothing behind. The flames that had burned blue-white at his back sputtered out.

His enemy had been right. Julius was at his limit, and it was difficult for his Armor to move at all. Still, he forced it to fly forward. "It's not over yet!"

Julius had only one intact sword left to fight with. He darted bravely toward the imperials, despite all the rifles trained on him.

His menacing determination daunted them.

"H-hurry up! Shoot him down!"

A relentless barrage of bullets flew upon Julius, piercing his plating and blowing off his entire left arm.

"Just a little bit more... Just a bit...for Leon!"

Julius's Armor whined and groaned around him. He lifted his sword, but the

enemy's bullets reached it, shattering the blade.

Outside the fortress, Brad and Hubert were still battling.

"Kuh!"

Brad's lances, and the drones Luxion had left him to control, were evenly matched by Hubert's squadrons.

"Squadron Two, fall back," Hubert ordered. "Squadron Five, continue firing on the enemy. Squadron Eight, focus on destroying his lances."

They'd already managed to destroy three of Brad's lances and a number of drones.

He commands his knights as expertly as if they were extensions of his own body, Brad thought. I have to admit he's tough.

The Demonic Knights whom Hubert commanded wouldn't be all that skilled on their own, but led by Hubert, they reached greater heights. One charged at Brad, swinging his weapon. Brad parried with the lance in his hand just in time, but he was forced back by the blow's weight, unable to fully defend against it.

His opponent was obviously young and hot-blooded. He was the only one of the bunch who didn't invariably coordinate with the others; he occasionally darted out of formation to attack Brad directly, making him an unpredictable element on the field.

"Looks like you can't defend yourself so well in close combat!" the knight exclaimed. Although he didn't follow commands as well as his peers, he was easily the strongest among them.

"I wouldn't be half as charming if I were entirely perfect," Brad said. "I need at least one weakness to offset all my strengths." His face dripped with perspiration, contradicting his bravado.

"Enough of your babbling!" The knight raised his blade, threatening to cut Brad down entirely.

Before the knight's sword could do the job, though, Jilk sniped him. The bullet only grazed his left arm, but its anti-Demonic Suit properties affected it like a

strong venom. The shot inflamed the limb, inflating it grotesquely until it burst completely.

"Aaaah!" The knight's shrill voice rang through the air like a siren.

"Laimer, fall back!" Hubert snapped at him.

"Dammit!" Laimer cursed, even as he obediently followed his superior's order.

"Return to the fortress and get that wound healed. We can take care of things here," said Hubert.

Despite his reluctance to leave the battlefield, Laimer withdrew, but not before shouting over his shoulder at Jilk, "You—the bastard in the green Armor—you're going to pay for this! Mark my words!"

In the brief reprieve while Hubert ordered Laimer off the field, Jilk said to Brad, "We can't keep going like this. We need to retreat too!"

Jilk was having a hard time assisting. A number of Demonic Knights had swarmed him to end his continued sniping. Each time he popped his head out to try a shot, they used magic to stop him. It had taken considerable effort to bypass them and graze Laimer a moment earlier. The lengthy battle had also damaged Jilk's Armor severely. On top of that, he was running out of ammo, which prompted his suggestion that they run for it.

Brad wouldn't back down. "I can't withdraw until I defeat Hubert," he said. "Besides, he'd never let us retreat."

He was right, of course. Hubert was too alert, too determined to finish their battle.

"It's your fault I've lost so many of my men. I never imagined you'd be so formidable," said Hubert, as if on cue.

Brad and Jilk were having a tough time against him, but still, they'd taken out half his subordinates.

"See?" Brad said. "I'm so stunning that he can't bear to let me go."

"Is this really the time to crack a joke?" Jilk shot back, exasperated by Brad's ridiculous narcissism. He must've assumed that, if Brad sounded so arrogant, he

was still going strong—but he was mistaken about that. Although force of habit made Brad sound and act like his normal self, he was reaching his limit.

"Joke? Jilk, you wound me," Brad said dramatically. "I'm always serious."

The two enjoyed their banter, even as—with renewed determination— Hubert commanded his men to attack.

"You really are something else, you know," Jilk sighed. "Fine. I'll stick with you until the end."

Brad expertly wielded his remaining lances. There were fewer now, so his focus was less divided, and the weapons' movements were more refined.

Hubert himself seemed to sense how much deadlier they were. "Even after all the damage you took, you're getting stronger?" He shook his head.

His knights surrounded Brad, whose lances whipped around to protect his blind spot. One by one, the lances took down knight after knight.

"You'd better not underestimate me!" said Brad.

He gradually reduced his enemy's numbers until at last Hubert's subordinates began ignoring their commander's orders. All the knights who'd been busy blocking Jilk turned away from him, charging Brad's lances and the drones.

"What are you doing?!" Hubert cried at them.

To his dismay, they ignored him.

"What's going on?" Brad blurted in surprise, firing his lances at the group. They pierced their intended targets, only for the wounded knights to wrap their arms around the lances and effectively hold them in place. "Are they really sacrificing themselves?!"

By the time Brad caught on, it was already too late. Their aim had been to render him defenseless.

"Without these, victory belongs to Lord Hubert!"

"Lord Hubert, please finish them off!"

"Who ordered you to act as sacrificial pawns?!" Hubert angrily demanded of his men. However furious he was with them, he wouldn't let their efforts be in

vain. His fingers squeezed tight around his sword hilt as he charged toward Brad.

"What a crazy bunch," Brad said. Though he was terrified of the end coming, he also had to respect the bravery throwing one's life away for a greater purpose required. Hubert's subordinates could do that only because they loved their commander so much.

Joined by his last three subordinates, Hubert flew forward, closing the remaining distance between him and Brad. Jilk cast his rifle aside and shot out of the fortress, using his blade to carve through the few remaining knights who'd stayed behind to block him.

"Brad," Jilk shouted, "hold on, and I'll be there!"

Hubert swung at Brad, who blocked the blow. He's not just an expert commander, he found himself thinking. No, what makes him so fearsome is that he's incredibly strong on top of that. It wasn't out of weakness that Hubert had turned to a command role. He was actually much stronger on his own than his subordinates had been together. No matter how Brad tried to parry his attacks, Hubert was quickly carving the outer plating from his Armor.

"It seems Laimer was right that you're weak in close combat," said Hubert.

"Dammit."

In the corner of his monitor, Brad saw how hard Jilk was fighting, defeating two Demonic Knights at once in his desperate attempt to reach Brad in time. He was pushing himself past his limits, and he'd somehow lost his left arm in the process.

"You're way overdoing it, Jilk. It's not like you," he said.

Brad had already run out of ammunition himself, and the hidden weapon on his left arm was unusable. All he had left was one lance and an extra shortsword. Hubert knew Brad had no more tricks up his sleeve, which was why he'd seized the opportunity to engage Brad in melee battle.

"I'm ending this now," Hubert announced. He made no lofty proclamations about doing it to avenge his fallen subordinates, but that was exactly why he was handling this personally. Charging full speed at Jilk to land his final blow

and bring this battle to its conclusion, he sank his blade into the outer plating protecting Brad's cockpit.

Brad let out a strangled laugh. "You've bested me flawlessly."

The sheer momentum of Hubert's attack sent the two crashing into Arcadia's outer wall. The blade penetrated the remainder of the plating on Brad's Armor, skewering Brad and pinning him to the fortress.

"Flawlessly, my foot," Hubert rasped. "You're the one who has bested me. It seems I really did...underestimate you..."

Brad's shortsword protruded from Hubert's abdomen. He'd jabbed it into the Demonic Knight when the two clashed. Sporting the fatal wound, Hubert slowly lost altitude, falling away from Brad.

"See? I can...pull it off...if I try," Brad managed to say through gasps of air. "I won't let anyone...say I'm bad...with the sword...ever again."

Only after Brad fell completely silent did Jilk manage to cut down the final knight and reach his friend. "Brad?" he called desperately. "Brad!"

Thanks to Luxion, who piloted the Armor on Leon's behalf, Arroganz finally reached Arcadia's reactor. It was tucked into the deepest reaches of the fortress, housed in a chamber that encircled it, and was shaped like a pillar. Many entrances along the outer walls led out to a number of corridors.

The reactor was enormous, just like the room it occupied. It was black, and red lines similar to veins ran across its surface. They pulsed almost as if the reactor had a heartbeat, weak at first and then stronger, lighting up with each throb.

Luxion peered at the reactor from the threshold of the corridor. As he observed and analyzed it, the outer ring of his lens hummed. "So, this is the reactor, the mechanism Arcadia uses to produce demonic essence."

Old humanity had struggled for decades to breach Arcadia's depths and take the fortress down, but never succeeded. Yet here he was, accomplishing what they couldn't. It might've been an emotional moment if Luxion hadn't been preoccupied with other concerns.

"Master, are you feeling all right?"

In the wake of the neutralizer Luxion had administered, Leon's face was deathly pale.

"No. I feel like crap," he said honestly. He was covered in perspiration, a new wave of it beading on his skin. Even one injection of the performance enhancer had taken a substantial toll on his body. Without the neutralizer, he probably couldn't even have spoken.

"You have been falling in and out of consciousness for some time. This is a considerable improvement," said Luxion.

"Yeah. That's lucky, since this is the exact part I need to be awake for." Leon leaned forward, fingers circling the control sticks, and launched several missiles from Arroganz's rear container at the reactor. The drones accompanying him soon joined in, but both their fire and the missiles were deflected by a magic barrier protecting the reactor.

Leon grimaced, his brows drawn together. "Should've known it wouldn't be this easy."

"I recommend a close-quarter attack," said Luxion. "Apologies, Master, but you will have to bear that on your own. I can only offer the bare minimum support due to interference from the demonic essence." As much as he wanted to control Arroganz in Leon's place and do the deed himself, all he could do was maintain a connection with his mobile unit. Leon would need to do this.

So long as Leon could land an attack powerful enough to penetrate the barrier, Luxion was sure they'd manage to destroy the reactor. Both it and its barrier were built to withstand a lot, but a direct attack from Arroganz would be sufficient to finish this mission.

"We're out of missiles," said Leon. "Let's switch containers first."

"Very well."

Leon spun around to swap his container for a fresh one. Purging the previous container, he took position for a drone to transfer its cargo to him.

"Master, an enemy!" Luxion cut in. "An enemy is fast approaching us!" "So he's finally here."

Before Leon could finish securing the new container to his back, an enemy had flown in, attacking the drones and causing several to explode. Fortunately, not all of them had been destroyed, which meant a container transfer was still possible. The bigger problem was their enemy's identity.

"It's been a while," said a voice all too familiar to Luxion.

Brave had dropped in on them from the ceiling. He was noticeably bigger than the other Demonic Suits they'd faced, and lightning crackled across his surface. The fact that he was already unleashing his magic made it clear how seriously his pilot, Finn, was taking this battle.

Leon forced a smile through the pain. "I was hoping to see you, Finn!" He sped backward as quickly as he could, hoping to gain time to finish transferring the new container to his back. He'd need a weapon if he was going to fight Brave. But that retreat would be difficult to manage successfully, especially since Finn immediately realized what he was doing.

"Likewise," Finn said, voice thick with sadness and regret at the conditions that had brought them here. As soon as Arroganz tried to complete the transfer, he interfered, unleashing his lightning and destroying the drones Leon was using.

"You're really getting in my way!" Leon snapped.

"I won't be pulling punches," Finn said, unperturbed. "Not with you. I'm sorry it has to be like this, but I can't afford to lose!"

Luxion began his calculations as Brave charged toward them. "Master," he said quickly, "preparations are complete."

"I knew I could count on you."

"Of course. Please do not compare me to someone as unreliable as Brave."

Overhearing their conversation, Brave exclaimed, "I'm the more reliable one between us!"

Leon knew they couldn't finish the transfer as long as Finn had any impact on

it. The hatches on his drones' rear containers cracked open.

"Eat this!" Leon bellowed.

The drones launched a barrage of missiles; they also began firing with the guns they held. The blasts and bullets covered nearly every inch of the corridor. It was sufficiently spacious for easy travel but not wide enough to accommodate an Armor and Demonic Suit locked in battle.

Brave couldn't run anywhere. Instead, he wrapped his wings around himself for protection. Still, he was unable to brace himself against the force of the blasts, which knocked him back through the air.

Arroganz took the opportunity to whiz past him, reaching toward one of the fallen drones. A battle axe had dropped from its container, the edge of the blade sinking into the floor. Leon yanked the weapon up and charged toward the reactor, but Finn wasn't about to let him get away with that.

"You really think you can throw me off that easily, Leon?!"

Spinning, Finn flew toward Leon, who caught the sword swinging downward with his axe. An earsplitting scream of metal against metal pierced the air, both weapons vying to overpower each other.

"Luxion, do something!" Leon shouted.

"Yes, Master." Luxion knew exactly what he needed to do.

One of the surviving drones aimed its rifle at Brave. The bullet couldn't pierce Brave, but it was enough to break his stance.

"Yowch!" Brave cried.

"That's not enough to break your skin, is it?" Luxion grumbled, frustration bleeding through his electronic voice. The bullet would've pierced any other Demonic Knight, but not Brave.

Luxion had known Brave was a threat, but it was frustrating to realize he'd underestimated just how formidable he was.

Brave lashed out with electricity, destroying the drone that had attacked him, then promptly refocused on Arroganz. He glowered at it with narrowed eyes.

"Apologies, Master," Luxion said. "That was the perfect opportunity, yet I wasn't able to take Brave down."

Leon shrugged, as if he'd never expected anything to come of it to begin with. "If he was that easy to beat, we wouldn't have struggled so much to get here in the first place. Now, how will we handle this?"

Brave swung forward with his longsword, which Arroganz readily parried with its battle axe. Each time they clashed, Brave's blade chipped away at the edge of the axe, until it finally cracked and shattered completely.

"Leon, I'm going to end this right here, right now!" Finn said.

Electricity crackled along the length of his longsword, wrapping it in light. When the charge came crashing in his direction, Leon leaped back, but the electric shot kept racing through the air toward him. Even if he evaded Finn's sword, that magic was inescapable. It was lucky that they'd prepared for this fight ahead of time with full knowledge of Brave's attacks, allowing Luxion to fashion special plating that defended against electricity magic. Still, the lightning was powerful enough to singe Arroganz's thick outer armor.

"It would be dangerous to continue. We should withdraw for the moment," said Luxion.

Leon shook his head. "He'll cut me down if I turn my back on him. No, we're going to do this." He tossed the battle axe aside, ready to face Brave barehanded.

"Are you going to struggle to your last? Is that what this is?" Finn asked warily. He didn't see how Leon could continue the fight without a weapon. That would be pointless, yet he knew Leon better than to assume nothing else was going on.

Brave shared his concerns. "Our magic did minimal damage to his outer armor. We're up against the hardest possible match right now, Partner."

Brave had been confident about the power of their attack; he'd hoped it would be enough to finish their opponent off entirely. However, by the looks of it, it hadn't even dealt the significant damage he'd counted on; it had done

practically nothing to Arroganz.

"Sorry, Partner," said Brave. "It's my fault. I underestimated them."

Finn's lips pulled into a taut line. "Don't worry about it," he said. "I never imagined they'd be easy to defeat."

His longsword kept humming with electric magic. Though he knew he was pushing his luck, Finn lurched forward and swung at Arroganz again. "If a single blow won't finish you, I'll just have to keep chopping until nothing's left!"

Brave's wings fanned, helping him speed forward until he slammed against Arroganz. When his sword bit down into the armor plating, however, it met more resistance than Finn ever expected.

"I can't cut through?!"

"Bastard," Brave hissed. "You went and added a bunch of extra plating to improve your defenses!"

That very plating had saved Arroganz from taking substantial damage from Brave's longsword. Now that they were face-to-face, Arroganz thrust both arms toward Brave.

Finn immediately leaped back. "Trying your shock wave attack? Unfortunately for you, I know it's only effective at point-blank range!"

The "shock wave attack" in question was Arroganz's ultimate technique. Finn had accurately pinpointed its weakness, though. As long as he didn't get close enough, Arroganz couldn't use it.

Or so he thought.

"Impact!"

A shock wave shot forth from Arroganz's palm. Although Finn was sure they would be safe at a distance, the shock wave rippled out and reached him.

"Gah!" Finn cried.

It jostled them so violently that he felt like his insides were being shaken, and the force of the blast sent Brave flailing backward. Finn watched through narrowed eyes as Arroganz activated what looked like a cooling device on its chest. It spat out a mist that billowed around them.

"He's strengthened his shock wave attack!" said Brave. "I don't think he can use it without pausing in between, though."

Electricity crackled over Arroganz's plating, as if it'd reached its limits.

"You ought to have saved your little trick for later," said Finn.

Leon should've finished Finn off while he had the chance. Since he hadn't, Finn was sure victory would be his. The joy that brought him was hollow. To summon the motivation he needed to charge at Arroganz again, he had to conjure an image of Mia's and his late sister's faces in his head.

Meanwhile, Arroganz had already purged its extra plating, and the vapor from its cooling device clouded the air.

"What?" Finn blurted out before the realization hit him. "A smokescreen?!"

He didn't panic, even though his vision was obstructed. The air was thick with demonic essence, and Brave thrived in such an environment. It gave Demonic Creatures such as him the advantage on the field. Finn was confident that Brave could see through the fog, no matter how thick it was.

"This is no normal smokescreen!" Brave cried to him. "They mixed something into it. My radar's completely scrambled!"

For a second—only a split second—they lost track of Arroganz completely.

"It appears our smokescreen was effective," Luxion reported after confirming that their jamming had worked.

"That's a big help."

The smokescreen Luxion had prepared for just this occasion was particularly effective at confusing Demonic Creatures' senses. The problem was that they'd never actually tested it; while it theoretically worked, Leon couldn't be entirely certain about its efficacy.

"That was an incredibly risky gamble," said Luxion.

Leon shrugged. "As long as it paid off, that's all that matters."

Having purged its extra plating, Arroganz was less well defended, as well as running out of weapons. However, the two of them had anticipated it coming to this.

Luxion swiveled, his gaze focused behind them. "Schwert is coming."

Schwert had been secured to one of the fallen drones. Now that they'd activated the smokescreen, it lifted itself through the air and zipped toward them. It had originally been an airbike, but Luxion had refashioned it into a rear container for Arroganz. Schwert took an almost airplane-like form, slowing as it approached in order to land on Arroganz's back.

Then Brave appeared through the mist. He charged toward them, relying on intuition alone to find his way. "I don't think so!" he growled.

He obviously wanted to stop Schwert and Arroganz from merging, but he was a few seconds too late to prevent it. Schwert docked successfully, its generator connecting to Arroganz and providing further power output.

"Docking complete," Luxion announced, composed despite the longsword rushing toward them. "Power output increasing. Ready when you are, Master."

Leon shoved the control sticks forward. "Here at the end, it's Schwert's time to shine!"

Arroganz's eyes flashed red as it lurched forward and slammed into Brave. The two grappled, each accelerating in a competition of power.

"Do it," Leon said.

"Yes, Master."

A section of Schwert's plating slid open to reveal several round lenses. Those immediately shot blue lasers that bent and altered direction to target Brave. They were powerful enough to sear his surface.

"Ahhh! Hot! Hot!" Brave squealed.

Finn forced him to fall back, using his wings as a shield to keep the lasers from causing further damage.

Leon seized the chance to turn away and speed toward the reactor room. "I don't have time to waste playing around with you."

"Ngh!" Finn let out a panicked grunt. "As if I'd let you get away! Wait, what?!" He fanned out his wings to give chase, but the fallen drones had somehow gotten hold of Brave's leg and clung to it stubbornly. They must've crawled toward him while he was distracted so that they could pin him back.

"Our battle can wait until later," said Leon. Sweat glimmered on his forehead, and a small sigh of relief escaped him, since he'd somehow slipped past Finn by the narrowest margin.

"Master, we should prioritize destroying the reactor for the moment."

Leon nodded. "That's exactly what I intend to do." His face was still strained from lingering pain. Even after the neutralizer, he hadn't completely recovered from the performance enhancer, which just showed how much impact it'd had on his body.

Luxion wanted to end this as quickly as possible. This battle is pointless. The sooner we destroy this reactor, the sooner it will be over.

An explosion rocked the air behind them. Brave must've destroyed the drones that latched on to him. Luxion's newest calculations indicated that Brave would likely reach them before they finished destroying the reactor.

"That was faster than expected!" Luxion said in dismay.

Arroganz had gained extra thrust with the addition of Schwert, but they were up against the man said to be the strongest Demonic Knight. More importantly, Brave had earned his name due to his many accomplishments in past battles, and he had survived the war between old and new humanity.

Brave will catch up to Arroganz at this rate. If he does, Master will most likely want to use that performance enhancer again, Luxion thought. That was all he cared about. His top concern was ensuring that Leon returned safely after the fighting ended.

Although Luxion angled to prevent the enhancer's use, his hopes were in vain. Brave had caught up to them.

"Leeeeon!" Finn howled.

Luxion immediately had to reevaluate his previous estimations of Brave's

strength. He caught up to us, and he's still accelerating more? I struggle to comprehend these Demonic Creatures and the variability of their strength.

"Luxion," Leon said calmly, "inject the performance enhancer."

Luxion was so alarmed that he hesitated a split second, then replied, "No, I cannot allow it. You still haven't fully recovered from the damage your first use of the enhancer produced."

Leon didn't listen to Luxion's laundry list of reasons why it was a bad idea. He just said, "It's an order. Do it." His voice was firm and unyielding.

"As you command, Master."

The needle pierced Leon's back, injecting the enhancer into his bloodstream. His face immediately contorted in anguish.

I'd hoped we wouldn't have to use it twice, or in such quick succession, thought Luxion. But there was nothing I could've said or done to stop him.

The pain abated quickly, but the side effects were instant this time. Blood leaked from Leon's eyes and dribbled down his cheeks.

We used it too quickly. If he doesn't give his body time to recover, it won't be able to endure a third shot.

Looking over his shoulder, Leon sped backward toward Brave. Lasers burst from Schwert again. Finn expertly evaded them as best he could, just shrugging off any blasts that landed. He was focused on simply catching up to Leon.

"Something is wrong," Luxion said. "They're stronger than they were before."

Finn and Brave's conversation spilled into the air, revealing something Luxion had already expected.

"You shouldn't push yourself like this, Partner!"

"When better to push myself than now?! Mia's future is on the line! This is a small sacrifice to make!"

"Yeah," Brave whined, "but a drug this strong will have a serious impact on your body!"

So, that's it. Finn and Brave are also using a performance enhancer. That was

how Finn had managed to use Brave's full potential.

Leon pulled a face at the revelation. "What, you're doping too?"

"I assume that means you've done the same," said Finn.

Both were willing to throw away their future if that allowed them to call upon their full power in this fight.

Luxion lamented that the two were fighting at all. If not for the past—if Master hadn't been dragged into this war between old and new humanity—he never would've needed to fight his own friend, would he? His regret sprang from a long-held concern that his presence had only burdened Leon.

They finally broke out of the corridor and into the room housing the reactor. Schwert fired lasers at the reactor but couldn't penetrate its magical barrier.

"Even the lasers aren't strong enough?" Leon asked in disbelief.

"No," Leon confirmed. "Unfortunately, it will be difficult for us to get close enough for a melee attack."

Brave was hot on their heels. Leon pulled a greatsword out of Schwert just as Brave swung, and sparks flew as their metal blades clashed together.

"I won't let you," Finn hissed at Leon. "I won't let anyone steal Mia's future from her!"

"What do you expect me to say to that?" Leon barked back at him. "'Okay, you're right, I'm sorry'? You're crazy!"

Leon was also protecting someone important to him: his niece from his previous life, Erica. But he wouldn't speak her name, not here. She wasn't the only reason he was fighting. If her life had been the only one at stake, he could've moved her somewhere safe. He hadn't done that, because more lives were on the line than just hers—a whole future generation's lives.

Leon was always running his mouth off, but Luxion knew how kind he really was deep down. Kinder than most people, in fact. It was true that he had a habit of going overboard. And, like anyone, he made mistakes. Even so, he was putting his own life at risk to protect others. Luxion resented him for being so self-sacrificing, but he was equally proud to have such an incredible Master.

All I want...

When he first awoke, he'd wanted a Master who would annihilate new humanity. Leon had risen up to protect old humanity's descendants and was fighting Luxion's long-hated enemy. It was everything Luxion had once hoped for.

All I really want is for Master to survive.

Having gotten exactly what he'd wished for, he was heartbroken.

Chapter 15: A Worthy Opponent

THE SITUATION OUTSIDE Arcadia's fortress continued to develop. The royal army had rallied and was pushing the imperials back, due in large part to the emperor's own orders. After Leon and his men breached the fortress, the emperor had recalled his Demonic Knights—the imperial army's strongest forces—to combat them. The ensuing panic affected all their troops.

Gilbert watched it all play out from the bridge of his ship. "Don't let this opportunity go to waste!" he ordered. "Keep pushing them back!"

Both armies were fighting with all their might, exhausting an enormous amount of resources and manpower in the process. If this had been an ordinary war, future generations would have looked back on it as a moment when both sides made the foolish mistake of refusing to retreat when they should have.

"Lord Gilbert, you should fall back," said the captain. Gilbert had ridden to the front line to command their forces and, thus far, refused to leave. "You're the Redgrave heir. We have no idea whether His Grace is still alive. If anything happened to you, it could have grave consequences!"

Gilbert's expression betrayed no emotion. "If I turned my back on our men now, I would bring shame on both myself and future generations of my house. Do you honestly expect me to do that?"

"Sometimes you must shoulder shame for the greater good! Besides, our allies are handling things just fine at the front. I don't see any reason for shame in falling back to safety."

"Shame is just an excuse on my part," Gilbert admitted. "The real reason I can't withdraw is because my pride won't allow it."

"Lord Gilbert..." Any further argument died on the captain's lips. He resigned himself, realizing he couldn't convince Gilbert even if he tried.

At that same moment, two white Armors whizzed past their ship, expertly

cleaving through nearby monsters as they went. They were no doubt capable of that partly because the Armors were so powerful, but it was obvious the pilots were equally talented.

Unfortunately, the conversation leaking into the air was less impressive or graceful.

"There, kiddo! See? I've beaten more enemies than you!"

"You've got some nerve claiming that after you stole my prey, you old man!"

When the Als upgraded the royal army's ships, they'd equipped the Redgraves' vessel with a monitor, which now displayed the two strangely masked pilots. Gilbert didn't need to see their faces anyway—not when he recognized both their voices.

Pressing a hand to his forehead, he sank to his knees.

The captain panicked and raced over to him. "Lord Gilbert! Please hold firm!" He probably realized the cause of Gilbert's sudden exasperation.

"It's...it's fine," Gilbert stammered. "Actually, I have a request to make of you, Captain. Could you fire at those two?"

"Pardon?"

Gilbert's expression had turned cold and emotionless as he stared at the monitor. "Just one missile," he reasoned. "Surely people would believe that was a misfire, right?"

"No. No, of course we can't do that. They're our allies!"

Gilbert grimaced. "I know that. I get it, I do! But still...!" What are they thinking, taking the battlefield?!

The pilots' voices were still leaking through the monitor into the ship.

"Who are you really, brat? As soon as this is over, and we get back to the capital, I'll have you arrested! You'd better be ready to face the dungeons!"

"Oh yeah? I'll make you regret defying me, Grandpa! You're the one who'll end up in the dungeon. Then you'll have no choice but to face the consequences of your actions!"

The saddest part was that the two masked knights had no idea who each other were.

Back in Arcadia's reactor room, Finn and I were locked in battle. Both of us had resorted to drugs to try to gain the advantage, and we'd both managed to access our respective suits' full potential because of it. Strictly speaking, though, Brave was still probably more powerful than Arroganz.

"Arroganz hasn't fought anyone this tough since that Black Knight," I said.

Merely from mentioning it, I started thinking back to that time. The Black Knight had been the hero of the former Principality of Fanoss. I'd let my guard down, and he pushed us to our limits. If not for that experience, I probably couldn't have held out against Finn this long. I was tougher now, steeled for the intense battle that was playing out.

"I won't let you destroy the reactor!" Finn shouted as his longsword sliced through the air toward me.

I parried the attack, but it wasn't enough. The blow's force slammed me into the wall behind me, denting it.

Two horns jutted from Brave's shoulders, generating electricity between them and then unleashing it. Brave had already used a substantial amount of mana, but with the reactor beside them, he could replenish himself by absorbing as much demonic essence as he wanted. This battlefield was entirely to Finn's advantage.

"Luxion!" I bellowed.

"Deploying a shield over the surface of Arroganz's armor," he announced.

A thin magical barrier shimmered over Arroganz. We'd purged the thickest plating earlier, so if we did nothing to mitigate Brave's attack, it could potentially be deadly. Fortunately, Arroganz was unscathed by that attack, but the same couldn't be said of our surroundings.

The floor and wall melted as the electricity touching them produced a small explosion. I darted through the air to escape it. Brave swung his longsword

down, cleaving straight through the wall with frightening power and narrowly missing me in the process.

"I can't—no, we can't let ourselves be defeated! Not here!" said Finn.

My nostrils flared. "Same goes for me, you know!"

As Brave recklessly lunged at us and swung again, my left hand reached toward them and fired a shock wave. He sidestepped it at the last second, avoiding any damage, but it at least allowed me to put more distance between us.

It was my turn to go on the offensive. I swiped my greatsword horizontally, but Finn deflected it and planted his foot right in my chest.

"Not very honorable of you!" I told Finn.

"I don't want a lecture from you about honor!"

As the force of his kick spun me back through the air, I launched more laser beams at Brave, singeing his skin. He ignored the damage and raced toward me. He and Finn were both drunk on the adrenaline from the fight. It was as if my attacks didn't even hurt them.

"I can't keep wasting time on this," I grumbled. I slammed my foot down on the pedal. Schwert's propelling nozzle closed to restrict airflow, boosting me and shooting out blue flames in the process.

Brave accelerated toward me, his large, batlike wings beating the air furiously. I aimed my lasers at them. The blasts burned and punctured his wings, but they rejuvenated themselves too quickly for the lasers to have any lasting impact. In return, Brave fired electricity at me in the form of crackling balls that spun toward us.

"Those contain homing magic! There are...eighty-one in total!" announced Luxion.

"Shoot them down!" I said.

Schwert's lasers managed to take care of most of them, but there were so many that it couldn't handle every single one. Luxion was trying to conserve Schwert's power, but this battle was draining its reserves quickly.

"How can you move like that?" Finn demanded. "However powerful you and Arroganz are, I don't remember you being able to do all this!"

They'd obviously noticed the discrepancy in power between the period before I took my performance enhancer and now. Finn already knew I'd used the drug, of course. He had too, but it apparently struck him as odd that they hadn't yet overpowered me despite having the clear advantage.

Brave figured out the answer before Finn could. "So that's what you've done," he said.

"What've they done, Kurosuke?"

"Luxion went and did the worst thing possible, Partner! He's going to kill his master!"

"You can't be serious!" Finn cried in disbelief.

"Don't let them get to you," I told Luxion. "Everything you did was on my orders."

"You know nothing," Luxion hissed at Brave with surprising emotion in his robotic voice. His whole tiny body trembled with fury.

"You're sacrificing your own master to beat us, huh?!" Brave said accusingly. "The performance enhancer you used wasn't any normal one on the market. You're using the type that drains the user's life force to grant them power! Just the kind of dirty trick I'd expect you filthy machines to resort to!"

Luxion instantly lost his cool. "If not for you and your kind, Master would have never resorted to such means to win," he shot back. "If new humanity never existed to begin with, things would not have come to this!"

With all the emotion on both sides, the battle heated up.

"Leon! How can you throw your own life away so casually?!" Finn demanded as we fought. "I thought you valued your life more. Why would you choose death without hesitation?!"

What? He's saying it isn't like me to put my life on the line for others this way? I didn't need him to point that out; I knew it better than anyone. But these two hands of mine could only protect so many people.

"If you want to protect everything, you have to be willing to make some sacrifices!" I said.

I'd been so greedy in wanting to save so many. Before I knew it, I'd shouldered a bigger burden than I could manage. Although I recognized that I couldn't carry more, there were still so many other people I wanted to protect. What other choice had I had? I could only take on so much by myself.

"So you're sacrificing yourself?!" Finn said admonishingly.

"Yeah, and that means I'll save a lot of people!"

If we eked out a victory, my life would be a small price to pay for all the others we'd protect in the process. Losing would cost us too much. I wouldn't let myself lose, not to anyone—even Finn.

The battle grew fiercer. Brave lobbed more electricity balls at me. Influenced by his emotions, they grew larger and faster than before. When I stopped to cut one down with my greatsword, Brave finally caught up again.

"Tch!" I slammed my foot into Finn's chest to knock him away, but he grabbed my left leg. "Shit!" Before I could react, it was already too late. He'd destroyed my leg.

"Purging left leg," Luxion said.

"You jerk! Now you've done it!"

Veins pulsed on the surface of Brave's skin.

"Did Brave take some of that performance enhancer too?!" I asked, giving Luxion a brief, questioning glance.

"No," he said. "But a Demonic Suit and its pilot are linked, so the effect bleeds over to him."

The two really were pushing themselves to give this fight everything they had. Finn in particular was intensely focused on me, which gave me an idea. I glanced at the reactor.

"Well, that explains it, then," I said, turning back to Finn. "I hate to break this to you, Finn, but you pushed yourself too far."

He charged after me, blind to everything around him thanks to the drug he'd taken. "Leon, I'm ending this now!" His longsword shone, electricity shimmering along its sharp edges. It grew several times in length; it would be nearly impossible to avoid at this point. Brandishing it, Brave charged toward me.

"Fire whatever you've got at him!" I shouted at Luxion.

"Understood!"

As Finn gave chase, I darted through the air, firing lasers at him. We accelerated so quickly that everything around us was a blur of color. We were circling the reactor itself. If not for the performance enhancer, I never could've matched Finn's current speed. Wherever I went, he followed me doggedly.

"Finn, I want you to know you were way stronger than me," I told him.

Yes, were stronger—past tense. The ending of this was a foregone conclusion. His mistake had been ever turning to a drug to enhance his strength.

When Finn finally trapped me in a corner, I had my back to a particular structure in the room. Finn raised his electrically charged blade and swung without hesitation, intending to take my life with this last attack.

"This is the end for you!" he howled.

"Partner, you can't!" Brave cried. He'd realized the truth before Finn could, but it was already too late.

Finn tried to stop himself but couldn't halt his momentum. "No! Damn!" His blade pierced the structure behind me. He immediately tried to pull it free, but he couldn't. I grabbed his arm and yanked him closer, forcing the sword deeper.

"Finn," I said, "your mistake was not testing the drug beforehand to take stock of its effects on your body. It made you too shortsighted!"

The drug had strengthened him, to be sure. Still, if he'd tested it before this fight and realized its drawbacks, he'd either have given up on ever using it, or Brave would've stopped him. The enhancer had caused him to ignore the thing he was really trying to protect. He'd been so focused on me that he hadn't spared a second thought for anything else around him. Worse, the effects had bled over to Brave, delaying his ability to realize what was happening.

The structure Finn had pierced was the very pillar housing the reactor, and heat from his sword had transferred into the reactor itself. Cracks appeared on its surface and rippled outward. A strange sound almost like a wail pierced the air.

"Master, we have not finished destroying the reactor," said Luxion.

Finn was frozen in place, dumbfounded. I shoved him away, hefted my greatsword, and buried it deep in the reactor.

"Now do it!"

"Very well!"

A shock wave traveled from Arroganz's hands through the sword and into the reactor itself, triggering a small explosion within.

"More!" I demanded.

"Your adamantius sword won't be able to withstand it. I am not sure Arroganz can either," he said.

"Do it anyway! If we destroy this blasted thing, I don't care if it breaks us!"

"As you command!" Luxion answered, despite his obvious reluctance.

His fears weren't unfounded. After the next shock wave, fire consumed Arroganz's right arm, and the greatsword shattered to pieces.

But we succeeded.

The pillar's interior expanded. The whole structure began to fissure, bleeding countless red particles into the atmosphere. The air surged around us, blasting us backward.

Then the reactor started to melt. There was so much crimson in the air that it blotted out our view.

"What's going on?!" I asked.

"The reactor has been destroyed," Luxion explained. "Its contents are now melting. It's too dangerous to remain here!"

"Then we need to hurry up and get out of—ngh!" My hand flew to my mouth. I began coughing and sputtering, and blood gushed past my lips.

"Master! The neutralizer!"

Not even ten minutes had passed since I took the enhancer. I should still have several more minutes to go, but my body had already reached its limit.

"Ha ha," I chuckled weakly. "I should've trained more before now."

"I request permission to administer the neutralizer!" Luxion said.

I shook my head. "Sorry to break it to you, Luxion...but that's off the table." I reached for the controls, dodging just in time to avoid a swipe of Brave's longsword.

Liquid almost like tears poured from Brave's eyes. "How dare you?" Finn's scratchy voice rang out. "How dare you...? How dare you steal Mia's future?!"

"I've won," I told him plainly, without malice or ill intent.

"Graaah!" Screaming at the top of his lungs, he charged at me. I sped away from him, guiding Arroganz upward.

"Arroganz's right arm is immobile," Luxion reported. "Its left is usable, but the device used to produce the shock wave attack was burned too severely to remain functional. We cannot continue fighting, Master. Please give me permission to administer the neutralizer!"

"Not yet!"

Schwert shot forth lasers to carve a hole in the ceiling, which we quickly burst through.

"Are we outside now?!"

"Yes, and Arcadia's energy output is decreasing. The fortress is beginning to sink!"

Fire exploded through the hole behind us, Brave's charred form rushing out to follow us.

"Thank you for everything, Schwert," I said.

Luxion instantly realized what I was planning. He released Schwert from Arroganz, sending it toward Finn. "I have purged Schwert and am controlling it remotely," he reported.

Schwert accelerated straight toward Brave, puncturing his abdomen. The force propelled Brave through the air with an echoing scream. "Damn yoooou!" Schwert had sunk deep into his chest; there was no way the pilot could've survived. Finn must have died instantly upon impact.

Brave collapsed onto Arcadia's deck, rolling a few times before coming to a stop. He didn't move after that. I guided Arroganz close to him, although it was difficult to pilot with one leg missing.

"Master, we have already exceeded ten minutes," Luxion reminded me. "We must administer the neutralizer!"

My hand flew to my mouth. Blood burst past my lips before I could stop it, gushing out in a seemingly endless stream.

"Master!" Luxion cried.

"D-don't panic. Just hurry up...with the neutralizer..."

We approached Brave, but Finn didn't say anything. Tears poured from Brave's crimson eyes.

"Are you going to continue fighting?" Luxion asked on my behalf.

"There's no point. Not without my partner," Brave said. His body was starting to crumble. "Leon, I've got a message for you from my partner. He told me... that he wouldn't resent you for killing him. Said he'd have done the same."

"Did he...really?" I rasped, finding it difficult to speak at all. "Sounds...like him." Luxion had administered the neutralizer already, but none of the pain had subsided.

Brave could no longer sustain his form. Pieces of him began to dissolve into dust.

"It's a little too soon to act relieved," he said. "You've still got Arcadia's core left to beat. I hate his guts, to be honest. But that aside..."

He pointed at his longsword; it protruded from the deck, its blade having sunk into the fortress's outer plating. As I reached for it and ripped it free, Brave watched me and smiled.

"Sorry, Partner," he mumbled. The pitch-black color drained from his body, giving him an ashen hue before his frame disintegrated and was carried away by the wind. Nothing was left behind, not even Finn's corpse.

"Finn..." My eyes burned with tears as I spoke the name of the very friend I had personally killed.

"Master, it's not over yet," Luxion said. "If what Brave said was true, we will have to contend with Arcadia's core. He should not be able to restore the fortress itself, but we still ought to prioritize dispatching him. We also need to alert our allies to our success."

He was right. If we got rid of Arcadia's core, victory would be ours.

I wiped bloody tears from my face and took a deep breath, preparing myself for the fight that remained. "You're right," I told Luxion. "Let's get this over with quickly."

While I was preoccupied with my own thoughts, the crimson particles that leaked out of the hole behind me seemed to flow off in a particular direction, as if something was attracting them. It wasn't the wind carrying them away, as I might've expected.

Luxion noticed it too. "Something is absorbing all the demonic essence with alarming speed."

Arroganz's fingers squeezed tightly around the hilt of the longsword I had taken from Finn.

"Looks like our enemy doesn't know when to give up," I said.

The battle wasn't over yet.

Chapter 16: Revenge

EVERYONE IN THE COMMAND ROOM watched on the monitor as Brave dissolved. Mia's eyes were wide, her breathing erratic.

"Sir...Knight?" she croaked in a hollow voice.

She couldn't comprehend what she'd just seen. It felt like an awful nightmare.

She clutched her head, her hair tangling around her fingers. "This can't be happening," she said, fat tears falling swiftly down her cheeks. "It can't be. It just can't!"

Finn had always been so kind to her, always protected her. But Arroganz had killed him—a fact she struggled to digest.

Moritz gazed at her sadly but offered no words, instead turning back to the monitor. "Our strongest knight has fallen."

The others in the command room looked devastated. They'd counted on Finn to defeat the Scumbag Knight, but he'd been bested. The other high-ranking Demonic Knights had likewise lost their lives in the battle. Worse, Arcadia's reactor had been destroyed. There was virtually no way to come back from this.

Arcadia glanced at Mia, then turned his bloodshot eye on Moritz. "It can't end like this. I won't accept it." Even with all their losses, and the odds against them, he wouldn't back down.

Moritz shook his head with a haunted expression. "It's over. We've lost. There's no point fighting them anymore."

"We have *not* lost!" Arcadia shrieked at him. "Under the waves all those years, I dreamed only of destroying those filthy machines and annihilating old humanity along with them! You cannot begin to fathom how long I spent down there—long enough for anyone to lose their mind! Anyway, we still have some hope left." His gaze turned again to Mia, who had crumpled to the floor in tears.

Moritz choked out a derisive laugh at Arcadia; their defeat was inevitable. "Your fortress is sinking. I doubt it'll ever see the world above the waves again."

"Then I'll just have to absorb all the demonic essence leaking out and completely destroy the place these lowlifes call home! As long as I have the princess with me, we will be victorious. We cannot possibly fall to them."

Everyone in the room held their breath, shocked at Arcadia's scorched-earth plan. His desperation to achieve victory for new humanity at all costs made Moritz suspicious.

"If you ruin the planet, there will be no future left for the empire," he reminded Arcadia.

"The empire?" Arcadia's mouth narrowed in a crescent-shaped grin. "I've never had any interest in your empire or its people."

"What?! You told us that you'd help us win this war! That we had to fight to protect our citizens!"

Arcadia gazed at him without interest. "You're nothing but impure specimens. The only true member of new humanity among you is the princess. Anyway, I never lied to you. What I said about the world being safe for you if the empire won was true. But now that it has come to this..."

Moritz's mouth hung agape. He could scarcely believe what he was hearing. The empire was insignificant to Arcadia. "Y-you're saying you deceived me? Tricked me into killing my own father?"

"You could say that, yes. Unfortunately, you were far less useful than I'd hoped," replied Arcadia.

Moritz gnashed his teeth, brows knitting together. He yanked his sword out and threw himself at Arcadia. "You monster!"

"So that's how you really feel. Glad we cleared the air."

Moritz's blade failed to reach its mark. Arcadia's magic thrust him back and threw him into a wall. He sank to the floor soon after.

The command room erupted in chaos. Soldiers rushed to their emperor's aid, then turned their weapons on Arcadia. "Protect His Imperial Majesty!"

Arcadia's magic easily forced them back. Once they were sufficiently subjugated, he drifted over to Mia, who was still sobbing on the floor. "Princess, I am so sorry. I should have been able to prevent this, but instead the royal army overran us. Regardless, we must get you to safety."

Though he'd been cold and unfeeling with Moritz and the other imperial soldiers, Arcadia was incredibly kind and attentive to Mia. He considered her his mistress, worthy of prioritizing over all else, since she'd awakened as a full-fledged member of new humanity.

The other Demonic Creatures in the room circled Mia, sharing Arcadia's desire to whisk her away from the dangerous battlefield.

Mia swallowed her tears and shot to her feet. Her gaze focused on the monitor, which was locked on Arroganz. She watched it yank Finn's longsword from the fortress's deck.

Her eyes went dark, all light snuffed out. "Arcadia," she said.

"Y-yes?! What is it, Your Imperial Highness?"

Mia's eyes darted over to him. She let the hate growing inside her fester, overwhelming all other thoughts and feelings. "Help me avenge Sir Knight."

"What? B-but we have to get you away from here."

"No! That's not what I want!" Mia shouted, unleashing a shock wave that ripped through the command room, leaving a large crack in the monitor on the wall. Only true members of new humanity could wield such power.

Sensing that Mia had unlocked her full potential, Arcadia bowed his head subserviently. "As you wish. But I must ask, are you certain about this?"

"Yes. As long as I can avenge him, I don't care what happens to me."

"Don't do it!" cried Moritz, having regained consciousness while Arcadia and Mia spoke. "The war's already over! If you keep going—"

"It's not over!" Mia snapped back, the tears flowing anew. She glared at Moritz, her whole face pinched with anger. "Not yet. It won't end until I take my revenge. I'm going to make that murderer suffer the same way I've suffered." She clutched her chest as if the pain was too much to bear.

"Trust me, I will take care of everything." Arcadia's jaw cracked wide open, and he leaped forward, swallowing Mia whole. She didn't even struggle.

Moritz shook his head in disbelief. "What're you doing?"

After consuming Mia, Arcadia absorbed the other Demonic Creatures as well. His body swelled, expanding so rapidly that it fissured. Mia's naked upper body appeared from a crack, rising from the belly button up; it was completely covered in a silver coating.

She threw her arms open wide. A black, tar-like substance flew through the air and gathered inside Arcadia's body, which grew and grew.

Mia didn't speak. Instead, Arcadia's joyful voice echoed through the air. "Princess, together we shall destroy old humanity's descendants!"

Mia's form was like a silver sculpture, and when her eyes cracked open, they shone red as rubies. She and Arcadia burst through the ceiling. Unable to intervene, Moritz watched helplessly as they left.

"I can't believe this. What have I done?" he murmured.



As he battled his own regret, his cane rolled across the floor and bumped his feet. It was the same cane that Carl had so loved using during his reign.

When the destruction of Arcadia's reactor was reported, everyone on the *Licorne* rejoiced at the victory. Their joy soon faded, however. They were all dumbstruck by what was happening before them.

Noelle was the first to draw herself to her feet. "What's going on?" she asked, staring out the window. Her voice was quiet initially but increased considerably in volume. "What's happening?!"

The reactor's destruction should've ended the entire war, but the battle was still unfolding. Neither side had backed down. The imperials refused to accept defeat, and the royal army had no option but to hold their ground on the field. That wasn't the only thing that alarmed the *Licorne*'s passengers, though. A foreboding, black, barbed object had leaped out of the fortress. Its shape was almost starlike, and its size continually expanded; at this point, it measured over ten meters.

Cleare magnified the image on their monitor. "That's Arcadia's core!" Her voice cracked through the room like a whip. "He's absorbed Mia into himself!"

Her description was accurate. Mia's upper body protruded from the starshaped monster, covered in a layer of silver and eyes gleaming red.

Marie hugged her staff to her chest. "Why would he absorb Mia?!"

"I don't have the data necessary to offer an answer," said Cleare. "But this is very bad. We may have destroyed his reactor, but that caused an outpouring of demonic essence that only multiplied the monsters on their side."

Demonic essence still issued from the spot where Arcadia's reactor was presumably located. It concentrated into clumps, giving shape to the monsters. The very presence of airborne demonic essence seemed to attract a throng of additional monsters, swelling their total numbers.

"Crap!" Cleare said as she analyzed the incoming data. "The situation's worse than I thought. Arcadia's core—or whatever it's become now—is ridiculously

powerful. It absorbed an insane amount of demonic essence. And if you can believe it, it's still growing by taking in Demonic Creatures and Demonic Suit fragments."

"Give us specifics," Angie demanded. "How strong is this thing?"

"I'll put it like this—as strong as Arcadia's main cannon, firing continuously."

Angie gaped, wide-eyed. "But we sank his fortress! How can he still be that powerful?!"

"He can only fight for a limited amount of time using this form, unlike when his fortress was functioning," Cleare explained. "The problem is that he can rampage until he uses up every last bit of the demonic essence he absorbed."

The reactor had been created by solidifying a massive amount of demonic essence. Upon destruction, it began leaking all that essence into the air. Arcadia's core had absorbed most of it. That gave the core ridiculous power that, if Cleare's analysis was correct, approximated the power of the fortress's main cannon invested with unlimited firing potential. It would be short-lived, though; it was like a candle flaring before it went out. Arcadia would eventually run out of fuel.

On top of it all, the demonic essence Arcadia hadn't absorbed was now pumping out endless monsters. Alongside Arcadia, they could cause untold destruction and devastation to the royal army.

Marie sniffled, her gaze dropping to the floor. "I thought it was finally over."

It seemed unfair that Arcadia's core somehow had more power than the fortress itself. Their side had already lost all their shield ships, most of their spaceships, and over half their army.

Arcadia's core continued absorbing whatever it could, powering up more and more.

"Unfortunately, I don't know if we can beat Arcadia with the strength we have left," said Cleare, running the calculations herself.

Monsters already surrounded the *Licorne*. Their allies desperately fought back as much as they could, but the enemy's numbers were too great. The royal

forces couldn't handle them.

Angie gritted her teeth. "Is there really nothing else we can do? There has to be something!"

"Everyone, please help me however you can," Livia said suddenly, standing up straight and staring directly ahead.

Her sudden request stunned everybody. What in the world could she be planning?

Angle shared the others' surprise, but she believed in Livia completely. "What are you going to do?" she asked.

Livia clasped Angie's outstretched hands in hers. "My power can take care of the monsters," she replied.

During their first year at the academy, while they were aboard the royal family's ship, Livia's strange powers had done a number on an enormous beast. Everyone realized immediately that that was what she was referring to.

"Ah—you mean what you did against the Principality back then?" Angie nodded thoughtfully. She shot Cleare a questioning glance. "If you can repeat that, it should work."

"It's possible," Cleare confirmed. "We have the necessary apparatus aboard the *Licorne*. The bigger problem is the strain it'll put on you, Liv. You won't be able to do it alone; Angie'll have to help out too. And of course, Rie, I expect you to have their backs."

"Don't treat me like an afterthought!" Marie groused. "B-but, sure, I'll help out."

Angie nodded. "I don't mind helping either." Her eyes moved to Noelle.

"Yeah, I've rested plenty," Noelle said confidently. "I'll pitch in too."

"Thank you, all of you," said Livia. "Cleary, if you would, please?"

Several images popped up around Cleare. "Liv, this'll hinge on you. Nelly, you're going to regulate the Sacred Tree's energy. And Rie...just do whatever you can with the Saint-power stuff you've got." It wasn't a particularly nice way to phrase it, but everyone let her continue. "Angie, you'll support Liv. Make

sure this doesn't break her."

"Of course. That's all I can really do," said Angie.

"I told you this'll take a heavy toll on Liv, right? Just to be clear, your role is important."

Angie nodded. "I know. Whatever happens, I'll have her back."

"This enemy is above and beyond what we faced in our war against the Principality," Cleare reminded them all. "But the *Licorne* is a much more powerful ship, and we have the Sacred Tree providing extra energy. I expect you all to contribute whatever you can."

Everyone on the ship—including Yumeria, Kyle, and Carla—nodded.

"Good. Then let's get this thing started."

As the operation began, faint light wrapped around the *Licorne*. The Sacred Tree also glowed, feeding energy into the ship.

Livia clasped her hands as if praying, her gaze focused ahead. "Thank you, everyone," she said again as her body gave off a subtle radiance.

Angie wrapped her arms around Livia. "I'll help too," she repeated. "Do it, Cleare."

"Just let me have five minutes," Cleare answered. "I promise I'll give you all the support I can, but I need that long to get everything ready. My biggest concern is that the enemy's already set its sights on us."

The monsters outside must've sensed that the *Licorne* was powering up for something, because an enormous mass of them had charged toward the ship.

An immense star-shaped object had pierced Arcadia's deck and appeared above it. A grotesque eye sat at its center, the same kind all Demonic Creatures had. From its forehead—assuming such a being *had* that body part—protruded a young woman's form.

"Master, the situation is even more dangerous than before," said Luxion.

Mere breathing was absolute agony, but I managed to crane my neck to peer

at Mia's body integrated into Arcadia's grotesque form. She was covered in a silver film, her eyes like rubies and her body entirely naked.

"Wow, Mia. You're showing an awful lot of skin," I summoned all my willpower to joke. "Finn'd be heartbroken." I broke into a coughing fit, and blood spilled from my mouth again.

"How dare you kill Sir Knight!" Mia screeched, her ruby eyes focused on me. She wasn't at all like I remembered.

The sharp points along the base of her body extended and fired at me.

Luxion was piloting Arroganz in my stead; it slid across the floor, evading Mia's attack. "Master, I cannot support you adequately. Due to all the damage Arroganz sustained, it is unable to use its full potential. I recommend retreating."

"She'll never let us retreat," I said, reaching my trembling hands toward the controls. I couldn't dredge up the strength to grasp them properly.

Taking two doses of the performance enhancer had dealt almost fatal damage to my body. I was completely useless. There was only one choice.

"Well, guess this was smart planning on my part. Glad I saved my final trump card till the end," I said.

"No—it is too dangerous!" Luxion roared at me angrily. "Do you really want to kill yourself?"

I didn't want to die, but I knew I'd regret not using my last remaining shot in this battle.

"It's the only way," I said.

I didn't know whether Mia had willingly been absorbed or if Arcadia had done that without her consent, but in the end it didn't matter.

Mia's movements were awkward and stilted. Below her, Arcadia placatingly said, "Princess, please try to calm down so you can take your revenge." Brave had said he detested Arcadia's core, but to Mia at least, Arcadia spoke with adoring reverence.

Mia kept firing spikes from her body until they absolutely covered the deck.

Arroganz continued to speed away, trying to avoid them all, but she eventually cornered us. Thorns sank into Arroganz's right arm, pinning it to the deck.

"Purging right arm," said Luxion.

As soon as he disposed of it, we were on the move again.

"Arroganz is falling to pieces too." My vision hazed over. Before I lost consciousness, I gave Luxion an order. I knew he'd oppose it, but it was the only option we had left. "Luxion, the performance enhancer."

He hesitated, reluctant even to acknowledge what I'd said. "For your own safety, I cannot permit that." I knew he'd find whatever reason he could to deny me.

"You're really going to throw our chance at victory away after we've come so far?"

"No matter what you say—"

Before he finished talking, we both noticed a sudden change in the foe. Arcadia had torn his gaze from us and focused on something in the distance. "That white ship there is trying something. Princess, it's a threat!"

Mia turned her attention toward the vessel he was referring to.

The *Licorne*—they were looking at the *Licorne*. I knew Mia would recognize it and realize who was aboard. My gut twisted with anxiety.

"The Licorne," she murmured, now focused on it.

"D-don't!" I screamed.

She smiled coldly at me, probably thinking that this was the perfect revenge after I took Finn from her. "The people you love most are aboard the *Licorne*, aren't they? Good. Then I'll give you a taste of my pain!" She instantly began firing on the ship.

"W-wait, please!" I called to her in vain. As much as I wanted to stop her, my body wouldn't even move.

She stared down at me. "No. Stay there. You can watch as the people you love die. Then you'll know exactly how I felt when you took my knight from

Given all the monsters crowding around it, the *Licorne* was in a precarious position.

Noelle braced herself and raised her right hand in the air. "You'll go no further!" Her Priestess's crest lit up.

A mirror image of it manifested in the sky over the *Licorne*, producing a number of shimmering emerald magic circles. Together, those created a barrier that deflected the monster attacks. The ones who slammed against the barrier disintegrated into puffs of black smoke that quickly disappeared.

Yumeria wrapped her arms around the Sacred Tree Sapling. "Please, offer us what strength you can," she whispered to it.

At her pleading, its leaves rustled, although there was no breeze inside the ship. The tree shone brighter, lighting up Noelle's crest in turn.

"Output increasing!" Cleare announced. "Just hold out three more minutes!"

Noelle clenched her jaw through the pain. She'd kept the monsters from overrunning them, but there were too many for her shield alone to destroy. "This might be tough."

The Republic ship pulled up alongside them. Noelle realized instantly that it could only be her sister.

"Lelia?!" she gasped.

A Priestess's crest, somewhat similar in design to Noelle's, lit the sky above their ship. Lelia's face appeared on the *Licorne*'s monitor. "If you're trying something, you could at least have had the decency to contact me. I'll help you out. Let's end this stupid war already." Her face was deathly pale, indicating that she was pushing herself past her limits to the same extent Noelle was.

The Alzer Republic's ship deployed a red Armor that began slicing through nearby monsters. "I swear I'll protect you, milady!" Loic's voice rang out. Accessing his own crest, he harnessed some of the Sacred Tree's power.

Marie's head jerked as another ship pulled up nearby. "No way. Hertrude?!"

The ships' communications networks linked, and Hertrude appeared on the monitor. "I have come to aid you, Saint, but don't forget I expect you to pay me back with interest." Despite Hertrude's haughty manner, her ship was a wreck. She was sticking her neck out to help them.

"Thank you," said Marie. "Thank you so much!"

"You always throw me off," Hertrude grumbled, cheeks flaming. She cut off communication.

"Two more minutes!" Cleare announced.

They were managing to hold out thanks to Lelia and Loic, but Arcadia's attention now turned toward them. He'd been fighting Arroganz on the fortress deck, but the *Licorne* had become his new target.

"Great. He's realized we're a danger to him!" Cleare cursed under her breath.

A mass of red-black light gathered around Arcadia, and he unleashed it toward them—an attack with the same strength as his fortress's main cannon. Before it reached them, however, Fact and the other AI ships darted in front of them.

"I-It's you guys," Marie gasped.

The power of Arcadia's attack quickly destroyed the AI ships at the front of the formation, and each one sank. Fact's remote unit linked into their communications network and appeared on their monitor.

"We evaluated you all unfairly," he said. "I have adjusted my evaluation to reflect your true capabilities."

Typical. Even in the last moments before his own destruction, Fact was rambling about evaluations and what have you.

"This isn't the time for that!" Cleare snapped at him.

"There is no better time for it," he argued. "All our efforts had a purpose. We know that now. No, I should rephrase that: *You* showed us that."

Fact was the last AI remaining. Following exposure to the combined force of the monster attacks and Arcadia's blast, explosions broke out across his carrier ship. Static crackled over the monitor. Before he cut out completely, Fact added, "It must have been fate...that we awoke...when we did."

Then the connection was severed. A much larger explosion enveloped the aircraft carrier, taking down a number of monsters in the process. The carrier lost altitude quickly and dropped toward the sea, flames dancing around its charred remains.

"They fulfilled their duty to the last," Cleare said quietly. "Liv, I'm ready whenever."

The time everyone had bought the *Licorne* had given them a chance.

Livia began to glow, her hair fluttering in the air despite the lack of wind aboard the ship. She slowly opened her eyes; they were shining too. "All right."

Chapter 17:

The Strongest Protagonist

"H ERE GOES," Livia muttered.

The apparatus from the royal ship that had been implanted on the *Licorne* responded to her. The *Licorne* amplified her powers, drawing on the energy it received from the Sacred Tree.

"Well, this is beyond what I expected," Cleare said, gobsmacked.

Suffused with Livia's impressive power, the *Licorne* was wrapped in faint white light. None of the nearby monsters could withstand the radiance. Any within a several-meter radius of the *Licorne*—and even some farther away than that—instantly disintegrated, reduced to wisps of black smoke and unable to regain their form. The *Licorne*'s luminance remained undiminished even after their defeat.

"This level of power is mind-boggling," said Angie with awe. "Livia, what in the world...?"

Livia smiled at her. "I can't explain it myself. All I can say is that, right now...I want to use this power to help Mr. Leon." She'd rather have avoided using these powers if she could help it, but for Leon's sake, she wouldn't hesitate.

Livia stretched her left hand out, and the *Licorne* shone even more brilliantly. A tremor ran through the ship as it struggled to withstand her energy output.

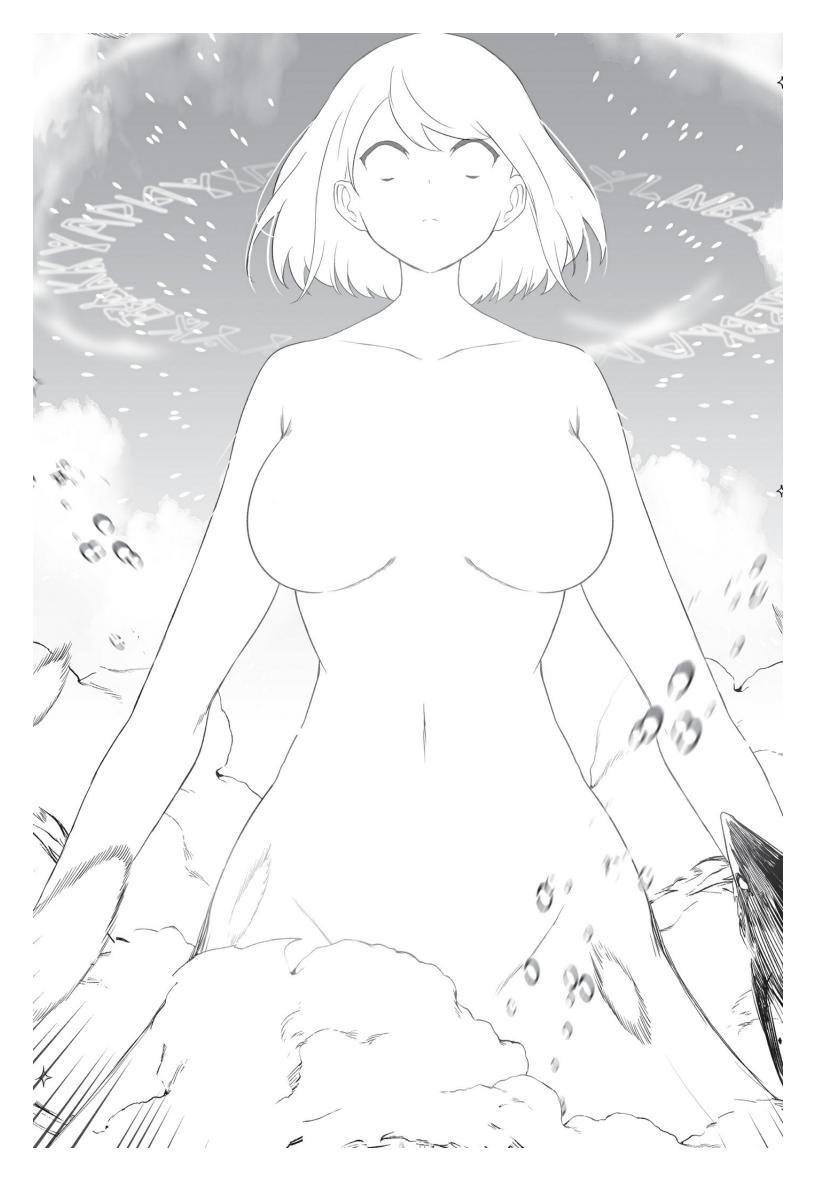
Carla clung to Marie. "The whole ship is shaking. What's going on?!" she squeaked in alarm.

It didn't matter that no one had ever taught Livia how her powers worked. She moved automatically, as if the answer came to her naturally. Her instincts were all she needed to guide her.

White particles of light gathered around the *Licorne*, clustering into a shape that resembled Livia herself. It didn't include all the details of its producer, but it possessed her basic outline. Its eyes glowed blue-white, and with the *Licorne* at its center, it towered over everything.

Any monsters that tried to attack it were instantly annihilated, but Livia's form phased through ally ships and left them untouched.

Voices flooded through their communications network.



"It's almost like the Saint. No, a goddess!"

"Yes, the goddess of victory!"

"All hail the goddess!"

Of course, only at a time like this would the Holfortians recognize Livia as their victory goddess. They all cheered as she effortlessly vanquished the monsters assailing them. But though Livia's power was impressive, it took a great toll on her. If she didn't brace herself and focus, she'd likely lose consciousness completely.

Angie kept her arms tight around Livia, providing physical as well as mental support. "Don't push yourself too much," she said.

"Thank you, but this is the one time I have to do just that."

"Then use my power too." Angie squeezed Livia's hand.

Outside, red particles of light gathered around the *Licorne*. They clustered together, forming a red dress around the giant Livia replica. When she thrust her left hand forward, several magic circles manifested in the air around her over a diameter of several hundred meters. Arrows of light shot from them; tens of thousands showered down on Arcadia.

Panicked, Arcadia launched a magical barrier to protect himself and his surroundings. The arrows soon burst past it, exploding on impact with the fortress. It had no way to protect itself any longer, and Livia's single attack reduced it to floating wreckage, a fragment of its former glory. Her power's ability to cause destruction was overwhelming.

Marie gawked. "Wh-whoa. If we keep it up, we might really win this thing."

Livia wasn't so optimistic. "We don't have much time," she said. "We need to retrieve Mr. Leon quickly." She could see Arroganz's broken form on the monitor.

Snapping her eyes shut, Livia linked her vision to the giant outside to see the entire scene around them directly.

"Found him!" she said.

Thankfully, Arcadia had been focused on her and the *Licorne* and hadn't touched Arroganz.

Livia's voice filled with fury. "Get away from Mr. Leon!" she shouted.

"Get away from him!" shrieked the giant Livia replica. Its enormous hand shot ahead toward Arcadia.

Mia thrust her own hands outward. "Is that...Miss Olivia?!" She conjured a barrier several layers thick to protect herself, but even that was no match for the giant Livia.

Arcadia struggled to comprehend the ridiculous power the enemy was exhibiting. "What is that thing?! Are these really old humanity's descendants?! Impossible, simply impossible. Not even new humanity could wield this level of magic!" He abandoned his attempts to analyze the foe's data. "Princess, wasting time will only weaken us. We must unleash another of our most powerful attacks."

Arcadia meant the one with the same strength as his main cannon. Mia had enough power to discharge it again; the only reason they hadn't been able to unleash it in quick succession was that she hadn't yet absorbed enough demonic essence from the air.

"I have located the *Licorne*. It is in the center—no, the chest—of that giant. If we aim for it and destroy it, the giant should disappear," said Arcadia.

Following his advice, Mia took aim with her right hand while unleashing a torrent of spikes. "I have no grudge against you or the other girls, but I cannot allow what happened to go unpunished! Let me have my vengeance, since you stole my knight from me!"

Red-black light gathered at her palm and hurtled toward its target. Mia had seen the destruction it could cause, but this time she concentrated even more power, making the attack more potent than before.

Yet despite Mia's confidence, the giant Livia's hand knocked the energy ball aside. It changed direction and exploded in the distance, sending up a plume of seawater. The intense shock wave that resulted caused an outright tsunami

below them.

Arcadia's eye bugged in rage and horror, his whole body vibrating. "This is outrageous! No one should be able to deflect such a powerful attack so easily!" he howled with incandescent fury.

Livia spread both arms out wide. "I'm going to save you now, Mr. Leon," her voice echoed.

A thousand magic circles formed, launching another powerful offensive at Mia: a combination of types of concentrated magic in the forms of fire, water, electricity, and light. Mia accelerated into the air to evade the attacks, but Livia's magic honed in on her and gave chase. Her attempts to combat it by unleashing her own magic were futile. Several hundred blasts rocked her body, sending her flailing.

"Gah!" Mia cried.

Having safely chased Mia away, the giant Livia wrapped her arms around the fortress deck to protect Arroganz. Since the giant was only a simplified replica, its face was too simple to clearly represent its controller's emotions. However, knowing Livia's love for Leon, she had to be smiling. Her hands were graceful and gentle as they cupped Arroganz.

Mia couldn't stand it. "It's not fair for you to have your partner when you murdered mine!"

She unleashed another of her most powerful attacks. In the same instant, a second woman manifested along the giant Livia's back, this one with much longer hair. The Livia part of the giant bent forward, curling in on herself to make it easier for the new woman who'd sprouted from her base to move. Much like Mia, this figure appeared only from the waist up. Her hands shot forward to intercept Mia's attack, rocking the sky with a powerful explosion. When the smoke settled, her body appeared completely unharmed.

None of it made any sense. Arcadia trembled with rage. "How can someone in this age rival the power of myself and the princess? There shouldn't be anybody out there who can compete with new humanity!"

Most of all, it bewildered him that the royal army hadn't opened with this

instead of squandering its own people.

Mia was incredibly vexed by the giant's overwhelming power. Try as she might to escape it, it managed to capture her. "Were you holding back against us all this time? I hate you even more for that!"

She managed to escape by firing off everything she could, launching herself higher into the sky. From high above the giant, she turned her sights back on Arroganz.

"You'll soon know how heartbreaking it is to watch the person you love die before your very eyes." If even one of the attacks she launched reached Arroganz, it would be fatal.

The giant Livia leaned forward, using her own body to shield Arroganz. Mia's spikes and blasts pelted her.

"Keep hounding them, princess!" Arcadia said, adding his power into the mix to assail the giant before them.

The second giant torso thrust an arm toward Mia, knocking her away. This time, it was Angie's voice that cracked the air, her words burning with intense fury. "Anyone who messes with Leon will have to answer to me." She managed to snatch Mia out of the air, then flung her toward the sea.

Unable to resist, Mia plunged into the ocean, the momentum of Angie's throw sending her far from the battlefield. It was unnerving just how much stronger they were than her.

Tears streaked Mia's cheeks. "This is so unfair!" she wailed. "I can't even avenge my knight!" She gritted her teeth, hands curling into tight fists. Finally, she burst back out of the water. "Even if it kills me, I'll at least have my revenge for—"

Her voice cut off. There was something odd about the enemy; the giant's outline had grown indistinct somehow. It seemed like she might disappear at any second.

"Aha. There's a limit to how long they can keep that up!" Arcadia declared, gleeful at his realization. "Performing such a powerful spell requires equally substantial energy. Even with the Sacred Tree to help them, they cannot keep

something like this up for hours at a time." It was a great relief to him to watch Livia's form dissolve and disappear.

Mia raced back toward Arcadia's deck. The battle had damaged her and Arcadia severely; they had shrunk in size, their outer layers largely carved away by Livia and Angie's attacks. Having used so much energy, it was impossible to maintain their previous enormous form. But diminished as they were, they were still powerful enough to finish off Arroganz.

"There," Mia said. "Now there's no one else to get in our way." She was as eager as Arcadia to put Leon out of his misery.

"Luxion, what's our situation?" I asked. Unable to move my body, I couldn't very well look myself to find out.

"I gathered all the drones that survived. They are repairing Arroganz as we speak," he said.

One unloaded a container and attached it to Arroganz. It wouldn't be a full repair, but at least Arroganz would be functional.

My mind wandered to Julius and the others. "Are the guys okay?"

"Due to the density of airborne demonic essence, I cannot assess their current status."

"All the same, I hope they made it," I said. "I'd feel awful if any of them died." My stomach knotted with worry.

The idiot brigade and I were inextricably linked, whether we liked it or not. Oftentimes I didn't like it, but they weren't so bad. When I played the game, I'd hated them. It wasn't until we'd actually interacted over a long time period that I changed my mind. They were good guys—better than I'd expected, really. I had hoped we could grow even closer.

I lifted my chin so I could see the monitor. Through it, I viewed Arroganz's hand, still tightly clenched around Brave's longsword. "If Finn were still alive, I know he'd ask me to save Mia." That was more than I could realistically achieve, but I couldn't help wanting to do so all the same.

"Master," Luxion said in a scolding tone, "it's not necessary for you to do that! You have already gone far past your limits."

He was right about that, but I knew I couldn't abandon Mia. If I did, I'd never be able to face Finn in the afterlife.

"Whatever the case, we have to stop her," I insisted. Livia's impressive display of power had at least bought us extra time, but she hadn't been able to destroy Arcadia.

As if on cue, Mia touched down on the deck. The spikes that once protruded from the base of her body were gone. Her form was all that remained. It was still coated in silver, and black armor plating now covered her. A lopsided breastplate shielded only the left side of her chest, and from it protruded Arcadia's grotesque eye.

The drones surged forward to protect me, but Mia destroyed them easily enough. Although her form was much smaller than before, she'd have no trouble killing me.

"Luxion, this is my last order for you," I said. "Administer the enhancer."

I had to stop Mia here. If I didn't, there was no telling what she'd do after I died. She was too emotionally vulnerable. Arcadia could probably get in her head and talk her into annihilating Holfort next. Before that happened, I had to summon my strength to stop her.

Luxion didn't respond. He was probably looking for a reason to refuse my command, so I told him, "Things won't wrap up nicely unless we finish this together. We've got to save Mia to make sure everyone gets a happy ending. Or, I guess, a better-than-the-alternative ending."

Looking at this in game terms, it was as close to a bad ending as could be. We'd have cleared the game, but the way things went down would leave a bad taste in the player's mouth. That kind of ending fit me perfectly, though.

"Master, will you find happiness by doing this?" Luxion asked.

Happiness? Yeah, I guess I'll be happy when all's said and done. I forced the best smile I could. "You know, I've often wondered why we reincarnated into this world. I figured there must be some reason, right? I mean, if not, oh well.

That would just mean we had to make one ourselves. I couldn't rescue everyone, but as long as I save as many people as possible, that's what matters. That's the happiest ending I could hope for."

"Is that the mentality one must have when sacrificing themselves? I cannot fathom it, Master. You are a fool."

"What, you didn't know that already? I've been a fool since the very beginning."

Souls were said to continue reincarnating until they reached true enlightenment. That was why someone lowly, like me, had to reincarnate over and over again. That's a Buddhist concept, right? I couldn't remember. Ah, well, doesn't matter.

When it came down to it, thinking that my life had meaning was my main salvation. The objective reality of that didn't matter. All I cared about was feeling like I'd served some purpose.

"Please, partner," I said. "I'm pretty sure this'll be the last order I give you."

"I cannot permit it. If you do this, Master, your life...your life will..." I glimpsed what I thought was sadness in Luxion's eye, but surely I had to be seeing things.

"If you can't permit the order, consider it a favor instead. Help me do this, partner."

His robotic voice trembled as he stammered, "I-I will administer the performance enhancer."

This was my third time receiving it. After the needle bit into my skin, a wave of intense pain soon followed. My body couldn't withstand it; I started vomiting blood. Fortunately, that soon abated, and I felt unbelievably light. The agony moments earlier was gone, and energy surged into my muscles, which had been too weak to do anything.

I grabbed Arroganz's controls, forced it to its feet, and lifted Brave's longsword.

Mia bristled when she saw that. "Give that back! It belongs to Sir Knight and Bravey!"

Now that I felt better, I could finally respond the way I normally would. "Come take it if you want it so badly, you crazy spitfire!"

Arroganz braced itself with its two new legs, and I swung the longsword at Mia. Despite how small she now was, her hand safely caught my attack.

"Luxion, can we separate Mia and Arcadia?"

"Investigation in progress," Luxion answered. He'd started analyzing the data coming in from her before I even asked.

Mia kicked off from the ground, leaping into the air. She drew her fist back and swung wide at me. I deflected the blow with the flat of my sword, surprised to find how much power was behind her bare fists.

Back inside Arcadia's fortress, Finn cracked his eyes open. Wincing, he clapped his right hand over the bleeding stub that had once been his left arm.

"What am I doing here?" He climbed to his feet, hissing in pain. "Kurosuke?!" Somehow, he already knew that Brave was gone. A tear escaped the corner of his eye. "You stupid idiot."

Brave's sacrifice was the only reason Finn was still alive. Memories raced back to him...

Finn was furious at himself for the part he'd played in the reactor's destruction. Although there was no point fighting anymore, he resolved to chase after Leon and put an end to him.

The reactor was on the cusp of a violent explosion.

"Even if it's the last thing I do..." Finn seethed, words dripping with resentment.

He'd already forgotten his original goal. His single-minded hostility unnerved Brave, but regardless of either's feelings, they couldn't back down. They had to fight for Mia's sake.

"This is where we part ways," said Brave.

"Kurosuke?"

Before Finn could ask what he meant, he was unceremoniously launched out of Brave. A magical barrier wrapped around him, gently guiding him down to the ground. Because of the enhancer he'd taken, he hadn't even noticed that he'd lost his left arm at some point during the battle.

"Why?" Finn demanded. "Why are you betraying me?!" He reached toward Brave with his only remaining hand.

"Because you'll die if we keep fighting," Brave answered, a mixture of embarrassment and heartache in his voice. "I want you to keep living. That's why this is goodbye."

In the course of the battle, Brave had far surpassed his limits. He knew he couldn't defeat Arroganz, which was why he at least wanted to spare Finn's life.

"Brave, don't go!" Finn clutched desperately at the empty air, as if he could pull Brave back to him.

He almost thought he saw his partner grin back. "Don't you mean 'Kurosuke'?" Brave paused, then added, "You know, I never actually hated it when you called me that. Farewell, Partner."

With that, he sped after Leon.

Thanks to Brave, Finn had escaped with his life intact before losing consciousness.

Fresh tears rolled down his cheeks. "I wanted you to survive too. I wanted the two of us to be—Mia? Where's Mia?!" He had no idea how long he'd been out or what had happened in the meantime.

Finn lurched forward, scrambling toward the command room.

Chapter 18:

The Truth About the Former Emperor

THE WHOLE FORTRESS trembled and shook around Finn as he finally reached the command room. He was shocked at the destruction he found inside, including a jagged hole in the ceiling.

All the soldiers were on the floor, unconscious. Among them, a sobbing Moritz clung to his cane.

"Your Imperial Majesty?" Finn inched toward him.

Moritz lifted his head, wiping away tears. "Finn? You're still alive? This is all my fault. I fell prey to Arcadia's deception and killed my own father. All this is because of me." The color had completely drained from his face, and the way he spoke made it sound like he was about to take his own life.

Finn was angry about the part Moritz had played in assassinating Carl, but he reined in his emotions and gazed down at the cane in the emperor's hands. "That's the old man's, right?" He was sure he'd seen Carl use it all the time.

Moritz held it out to him. "I don't need this anymore. You were my father's favorite. You should have it."

Finn gently took it in his hand, recalling how often Carl had used it. "What's this?" he wondered aloud, twisting a gem atop the cane. The decoration glowed, producing a hologram of Carl.

"Father?!" Moritz cried.

Finn shook his head. "This is a recorded image. He can't actually talk to you." Moritz hung his head.

"I assume Moritz is seeing this, or maybe someone else. Perhaps even that brat Finn, eh?" said the hologram. "I have no way of knowing who'll see this, but I decided to record my dying moments." He'd apparently done this after sustaining his fatal wound.

Finn was a little exasperated that Carl had implemented a function to record messages like this in his cane, but all the same, he watched the hologram with fond nostalgia.

"A Demonic Creature incited my fool of a son, Moritz, to assassinate me. He's an incurable moron who was too reckless to hear me out."

Moritz kept his eyes focused on the floor. He couldn't dispute what his father said about him, disparaging as it was.

"I'd hoped for a peaceful conclusion to the war that took place eons ago between old and new humanity."

At that, Moritz finally lifted his head and met Finn's gaze. "Did you know about this?" he asked.

"No," said Finn. "This is the first I've heard of it. I didn't even learn about the whole war of survival until after he was dead."

The hologram continued. "There are a vast number of Lost Items in Vordenoit. While scouring our records of those, I discovered that the ancients' war still hadn't ended. I knew that we, the descendants of new humanity, would eventually meet old humanity's descendants in battle."

Carl had apparently realized that before everyone else thanks to the relatively large number of Lost Items within Vordenoit's borders. From the way he spoke, it seemed the problem had weighed heavily on his mind.

"I considered overwhelming the opposition with sheer military might, but that was far too merciless for my liking. I struggled over the issue. I thought, if I only I could place my trust in someone in Holfort Kingdom, the two of us could join hands to resolve the matter."

Moritz shook his head in disbelief. "I never realized he'd thought this much about it."

Finn felt likewise. Carl had always seemed shallow to him, preoccupied with fawning over Mia. He'd never known so much else was going on in his head.

"Then," Carl went on, "someone I could trust *did* appear, so I decided to opt for a peaceful resolution instead of a violent one."

Moritz sniffled, fresh tears streaming down his face. "If only I hadn't let Arcadia talk me into this..."

"Unfortunately, my idiot son got in my way, so I have no way of knowing whether our nations will manage to come together or not. I can only hope he and the others involved chose the route of peace. Either way, if my fool son still lives, please make sure to deliver a message to him."

Moritz raised his head.

Carl smiled. "I haven't told you that I have an illegitimate child, an adorable daughter named Miliaris—or Mia, as I call her. I want you to make sure she can live in peace without getting dragged into the imperial family's bloody power struggles. Oh, and if that brat Finn is still alive, tell him I'll curse him from beyond the grave if he makes her cry."

It was so like him to ramble about Mia at the end.

As Moritz grimaced, Finn shook his head. "So much for all the sentimentality."

"Finally, a message for my idiot son: I forgive you."

"What?" Moritz blurted out. His eyes, wide with surprise, met the hologram's.

"It pains me to think of the difficult choice you'll have to face, but you can't escape the responsibility that falls on you. You have to shoulder it, Moritz, as well as whatever consequences come with it. Having said that, as your father, I'm willing to forgive and forget the hand you had in my death."

A wail escaped Moritz, the tears falling fast.

"I'll assume Miliaris is watching this recording as well," Carl went on. "My adorable daughter, I love you dearly. If you wish to know just how much you mean to me, then allow me to explain..."

The hologram was beginning to fade at the edges, just as Carl's consciousness must've faded as his life neared its end. Creating this recording had probably taken everything he had left in him.

As Carl's image dissipated, he added, "Brat—no, I should at least call you by your name. Finn, you'd better make Mia happy."

The hologram cut out after that, leaving Finn crying. His hands formed tight

fists at his sides. "I planned on doing that anyway," he grumbled back at the empty air.

Moritz slowly lifted himself to his feet. "Finn, there's still something I need to do. You should carry out your duty as well."

"Your Imperial Majesty?"

"You need to hurry to wherever Mia is. She was convinced you'd died, and she let Arcadia consume her."

"She what?!"

As the battle with Mia continued, I racked my brain desperately for some way to save her. Someone incorporated into a Demonic Suit that had lost its core could no longer regain their humanity, but it stood to reason that they could do so if the suit core was still intact.

"It has to be possible," I muttered.

I wasn't experiencing pain at all just then. My internal organs had screamed in agony moments before, but I ceased to feel any of it as soon as that third strength-enhancer shot took effect. The drug really was ridiculously powerful, letting me fight again even though I was on the brink of death.

"I'll never forgive you for what you've done," Mia hissed at me, her words dripping with venom. "Never!"

I laughed at her. "Ha! Don't worry, I didn't plan to seek your forgiveness to begin with. Don't you understand that this whole war's already over? All that's left is to rip that stupid core out of you and destroy it. Then I'll have no regrets!"

"You were supposed to be Sir Knight's friend!"

"He came at me trying to kill me too, you know! Anyway, it's done, so stop dragging this out," I said. "Back off. If you don't, Finn will have died for nothing. He put himself on the line to make sure you could go on living. You're throwing his sacrifice away!" I was deliberately antagonizing her.

"How could I possibly stay quiet on the sidelines after watching you kill the man I love?! You didn't have to do it!"

Each of her words was like a knife to the heart. *I didn't want to kill him either, you know!* Life would've been so much easier if I could tell her that, but I couldn't. "People in power have duties they have to carry out. There was no reason to let the empire's hero live. I know he felt the same way," I said.

"You heartless man!"

Finn would've kept fighting for Mia even after Arcadia sank. I'd have done the same in his shoes. How else could we face our fallen comrades? Inability to achieve victory was no excuse to give up the fight. I was bound by invisible ties: my reputation, people's expectations, and more. Although I was just an ordinary man, this world was so far gone that someone as normal as me had no choice but to take up the fight.

"You don't belong out here on the field! Quit resisting and give me that stupid core!" I shouted at Mia.

"Why would I ever listen to you?!"

As long as Arcadia's core was alive, I couldn't die in peace. The war was already over. As far as I was concerned, this was just a bonus stage.

I forced my limbs to move, drawing up the longsword in Arroganz's hands and swinging it down at Mia. She deflected the blow and leaped backward.

"Master, I located the core," Luxion said. "You will need to pinpoint it precisely. If you can, you should be able to separate it from her."

"You think we can save Mia?"

"That is a possibility. However, if your aim is even slightly off, you will hit one of her vital organs instead."

What a pain that Arcadia had positioned himself in such a spot. Although, on second thought, he might've done so to protect her. Still, it made removing Arcadia without killing Mia a tall order. Our target was just too small for an Armor.

"Arroganz can't do it."

Mia's body was so small that Brave's longsword would kill her instantly if it pierced her. None of the other weapons Arroganz could use would work any

better.

My hands hovered over the controls, then gripped them harder. I accelerated toward Mia. She threw both arms forward, palms out. A crackling ball of red-black energy formed, fragmenting and multiplying after she unleashed it. I plunged toward her, avoiding as many of the attacks as I could, but their sheer volume made it impossible to evade them all. Several pierced straight through Arroganz's plating. I raised Brave's longsword, using its flat as a shield.

Arroganz was reaching its limit. Fire sprayed from its back, and electricity crackled along the overloaded machinery in the cockpit. I tossed the longsword to one side and seized Mia with both hands.

Luxion's voice rang out. "Purging the hatch!"

The hatch immediately in front of me was blown away. Outside air rushed into the cockpit. Released from my seat, I lurched forward, grabbing the rifle I'd set beside me.

By the time I'd ducked outside, Mia had already freed herself somewhat, having sliced straight through the fingers of Arroganz's left hand. She tossed them back at me. Then her eyes fell on me, shock registering on her face. Freezing for a split second, she furrowed her brow. The venomous hatred on her adorable face faltered and gave way to fear, if only for a moment. Mia gnashed her teeth, looking for all the world like a feral animal.

I couldn't blame her. Not after the heartache I'd caused her.

"Coming out in person won't do you any good!" she said. Her right hand shot forward, mana coalescing in her palm.

Luxion darted in front of me and deployed a shield. Fire swallowed my vision, black flames engulfing the barrier.

"Master," Luxion called back at me, "I can't keep this up! We have only fifty seconds until I run out of energy to shield you!"

"That's plenty of time." I raised the rifle. Through the scope, I could identify exactly where my target was, thanks to Luxion. He could see past the black flames and locate her—and Arcadia. My finger pulled on the trigger.

The bullet pierced the shield, blasting right through the wall of black fire and leaving a gaping hole in its wake. When it slammed against Mia, it hurled its target backward, ripping the black armor from her body. The silver coating on her skin began to crack, peel, and crumble away.

"Nice rifle, huh? It's a rare, specially made one Luxion altered himself," I said.

Once the flames faded, I extended the rifle's bayonet and approached Mia. She was sprawled on her back. A black mass on the ground beside her pulled itself toward me.

"How dare you do this to the princess," hissed Arcadia. "I'll at least drag you down with me if it's the last thing I do!"

Luxion hovered above my right shoulder, wobbling. "My remote unit's battery is nearing its limit. I expended all my energy on that shield, Master. Please dispose of this refuse quickly."

"You got it." I lifted the rifle and squeezed the trigger without any hesitation.

"Gyaaah!" Arcadia squealed when the bullet pierced him. Black liquid gushed from his open wound as he writhed. His reaction was as good an indication as any that my weapon was effective against him. I added a couple more holes, but the darn thing wouldn't kick the bucket like he was supposed to.

"He's a tough one," I mumbled, pausing to change the magazine.

The creature's enormous eye turned toward me, bloodshot and filled with the bitterest hatred I'd ever seen. "You!" he shrieked. "I'll at least take you!" Sharp spikes formed on the surface of his body before he jumped toward me.

Crap, I thought.

Luxion swung in front of me, trying to protect me. The spikes were coneshaped, sixty centimeters long, but he successfully deflected most of them. "I won't let you kill my master!" He defended me desperately, even as the spikes left numerous marks across his body.

Arcadia grinned devilishly. "Too bad, you lump of scrap metal. Look behind you."

Luxion swiveled to face me. His gaze dropped to the right side of my chest,

where one of the sharp, black cones protruded. It had punctured so deeply that it cut the strap to my backpack, which fell to the ground. My fingers couldn't get a grip on my rifle, which slid from my hand. Strangely, the injury didn't hurt at all. Yet my body still registered the blow, even if my nerves didn't; blood rose up my throat and gushed from my mouth.

"Master?" Luxion looked like he was trembling, but it was more likely my vision swimming. I'd run my body ragged and drained all my strength.

"Now I shall destroy everything!" Arcadia declared gleefully. "At the bare minimum, I will wipe your country off the map! No one's left to stop me!"

The fortress below him and Mia rumbled, summoning the last of its power to unleash its main cannon once more. A red-black energy ball forming at the tip of the fortress's cannon absorbed the demonic essence pouring from Arcadia's core. If no one stopped it, the cannon would fire in moments.

"Don't kid yourself!" I managed to shout, reaching for the dagger at my waist. My hand trembled violently.

Arcadia roared with laughter. "What are you planning to do with that?" He probably thought it was an exercise in futility.

"Something, obviously, or I wouldn't have pulled it out." I took aim and thumbed the button on it, causing the blade to shoot out and bury itself in Arcadia's eye. The magic imbued within it triggered an explosion within Arcadia's body. "Guess you could call it a utility knife. Or dagger. It's a special magical item. Pretty effective, huh?" Blood poured past my lips as I spoke. Not that my words mattered; Arcadia was past listening to me.

"Gyaaaaaaaah!" he screamed.

More black liquid issued from his eye, and a burned smell filled the air. But it was too late. His orders had already reached the fortress, which continued powering up for its final attack.

I sank to my knees.

"Gah ha ha!" Arcadia cackled through his bleeding. "You couldn't finish me off completely!"

"D-dammit..." Of course I'd fail right at the end.

Back on the *Licorne*, Livia and Angie had collapsed to the floor, all their energy spent. Livia had drawn on the full extent of her powers, bringing the *Licorne* itself to its very limits. Its bridge controls had overloaded and were discharging electricity.

"Hurry, everyone! Throw yourselves on the Sacred Tree!" Cleare ordered. "There's an escape hatch built beneath it!" That was why they'd purposely transplanted the sapling to that spot—so they could eject the Sacred Tree if the need arose.

Noelle lifted Livia onto her back, Yumeria and Carla teamed up to carry Angie, and Kyle busied himself readying the apparatus that would eject them from the ship. Marie was the only one not proactively doing something. She stood unmoving, staring out the window in a daze. That was how she saw the redblack energy ball forming and knew Arcadia was powering up his main cannon to fire it again. The *Licorne* had managed to pick up the full conversation between Leon, Luxion, Mia, and Arcadia, so they knew exactly where this was headed.

"Rie, hurry and get your butt over here!" Noelle hollered coarsely, cheeks streaked with tears. She was shaken because Leon had collapsed, heavily injured, on Arcadia's deck. Still, she tried her best to keep it together.

Marie smiled back at Noelle—a woman she considered a friend. She slowly strode toward the Sacred Tree. Kyle and Carla stretched their hands out to welcome her.

"Hurry, Mistress!" said Kyle.

"Yes," Carla chimed in. "We need to get out of here, Lady Marie!"

Both were on the verge of tears themselves.

Marie dropped her staff to grab their extended hands. She squeezed them tight. "Thank you both for everything. Words can't express how grateful I am that you followed and believed in someone like me! Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I only had as much fun as I did because you two were part of my

life."

Kyle and Carla were too taken aback to respond. Marie released their hands, and a thick barrier as transparent as glass sprang up between her and them, separating the Sacred Tree and everyone near it from the rest of the ship. The two collected themselves quickly and started banging the glass with their fists. Their lips moved, but Marie couldn't hear anything they said, since the barrier was completely soundproof.

Marie's gaze darted to Cleare. She was linking herself to the *Licorne*'s communication system, so hers was the only voice audible to Marie.

"Are you sure about this?" Cleare asked.

Marie knelt and picked her staff up again. Leaning it on her shoulder, she stood tall and grinned. "It's the least I can do now, at the end, to clean up my brother's mess. It'll make for good blackmail material next time I see him, so hurry up and get out of here. Rescue him."

"You really are the best sister a brother could ask for," Cleare replied, understanding exactly what Marie intended to do. "Vent the pod." Together with the Sacred Tree, she and the others began to sink downward.

Noelle gaped at Marie in shock. Yumeria sobbed. Kyle and Carla were both wailing, screaming something at her.

Marie smiled at them and waved. Once they were gone, and she was left all alone, she muttered, "Stupid brother. You really screwed this up."

When she turned back toward Arcadia, its main cannon looked ready to fire at any moment.

"Licorne, you're going to help me in this fight," said Marie.

"Switching master to Marie," a robotic voice answered. "Awaiting orders."

Marie grasped her staff in both hands and slammed its butt hard against the floor. Her body began emanating faint light that ruffled her hair. The brighter she shone, the more mana filled the air around her. The radiance of her holy magic was no less magnificent than Livia's.

"We're going to block the enemy's attack. Move in front of the fortress!"

"As you command," the *Licorne* answered. The vessel shuddered and shook as it took position.

Marie's hands clenched the staff. "Please," she whispered to it, "give me your strength. Let me protect everyone."

The staff, necklace, and bracelet emitted light in response to her plea. Three enormous magic circles formed in the air around the *Licorne*, creating a three-layer barrier to withstand the cannon.

Marie had hardly finished preparing these defenses when Arcadia unleashed a blast aimed for Holfort Kingdom's main landmass, which lay just behind her.

Red-black light wrapped around Marie, blotting out her vision. The first barrier shattered all too easily. The *Licorne* shook violently, its metal plating screaming and creaking on all sides. Marie's hands clutched desperately at her staff as she braced herself, feet spread wide so she wouldn't be knocked to the ground.

"Don't...underestimate meeee!"

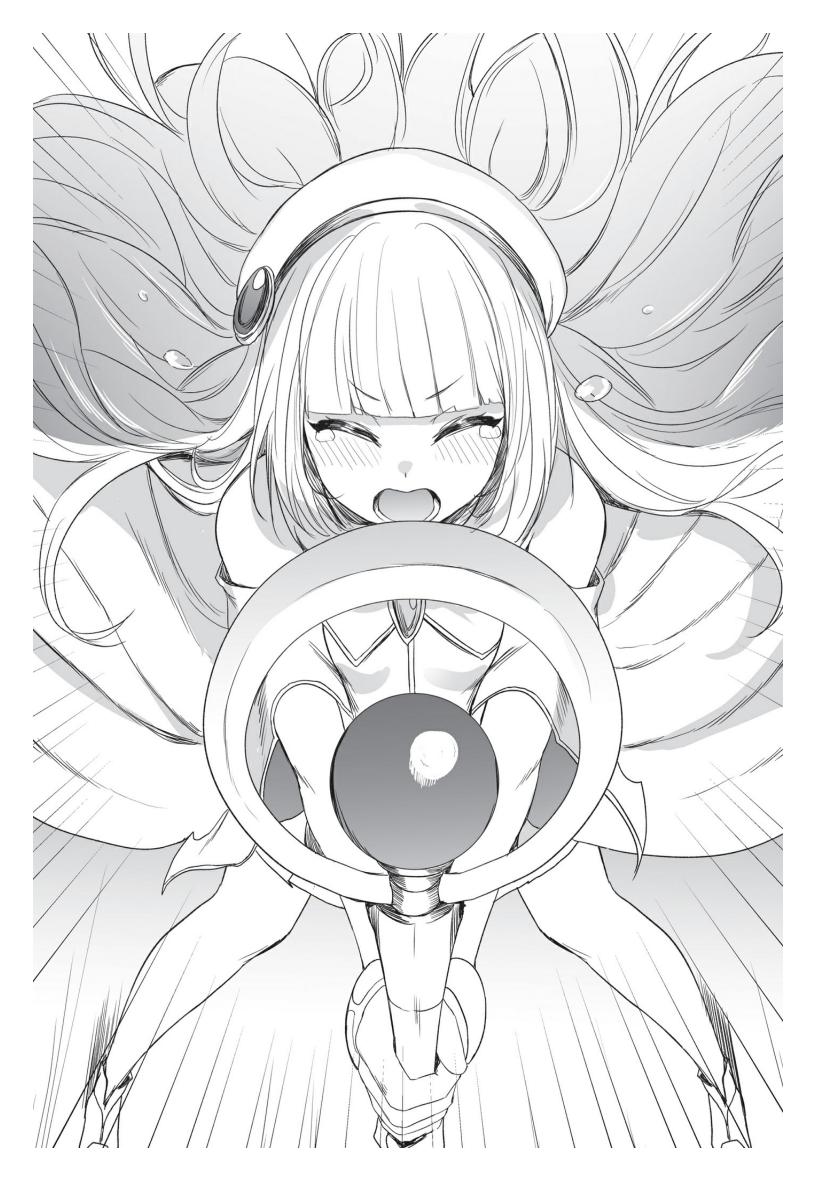
As Marie poured energy into the magic circles, they shone brightly, but the cannon's powerful blast burst through the second shield as well.

Marie's thoughts turned to the events that led her to this point. *I really am hopeless, aren't I?* By reincarnating here, she'd gotten a second chance at life. She'd fallen back into her old ways, though—always leaning on Leon for support, always causing him trouble.

Yet despite her bad habit of letting him coddle her, he'd consistently protected her. He'd sure pissed her off countless times, but looking back now, she was proud to be his sister. Marie loved him dearly, although she was too embarrassed to ever say as much to his face.

A crack formed in the final shield. All the strain on the *Licorne* caused fires to erupt throughout the ship. The control panel burst, and smoke filled the air around her.

Marie ignored the destruction. Tears streaked her cheeks, but she kept her eyes focused straight ahead. "Since I ruined your life last time, it's my turn to protect you. You'll have to live a full enough life for the both of us, Big Bro."



Something inside her clicked. So that's it. I must've gotten this second chance at life so I could have an opportunity to save him. She'd given Leon so much grief during her first life, and quite a bit in her second too, if she was honest with herself. It was gratifying to think she could be useful to him here, at the end—that she'd carried out her duty.

Satisfied, she smiled. "Okay, you big worrywart," she said, as if speaking to Leon directly. "Time for you to finally enjoy your life."

The third shield at last gave in. Light surrounded the *Licorne*, and Marie's consciousness began to fade. She accepted that this would be the end, that the remaining power of Arcadia's attack would evaporate her and the *Licorne*. But as she was thrown through the air, she saw two women resembling Livia and Angie wrap her in an embrace as if trying to protect her. The *Licorne*, however, was swallowed by the blast—exploding and crumbling to dust.

The *Licorne* had managed to block Arcadia's final attack, though the process destroyed it.

"Angelica, Livia, Noelle, Yumeria, Kyle, Carla, and Cleare all escaped safely," Luxion reported. "I cannot confirm Marie's safety."

That dummy. What was she doing? If you go and die on me, there's no point to any of this. Our parents will be furious with me when I cross over.

"Th-that idiot," I choked out. "If only she didn't...push herself...so much."

My eyes moved to Arcadia. He said nothing at first, just floating there in the air. It took him a moment to digest the reality of the situation. At that point, he turned on us.

"Just how long will you and your lot keep getting in my way?! Filthy descendants, crawling up through the cracks and acting as if this world is yours! This planet belongs to new humanity!"

He could scream whatever he liked. I no longer had the energy to feel pissed off at his words. I couldn't even have stood up if I wanted to.

"Master, everything is ready," said Luxion.

"Heh heh. I knew I could count on you until the very end." My voice was so hoarse that the words barely came out properly. Thank goodness Luxion still had one last ace up his sleeve.

"I'll carve you two to pieces!" Arcadia howled as spikes formed on his skin once again. "Wh-what?!"

I was equally shocked, my mouth agape. "Arroganz...?"

Arroganz had tackled Arcadia, arms wrapping tight around the Demonic Core as it dragged him away from me. Arroganz's thrusters spit out so much fire that the flames burned through its plating, but the Armor kept Arcadia squeezed to its chest.

"L-Let go of me, you piece of scrap!" Arcadia wriggled desperately, releasing his spikes. They plunged through Arroganz's plating, embedding themselves deep inside it and shredding its exterior.

Arroganz's head turned toward us, and its eyes gleamed. I knew Luxion wouldn't command it to do that; he was all about efficiency. The only explanation was that Arroganz did so by itself. Luxion had implemented primitive AI into the Armor, and it was conveying its farewell in a final show of dedication.

"Thank you for everything, Arroganz," I said.

"I am grateful to you for all you have done, Arroganz," Luxion added reverently. Yet, knowing he couldn't waste the opportunity, he quickly added, "Firing my main cannon now."

Having undergone emergency repairs after it sank beneath the waves, Luxion's main body finally reemerged. A blue-white beam of light sprang forth, piercing Arcadia and extending like a pillar toward the sky above. The blast also caught Arroganz, since the Armor was holding Arcadia in place.

I stretched a hand toward Arroganz. It held my gaze until its form crumbled wholly into dust and disappeared on the wind. Thank you for sticking with me through all those battles, I thought. You were as much my partner as Luxion.

"You bastaaaard!" Arcadia howled in his last moments, before his core disappeared completely.

His fortress began to sink, parts crumbling away.							

Chapter 19: The Neutralizer

PUSHED MYSELF OVER to a piece of fallen debris, leaned my back against it, and watched as everything drew to an end. I had no strength left to stand. There was no way I could escape the sinking fortress.

"We won, right?" I glanced at Luxion. Having used his body to shield me from Arcadia's attacks, he was a wreck. Dents and deep gashes covered his exterior, and a crack had formed over his lens.

"Yes," he answered after a long pause. "But you pushed yourself far further than you should have. Having fired that last shot, my main body is sinking back under the waves. I think it will...take significant time to recover." Luxion, too, had pushed himself.

"Y-yeah? Sorry about—" I coughed.

Agonizing pain racked my body, draining any energy I had left. It seemed the ten minutes for my strength enhancer had run out. Clinging to consciousness was incredibly difficult.

"Master! The neutralizer—" Luxion's voice cut off when he noticed that my backpack was gone. He spun and drifted off, looking for it. When he spotted the backpack, he raced to it. The syringe holding the neutralizer had shattered, though, the liquid spilling onto the deck. "The neutralizer—Master's neutralizer! Mas...ter..."

The last reserves of Luxion's battery had run dry. He slammed to the ground. Even on the cusp of power failure, he tried to nudge the neutralizer into a puddle as if he might somehow salvage it. He must've known it was no use, but he still tried anyway.

"Master's neutralizer. Without it, Master will die. Without it, Master won't be able to... I can't let that happen..." He choked up as if crying.

Try as he might, the neutralizer was as good as useless. It pained me to see

him struggle so desperately for me. I couldn't watch anymore, but when I opened my mouth, blood sprayed out.

It took everything I had to summon the strength to speak. "You've...done enough. Come...over here."

Luxion couldn't even float anymore. He only reached me by rolling across the ground until he bumped my right hand.

There was still a gaping hole on the right side of my chest. Even without blood gushing from the wound, my body was already fatally injured.

I leaned to the side and let myself fall to the ground. That felt a little more comfortable, at least.

The strength enhancer had taken too heavy a toll on my organs. Even if Luxion had managed to administer the neutralizer, I would have been beyond saving. He had to know that, but despite the futility, he still wanted to stabilize me.

"What happened to Marie?" I asked. "Are Angie and Livia...both safe? And Noelle? And...and also..."

"Master, please stop talking. Help will come. I promise we will save you. We can regenerate your body. I don't care how difficult or painful it is; you must live. Please."

How touching. "You don't sound like your usual self. Trash-talk me more, the way you usually do." I paused for a shaky breath. "There's no saving me. You know that, right? It's too late."

I'd be dead before he had the chance to do so.

"But, you know...I think this second life was at least better than the last. I died falling down some stairs the first time. Then I was reincarnated here..." I trailed off into a fit of coughs.



"You regret the way this is ending?" Luxion inquired.

"I don't know...about that. It's been...pretty fun, hasn't it? But if you asked me to do it all over again...I think I'd hesitate."

That was an understatement. I knew myself well enough to realize that, if asked to repeat this whole life again, I'd have refused vehemently. It was kind of a shame I wouldn't get that chance, though. Part of me actually wanted a doover. Still, this was probably for the best. I'd done a pretty good job, if I did say so myself. I'd met so many people: Livia, Angie, and Noelle, as well as lots of others. There'd been trials and tribulations, but in hindsight, I thought I'd enjoyed it all.

Liquid oozed from Luxion's lens. It really did look like he was crying. "Master," he said, "hypothetically, given the chance to do it all again—assuming the two of us *could* meet—would you come to find me?"

I tried to ask where that question had come from out of nowhere, but the words wouldn't come out. Ah. He's probably remembering that conversation we had way back when we were in that cave. How did I answer him then? Can't seem to remember.

"Assuming you reincarnated again, and all the other variables were the same as in this life," Luxion went on, "Would you come to find me? I promise, given another chance, I wouldn't fail as I did this time. I would ensure you were happy. So please give me another chance."

Was he assuming there really would be a do-over? That there were endless cycles of death and rebirth? No, what he was imagining was more a time loop that repeated itself. Time rewinding and bringing us back to the past, where it all began. How funny that the two of us were picturing the same thing.

That makes things easy, then. My answer is a given. "Hell no."

Luxion went silent. More fluid poured from his eye. "I suppose...I should have seen that coming. If you hadn't met me, you could have lived the peaceful life you dreamed of."

No, that's not what I was saying. I didn't mean it would be better if we hadn't met. Obviously, I needed to explain, or he'd remain under that

misapprehension.

Biting back the agony I felt—and the wave of blood that surged into my mouth—each time I tried to talk, I choked out, "Even if...I found you again, there's no telling if things would work out well." I paused for a breath. "If we did it all over again, it'd be your turn to come find *me*."

I'd gone on a grand adventure to find Luxion in this life, which was completely out of character for me. There was no telling whether I'd luck out the same way if I tried that again. It'd be better for me if he just found me instead. Preferably before Zola sold me off.

"You would be my master again?" he asked.

"Yeah...if you came to find me."

I couldn't do it anymore. My vision had blurred to the point that I couldn't see anything.

"Whatever it takes, I will find you," Luxion said. "I swear it."

"Good. I'm counting...on you."

Just as my consciousness began to fade, a green Armor landed in front of me.

"I found you! You're still alive, right, Leon?!" came Jilk's familiar voice.

"Wh-why're you here?"

There was a moment of charged silence—he was shocked to see me so badly injured. He soon put on a facade, though, acting as if everything were all right as he administered what aid he could.

"Because I'm tougher than I look," he answered. "I'm sure everyone else is still alive too."

I wanted to thank Jilk for his help, but I couldn't find the strength to speak.

"Besides, I can score brownie points with Miss Marie by saving her brother, right?" Jilk added jokingly, trying his best to treat me like he always did.

Ha. Always so calculating. I managed a dry chuckle.

"Please don't die on me," Jilk said, turning solemn. "You have to hang on, for me, for Miss Marie... No, for everyone."

"Don't ask...for the impossible," I managed to mutter. Then my eyes forced themselves shut. I felt a warm sensation on the back of my right hand as everything faded into darkness.

Jilk cradled Leon in his arms and lifted him up.

"We need to heal you quickly," he muttered. In truth, Jilk doubted Leon could be saved. He'd simply have to place his faith in Luxion and Cleare's medical technology, but at a glance, the seriousness of Leon's injuries made that seem futile. "Whatever the case, I'll try my best not to jostle you too much. But we have to hurry."

He lifted off from the deck, intent on escaping the sinking fortress with Leon. No sooner had they risen into the air than a knot twisted his stomach, a dark premonition of what was to come, for in front of him he saw Laimer—the Demonic Knight who'd fought alongside Hubert earlier on. He was down an arm, thanks to Jilk's bullet, and was clearly seething with anger.

"I never forgot you, you green bastard! Isn't that the Scumbag Knight you've got there in your arms? I'll end you both right here, right now!"

"It's a bit late for that," Jilk told him calmly. "The war has already ended."

"No, it hasn't!" Laimer shrieked. "You guys killed my little brother! Sir Hubert and Sir Gunther too! It wouldn't be fair for you to go on living when they can't!" He'd lost sight of himself and reality in his fury. There was no way for them to have any meaningful conversation.

Jilk didn't want to waste any more time here than necessary. He tried to speed away with Leon still in his arms, but Laimer launched numerous attacks on them from behind, sparking fireballs that slammed into Jilk and exploded.

"What horrible timing." Jilk couldn't respond to the attacks with Leon in his hands, and he was exposing his back to the enemy to protect his passenger. Laimer's injuries had obviously weakened him, but his continuous attacks were more than Jilk's Armor could withstand.

"You're wide open!" Laimer just kept going.

"Guh!" Jilk grunted.

The constant explosions were pushing his Armor to the brink. He twisted his head to look behind him. It would've been so much easier if he could fight Laimer normally, but as long as he had Leon with him, he couldn't. If he abandoned Leon, he could save his own life, but that wasn't an option.

"Just a bit farther...just a bit," he told himself as he spotted a nearby ally ship. He had to get Leon to them if it was the last thing he did.

Laimer sped toward them as if intending to body-slam Jilk. The moment his hands reached Jilk's back, an even more violent explosion rocked them both. It was dangerous even for Laimer at this point.

"I'll kill you two, even if it kills me!"

Jilk hunched over to protect Leon. He was too vulnerable in this position, but he had no other choice, even if he couldn't do anything to defend himself. "Leon, I'm getting you to Miss Marie, no matter what!"

"Eat this!"

Another explosion occurred, swallowing them both this time.

"Mia! Please open your eyes! My life has no meaning without you in it. All that matters to me is your survival!"

Mia's eyes cracked open at the familiar sound of her name. Finn was holding her and sobbing. She smiled right away. "I finally get to see you again, Sir Knight. This time, we won't be separated. We may have died, but we'll be together forever now."

Since Finn was already dead, she was certain they could only reunite like this if she had perished too. Or perhaps this was a dream, one from which she hoped she'd never wake.

"Oh, Sir Knight," she continued. "I don't care if I'm dead, or if this is a dream. All that matters is that I get to see you again."

Finn snatched her hand into his and squeezed it. A fresh wave of tears carved trails down his cheeks. "Don't be silly. You haven't died, and this isn't a dream.

I'm right here, because Kurosuke saved me at the end."

Mia gaped at him. "What?"

With Finn's help, she sat upright. They weren't inside Arcadia's fortress, but instead aboard one of the empire's ships.

"Bravey?" she called urgently.

There was no response. As she became more alert, she remembered the moment Brave fell in battle.

"He's...he's gone." Mia sobbed.

Finn wrapped her in his gentle embrace. "I'm sorry. It's my fault."

"Sir Knight," she cried back, squeezing him to her. They cried together.

The rhythmic rush of ocean waves filled Marie's ears. When her eyes fluttered open, she found herself lying on an inflatable raft. Someone had pulled a blanket over her.

"I'm...alive?" she croaked in disbelief.

The setting sun's light outlined Julius, Brad, Greg, and Chris, all on the verge of tears as they stared at her.

"You're all here?"

Julius helped her sit up. "Why would you do something so dangerous?!" he snapped at her.

"Julius?" she muttered numbly.

He yanked her to his chest, wrapping his arms tight around her. "Thank goodness. Honestly, what a relief. We couldn't go on if anything happened to you."

"He's right," Brad sobbed. "We'd be lost without you!"

Greg sniffled. "You should depend on us more, Marie! You're just like Leon, trying to do everything on your own when the going gets tough."

"It's such a relief to see you and everyone else again. Truly." Chris removed

his glasses, covering his eyes with a hand.

They were all crying. Marie was gobsmacked.

Julius looked completely beaten up, but not so badly that she'd doubt his success in battle. Brad looked significantly worse, his pilot suit tattered.

"Brad, what's with your outfit?" Marie demanded.

"This? Oh, just a little magic trick of mine to evade the enemy's attack. Sadly, it left my suit with more holes than a block of cheese."

"Uh, yeah." His explanation made no sense to Marie. The remaining two had bigger outfit issues than Brad, though. Her gaze moved to them.

Greg was completely naked save for a speedo.

"Greg, why is that all you're wearing?" asked Marie.

"Oh, you mean this? When my Armor self-destructed, it burned my suit too. Gave me a nice tan in the process." He flexed, trying to show off his bronzed skin tone.

Marie wrinkled her nose. "W-well, I'm impressed you survived self-destructing. Almost makes me doubt you're human that you came out intact."

"Aw, you're flatterin' me." It hadn't been meant as a compliment, but he blushed all the same.

Marie's eyes moved to Chris. He'd been reduced to a loincloth and didn't seem the least bit bothered by his exposed state. "And you, Chris? What's with your getup?"

"This? I was wearing it under my suit to begin with. The fabric's thin, so I was worried it might not be durable, but it saved my life."

"It saved your life?" Marie echoed skeptically.

Chris held up a sharp fragment of something. "This plunged into my side. If not for the protection of my loincloth, it would've killed me." Pleased, he stroked his underwear.

Marie didn't understand that either, but the important part was that they'd all survived their near-death experiences. That, she told herself, was more than

enough—at least until a realization sank in. "W-wait a minute. What about Big Bro? And Jilk? And everyone else?!"

Julius tried to respond but was interrupted by a battleship drifting along the waves toward them. Marie recognized the approaching ship as the Bartforts' at once.

Nicks waved at them from the deck. "Glad to see you all safe!"

The Sacred Tree Sapling sat on the deck as well. Jilk's Armor was there too, though it was severely damaged. Marie tried to hop to her feet, but Julius lifted her up before she could.

"Jilk's safe," he told her. "The people who escaped are still alive as well. But Leon..."

Her blood ran cold. "What about him?"

After the Bartfort battleship sank and could no longer fly, it had occupied itself with saving as many of those in the water as possible. Nicks took the helm and commanded the ship himself. Among the survivors their ship rescued, who sat on the deck with bandages wrapped all over their bodies, were Vince and Balcus. The two watched quietly as Nicks continued shouting orders to his men.

"You're lucky to have such a good son," Vince had said.

Balcus's cheeks reddened at the compliment. His injuries had already been treated, but he was still too banged up to join Nicks. Word had reached him that Leon was on board. Worried as he was, he was in no condition to go see him. All Balcus could do was pray for his son's safety.

"True. It's comforting to know I have such a reliable son to take care of things," agreed Balcus. "He and Leon are far more capable than I've ever been. But you have an incredible son yourself, Your Grace."

Vince's gaze traveled upward. The Redgrave ship, which commanded all the area's allied vessels, hovered high over them. "He'd be fine without me, I'm sure. I may end up yielding the role of duke to him far sooner than I originally planned." Sadness and relief filled his eyes in equal measure.

Balcus lowered his gaze. "I'm eager to give my position up to my son, personally."

"Looking forward to a comfortable retirement? You sound just like your son," Vince said with a hearty laugh.

Balcus's smile drew taut.

"I'm sorry. Saying that was insensitive under the circumstances."

"No," Balcus said quickly. "I'm sure Leon will be all right. He's always survived all the other impossible situations he's been thrown into. Ever since he left home at fifteen to go on that first adventure, he's thrown one surprise after another at me."

That was how it'd all started. When Leon was fifteen, he went searching for a previously unexplored dungeon where he discovered countless treasures and an incredible Lost Item. In his short life, he'd accomplished more than most people did in a lifetime.

"Before I knew it, we stood shoulder to shoulder, and he surpassed me even more quickly. He's reached the pinnacle at this point. As a father, I'm proud, if utterly confused." Leon had seemingly grown out of reach. Any parent would feel pride over such an accomplishment, but Balcus worried for Leon too.

Vince glanced at the sky again, focusing on the Redgrave ship. "A new age is coming. An old man like me has no more reason to worry. I can retire in peace," he chuckled.

"Well said. But you know, there is one thing I want to do before I retire."

"What would that be?"

"I was so focused on surviving that I never got to enjoy being an adventurer the way I wanted," said Balcus. "I'd like to experience that before I call it quits. Doesn't have to be anything as grand as what my son's done. Just something."

Vince's face went blank for a split second before he burst into laughter. "Sounds like an excellent dream to me."

"This seems like a good time to do it. Nicks has a wife now, and he'll soon have a child of his own."

"Yes, isn't he married to Earl Roseblade's daughter?"

"Sounds like an interesting conversation you're having over here, Your Grace," interrupted a voice.

Stunned, Vince muttered, "House Roseblade's—"

"Earl!" Balcus cried, finishing his sentence. "M-My Lord..."

Dorothea's father Earl Roseblade had indeed come to join them, to the shock of both. He smiled wanly at Balcus. "After we were shot down, your son saved us. There's no need to be so polite with me. We're already family, are we not?" He motioned to Nicks. "My son-in-law is incredibly dependable, I must say. I couldn't be prouder. But leaving that aside, you were speaking about adventure, weren't you? I was thinking about retiring and settling down here myself soon."

Surprisingly, once they began discussing adventuring, the conversation soon picked up.

"Quickly, bring the medical pod!" Cleare darted through the ship. Numerous pieces of equipment were being carried into the medical bay, and several robots buzzed about on Cleare's orders. They loaded Leon into a pod, beginning the healing process as quickly as they could.

"Wake up!" Noelle cried at him. "Please, Leon!"

Yumeria grabbed her shoulders and pulled her away from the pod. "Lady Noelle, he needs rest right now."

As word reached them that Marie was safe, Kyle, Carla, and Jilk raced from the medical bay to see her. Angie and Livia were undergoing treatment in a separate room. Luxion's beaten-up remote unit sat nearby, but it hadn't powered back on, even after being recharged.

"Are you broken?! Is that why you aren't responding?" Cleare screeched at him. "Without you, I have no idea what's going on, you know!"

No one knew what had happened to Luxion's main body either. Was it again unable to move after sinking under the waves, or still perfectly functional? If

the latter was true, Cleare wished he'd hurry back to the surface and bring her one of the medical pods they'd received from Ideal.

Cleare studied Leon. They'd stripped him down, and he was linked to a number of machines. The gaping wound on the right side of his chest was horrific, but worse were his internal organs. They'd been pushed past the brink by the many doses Leon took of the enhancer drug.

"There won't be any point healing his external wounds if he dies, but I can't do anything to save him with the equipment we have on hand. If we're going to pull this off, I need you, Luxion!"

Noelle snatched Leon's hand. "Leon, I'll never forgive you if you die on me here!"

Leon's heart was still beating, thanks to the medical pod he lay in, but it could flatline at any moment. He was on the brink of death.

Livia and Angie burst into the room wearing hospital gowns. Noelle stepped away to give them room, and both girls flung themselves at Leon.

"Mr. Leon! Please open your eyes!" Livia cried.

"You big idiot," Angie muttered. "If you die on us, this will all have been pointless!"

Leon's eyes slowly cracked open. Livia, Angie, and everyone else in the room immediately smiled, but he closed them again and took a slow, agonizing breath. In the next moment, the heart monitor screeched as the line it displayed went flat.

Vexed by her own powerlessness, Cleare muttered, "Master, you fool."

Everyone knew immediately what this meant. Noelle sank to her knees. Yumeria began wailing. Livia's face went blank, tears still falling fast down her cheeks.

Angie clung to his body and wept. "Don't leave me! I promised you, remember? I said I'd make you happy! Please don't make a liar out of me..."

Noise erupted outside the room, but Livia paid no attention. She quietly stroked Leon's hand, crying even as she struggled to put a smile on her face.

"Mr. Leon, you can't leave me behind like this. You just can't. Please open your eyes. I want to hear you say my name again. Please." Tears fell from her chin onto his face.

Leon didn't move. Didn't react at all.

Marie and the idiot brigade burst into the room, Marie shouting, "Big Bro?!" She raced to him and grabbed his hand.

"He just passed away," Cleare informed her. She'd already given up on saving him now that his heart had stopped.

Marie's eyes misted over, but she wiped away the tears as quickly as they fell. "Not yet," she said. "We can still save him!"

Angie's head shot up. "We can? D-do you really mean it?!"

Livia seized Marie's shoulders. "Is there really a way?"

Her grip was so painful that Marie knocked her hands away. "Give me some credit! I know a decent amount about this game! There's magic in it that only the Saint can use."

Angie had no idea what any of that meant, but she didn't care. The prospect of saving Leon had given her hope. "Magic that can save him even in this state? I've never heard of such a thing."

"That's because there is no such magic," interjected Cleare. "I don't think there's any magic in the world that can save him. I looked into all kinds of things before this war even began. No miracles like that exist."

"Calm down," Marie said. "I'll bring him back myself. But I have to warn you that there'll be no hope for him if his soul already left his body. I'd prefer we had something to lock it in place, but we don't have the necessary tool. Either way, we've got to hurry."

Noelle rushed to Marie and leaned over her. "I'll do anything—just say the word! What kind of tool do you need?!" Her brow furrowed in desperation.

Marie averted her eyes. "A tool to pin his soul to his body. I trust Cleare can do something about his physical wounds, but even I can't help him if his soul's gone."

A bright light flashed on the back of Leon's hand, and his heart monitor quieted as his heartbeat stuttered back to life.

Everyone gaped in disbelief at the Guardian crest, which continued to shine.

Noelle reached out and gripped his hand tightly. "The Sacred Tree's trying to save him. It's telling him to live."

Chapter 20: The Saint's Forbidden Art

W HEN LEON'S HEART started back up, Marie slumped with relief. *I guess the Guardian crest can stand in for the tool I'd need. Good. Now I can use my forbidden magic!*

This feat normally involved a special tool, but the Sacred Tree had stepped in to keep Leon's soul bound to his body.

There's no time to waste. I need to bring him back quickly. To perform this successfully, there's one other requirement, but I'll take care of that myself.

Marie drew a deep breath. "While the Sacred Tree's binding him, I'll bring him back." She brushed her fingers over Leon's hand.

Julius seized her shoulders, his face full of worry. "What exactly are you planning to do?"

She looked back at him, trying her best to act normal. "What do you mean? I'm going to save him, of course."

He and the other boys seemed dubious about her promise, as if they somehow sensed there was a greater meaning behind all this. "You keep saying that, but is bringing him back from this really possible? And wouldn't such magic come at a major price?"

Marie was basically offering to resurrect Leon. Julius and the other boys couldn't believe she'd accomplish a miracle like that without significant risk.

"It's all right," Marie said. "It'll be fine."

"How do you plan to bring him back, then? Explain it to us so we can understand!"

Marie had to placate them somehow. She was about to use the same magic employed when the saint Livia rescued her beloved in the third game. "I'm going to the other side, and I'll haul his soul back. You guys on this side will

need to do something about his wounds in the meantime."

Leon's body wasn't in good shape.

"If you just want me to prolong his life, I might be able to—wait! He's here. He's finally here!" Cleare had glanced out the window. Outside, Luxion's main ship had broken through the waves. She spun to face his motionless mobile unit. "So, you still hear me, even though you can't move. I knew you weren't down for the count. Hurry up and contact me, would you?" She paused. "Hm? His main ship isn't responding to my calls. Is he having trouble or something?"

Luxion's mobile unit was still unresponsive too.

Jilk, wrapped in thick bandages like the ship's other wounded passengers, examined Luxion. "That's strange. He was working just fine on the way here."

Marie shooed him and the other boys from the room. "Out, all of you! I've got stuff to do!"

"All right, all right. Don't push."

Marie slammed the door behind them, pressing her forehead to the metal, and silently apologized to them. *Sorry, guys. Thank you for everything.* After brushing away the few tears that fell, she clapped her hands hard over her cheeks. "Okay! Time to get to it!" She turned back around, marched over to Leon, and grasped his hand.

"Please let me help too," said Livia, grabbing their hands.

Marie was initially going to refuse, but seeing how intent Livia was, she gave up on dissuading her. "You help too then," she told Angie.

"Are you sure? As long as it's within my ability, I'll do whatever is needed."

Marie nodded. "You're engaged to him, so you need to pitch in. That goes for you too, Noelle."

Noelle swallowed her tears and smiled. "Of course! I'll give this everything I've got!"

"We're going to travel to the other side to bring back his soul," Marie told them. "And, no matter what you see while you're there, I must ask you not to hate Leon." Livia and the other girls were unsettled by Marie's implication, but

before they could ask what she meant, she initiated the spell. "Here we go."

As their bodies instantly collapsed, Yumeria and the robots scrambled to support them. The lens of Luxion's unresponsive mobile unit flashed red for a split second, then faded to black again.

The next thing Livia knew, she found herself walking in a pitch-black tunnel. "Angie?" she called out. "Miss Noelle? Miss Marie?!" She couldn't see anything, but the tunnel felt strangely familiar.

"Over here!" Marie called to them. "Make sure you don't get separated!" "I'm right here!" Angie chimed in shortly after.

"Hold on," Livia cried. "I can't see anything!"

It was a relief that they were in close proximity to one another, at least.

"Listen up," Marie told them. "From here on out, you need to follow my instructions. And whatever you see, don't be too surprised. Have faith in my brother."

"Of course we will," Angie said. "But putting that aside, I've never heard of an ability to resurrect the dead. How did you learn to do something like this?"

"It's a forbidden art within the temple," Marie explained. "Only those who've inherited the Saint's relics can learn to use it."

"Forbidden?" Angie shook her head; that wasn't really the part she had questions about. "So, you inherited this ability through those relics?" She couldn't fathom how that was possible. Not much time had passed since the temple recognized Marie as the Saint—certainly not enough for her to memorize a complex spell like this.

"Could you really learn something like this in such little time?" Livia asked, as if on the same wavelength as Angie. Knowledge alone wasn't enough to actually perform a spell the way Marie had. "Either way, I see why it's forbidden," she added. "The ability to freely bring people back from the afterlife could cause big problems."

Angie nodded thoughtfully. "Something about this doesn't make sense. You

could've used this ability at any point before this." She asked why Marie had waited until now.

Marie sighed. "I only learned this very recently."

"The point is that, thanks to Rie, we can save Leon," said Noelle. "I don't think there's any point grilling her about it right now."

"Fair enough. Sorry about that," Angie said sheepishly.

Marie was happy to let the matter go.

Livia, on the other hand, was preoccupied with thinking about it. *I can see* completely why the temple forbade resurrection magic, but *I still don't* understand how Marie learned it so quickly. Unless performing the magic itself isn't complicated, but requires a steep price?

As she started to piece the puzzle together, a light appeared ahead.

"There! I can finally see it!" Marie cried. Footsteps echoed around them, suggesting that she had dashed forward, though it was still impossible to see her.

Once the girls reached the light, they found an enormous gate in front of them. Marie strode right up to it and pressed both hands against the doors. "Hurry!" she called back to the others. "If we take too long, his soul really will leave his body!"

When Angie finally reached the light, her form became visible. The same happened as the other girls slipped out of the darkness behind her. Together, the four passed through the gate. A town they'd never seen spread out before them.

"Where are we?" Noelle blurted out.

The place was completely unrecognizable. The architecture looked nothing like what they were accustomed to, although it seemed to be a suburb of some sort. Pillars connected by long stretches of wire lined the streets at intervals. Those streets weren't cobbled, but were still plenty firm, and white lines were drawn upon them alongside some sort of writing they'd never come across. The strangest part by far was how well used the area looked, although no one was

around.

Angie's jaw dropped. "This is the afterlife? I've never seen a place like this before. Wait—I think the architecture might be a bit similar to that island we visited for our school trip."

Livia looked at the sky. It was occupied by an enormous black hole, beyond which she saw nothing. Whatever it was, it filled her with fear and anxiety.

"I wonder what that could be," she said. "Just looking at it unsettles me."

Marie had frozen as she entered. Drinking in her surroundings, she wiped a few stray tears away and shook off any sentimentality, saying, "Let's hurry. We need to find my brother."

Mounting suspicion gripped Angie as they followed Marie. Why does she seem to know exactly where she's going? None of them knew these streets, yet Marie proceeded through them with the familiarity of someone who'd been there before, leading them all the way to an apartment building.

"Here," said Marie. "The third floor!" She climbed the stairs eagerly.

Angie lingered a step behind, scrutinizing the structure before she followed. "The building designs are completely different from the ones in Holfort. It's almost like a separate country entirely." None of the architecture here was like home.

The quartet hiked up several flights of stairs until they reached the third floor, where a row of identical doors greeted them. Marie showed no hesitation in picking out what was presumably the correct one.

"It's this apartment!" Marie banged her fist against the door. "If you're in there, come out!" When there was no response, she reached for the doorknob. "It's unlocked."

She pushed the door open and stepped inside, Angie and the other girls following close behind her. Marie kicked her shoes off at the front entrance and padded through the apartment, looking for Leon as if she already knew the layout perfectly. "Maybe he's in the bathroom?" she muttered to herself.

Anger swelled in Angie's breast. "You sure seem familiar with this place." It made her jealous how well Marie seemed to know Leon—better than Angie or his other fiancées did.

Marie pulled a face at her. "Look, it seems like you're misunderstanding things, so I'm just going to make one thing clear: I'm Leon's younger sister."

"No way!" Noelle cried, slapping both hands over her mouth.

Angie was similarly taken aback, but she didn't buy it for a minute. "That's not possible! I've investigated Leon's family line thoroughly using the Redgraves' connections! About a dozen times, if you must know, thanks to all the rumors constantly swirling around!"

"Miss Marie," Livia said calmly, not sharing the shock the other two felt, "won't you explain what you mean by that?"

Marie stared back at them solemnly, reinforcing the fact that this was no lie or joke. "To be exact, we were siblings in his previous life."

Angie's brow wrinkled. "Previous life?"

The apartment they had entered wasn't terribly spacious, to say the least. The student dorms were nicer than this place. It was hard to believe so much was crammed into the tiny area: a bed, a desk, and much more.

Noelle scanned the room. "Oh, look, this place has a monitor too," she said. It reminded her of the ones Luxion and Cleare used in their ships.

"I've never seen this alphabet before," Livia said, her curiosity piqued. "Could this be...an ancient civilization?!" She studied a poster on the wall.

Marie frowned. "Yeah, sure. An ancient civilization. Just so you know, that's a dating sim poster you're looking at."

Despite Marie's dismissive attitude, Livia was still bursting with curiosity. She could somehow tell the room belonged to Leon. "So, that's why you know so much about him. You remember your previous life together."

Angie was dumbfounded that Livia accepted everything so easily. "You're really not surprised?"

"So many strange things happened around Mr. Leon," Livia said with a bitter

smile. "What Miss Marie said makes a lot of sense when you put it in context, especially since I'd heard her call Mr. Leon her older brother before."

Marie's cheeks flushed.

"So this is Leon's old room," Angie remarked, deciding to check it out for herself. "Then I should be able to find... Aha. Here it is." She'd peeked under the bed and discovered what appeared to be Leon's porn.

Marie hid her face behind her hands. "Big Bro, you idiot. Can't you think of a better place to hide your pervy stuff? I'm embarrassed for you. Your fiancées have you all figured out."

Noelle was busy ransacking Leon's bookshelves. "Ah, there's more over here! This really does feel like Leon's room, considering all the hiding places are the same."

It was Livia who found the most important item in the room. "What is this?" On the floor, she'd located the package for the very otome game they were part of.

Marie approached and gazed nostalgically at the package. "Alte Liebe," she said. "The Saint's Tale."

Alte Liebe was the game title, while The Saint's Tale was the subtitle.

Livia's hand trembled as she gripped the package. She'd noticed someone who looked just like her on the cover, along with a group of men identical to the idiot brigade. Curious, Angie came over and took it from her hands. She couldn't read the text on the package, but on the back was a woman in a red dress who resembled her as well.

"These guys look like the prince and his friends," said Angie. "I've seen the locations in these snapshots too. That's the fountain in the academy plaza, right?"

Marie dropped her gaze to the floor, face scrunched. "To Leon and I, this place we're in right now was reality. From our point of view, the world you all come from is a video game. A fictional world."

From there, she went on to explain how she and Leon had reincarnated into

the world of *Alte Liebe*. She detailed the whole story carefully from the very beginning to the end, leaving out nothing.

By the time she finished, Angie's hands were clenched tightly around the package. "You're saying Livia and I were enemies in this game? That's unthinkable!"

Livia seemed to share her opinion. "Angie's right. I'd never agree to duel with her!"

"That's because I got in the way," Marie said with a sad smile.

"In the way?" Angie's eyes widened with realization. "Wait... Don't tell me!"

"I only knew what would happen in the game up to the midway point," explained Marie. "That's why it was so easy for me to entice Julius and the other boys. I knew from the start exactly what they liked and wanted to hear, because I'd memorized their preferences."

Angie's hand shot out, but Livia grabbed her wrist before she could slap Marie. "Let me go, Livia!"

"Please calm down. I admit I'm surprised too. I really am, but I'm very happy with the way things turned out."

"But, Livia, her actions made you suffer as well."

Livia nodded. "I know. We've all been through a lot, but I'm glad that you and I ended up with Mr. Leon. That's why we should focus on finding him right now."

Angie looked down at the package. "You have a point. I guess this puts things into perspective. Leon must've thought of us as characters in a story." That was heart-wrenching to realize, but it helped her recognize what had likely been going through his mind this whole time. I knew he was hiding something. So this was it. She could see why he'd kept it secret. She set the package down on his desk.

Noelle crept over and peeked at the package. Her face fell. "I'm not even on the cover."

Marie sighed deeply. "That's because you don't show up until the second

game. You're not in this one. Don't worry, in that game you're a protagonist."

"I...guess that's comforting to know. But it all feels kind of unsettling, to be honest," said Noelle.

Marie was mostly concerned that they hadn't found Leon yet. "I guess, if he's not here, he has to be at our parents' place."

"Your parents' place is here too?" Angie asked, perking up.

"Yeah. I think our parents are probably there as well."

All three of the others were shocked.

"Your parents are here?!" Angie cried.

Marie nodded. "Probably. Anyway, let's get going." She let out a beleaguered groan. "I'm really not looking forward to this." Slumping her shoulders, she lumbered through the front entrance and headed back outside.

As they stepped out, they saw a dark-gray cat sitting politely in front of the door. Its red eyes stared up at them.

"A cat?" Angie tilted her head.

They hadn't encountered any other animals, let alone people, up to this point. What was a cat doing here?

This particular feline had a proud, regal look. When Angie stretched her hand toward it, it jumped up and hurried away. It paused once it reached the steps, glanced back at them, and let out a short cry. It was almost as if the cat was telling them to follow it.

Guided by the cat, Marie found herself in front of her family home. She hadn't returned here since her parents chased her out. After reincarnating into *Alte Liebe*, she'd assumed she would never see it again.

She sucked in a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves.

"What's wrong?" Livia asked.



The question caught Marie so off guard that she choked as she tried to exhale. "I-I'm nervous, okay?!"

Angie rolled her eyes. "This is your family home, isn't it? Wait. Did you do something to hurt your relationship with your parents?"

Marie avoided her gaze. "Well, um... I was sort of responsible for how my brother died...and I tricked my parents into giving me money so I could travel overseas... A lot happened, let's put it like that."

Livia and Angie glared at her. Noelle was simply exasperated. "Rie, I've got to tell you, that's pretty awful."

"This was a long time ago, okay?! During my last life! Now, come on. Let's go in!" She marched to the door and jabbed the bell.

A familiar voice—her mother's—trickled through the intercom. "Yes? Who is it?"

Marie tried to say her old name, but she couldn't remember it for some reason. Her voice got stuck in her throat. "Um, uh... I'm... Er, that is..."

As she fumbled for some way to respond, her mother asked, "Is that my idiot daughter? You go by Marie now, right? I'll unlock the door. Come inside." There was a hint of annoyance in her voice.

The lock released with an audible clank. Marie hesitated, then pulled the door open. A familiar sight sprawled in front of her. Everything from the decorations to the smell hanging in the air brought back fond, vivid memories of her previous life.

The other girls filed in behind her.

Livia eagerly drank in every detail of the interior. "So, this is where Mr. Leon grew up? What a lovely home."

"I-I've never seen architecture like this before," Angie stammered, unsure what else to say. She'd been raised as a high-ranking noblewoman, so this was far inferior to what she'd grown accustomed to.

"Seems homey to me," said Noelle.

Marie peeled off her shoes and darted through the hallway to the living room. She pulled the door open and stepped inside. Next to the living room was the kitchen, and her mother was in there cooking. Her father sat at the kotatsu, reading a newspaper. He lifted his head when she entered. "So you've come back too? Oh—and who are these young ladies you brought with you?"

Marie stood frozen. Her parents were older than she remembered, but otherwise just as familiar.

"Huh? Have we got guests?" Leon, who'd been slumped sleeping at the kotatsu, slowly lifted himself with a yawn.

The moment they saw him, Angie and the other girls burst into tears. Before they could move, Marie shot forward. She seized her brother by his shirt collar and shook him violently. "Imbecile! It's time to go back! Pull yourself together, and let's go! We don't have much time!"

She tried to drag him away from the kotatsu, but he resisted. "What? No, I don't want to."

Chapter 21:

Resurrection

"M NOT GOING! You can't make me!" Leon clung to one of the apartment pillars as Marie tried desperately to rip him off and drag him away.

"I told you, we don't have time for this, you big idiot!" She had to get him back quickly, but he was throwing a tantrum.

"What business do you have calling me an idiot, loser?!"

"That's it! Now you've done it!"

The two were already bickering. Angie, Livia, and Noelle watched on the sidelines, bewildered.

"What's going on?" Angie demanded.

Livia shook her head. "I-I'm as lost as you are."

"You two really are siblings, huh?" said Noelle.

There was no room for uncertainty about the pair's connection, at least. It explained all the mysteries and doubts that had cropped up during their time together. The other girls were relieved to know Marie and Leon weren't actually romantically involved. Still, the biggest issue was Leon's stubborn refusal to come back with them after they'd gone to all this trouble to find him.

They couldn't just stand idly by. They had to convince him.

"Leon," Angie said gently. "We have to hurry, or you won't be able to come back to life."

"She's absolutely right! Everyone's so worried about you," Livia added.

"Anyway, you shouldn't whine about not wanting to go back when we're right here," Noelle scolded him lightly. "It hurts to hear that."

"I'm not coming back," he said stubbornly. "I suffered plenty already! I'm settling down here and enjoying some peace and quiet!"

Marie finally released her grip on him, planting her foot right on his rear end instead.

"Yowch!"

"I freakin' told you, there isn't much time! We've got to get a move on!" she snapped.

"Do you have any idea how much I've gone through? I'm tired of it all! At this point, I've worked enough for several lifetimes." He obviously wouldn't budge easily.

"Leon, do you really not want to come back with us?" Angie asked, devastated. "Do you not want to spend time with us?" Tears slid down her cheeks.

Leon pulled a face and looked away, unable to meet her gaze.

"The fighting is already over, Mr. Leon," added Livia. "I can't promise that you'll never go through hardships again, but I'm sure the future can only get better."

"Let's go back together. I'd be lost without you, Leon," added Noelle.

Leon choked out a laugh. "Marie spilled everything, didn't she? So you must know I just saw you guys as video game characters. I only approached the three of you because you're hot. I gave Marie a lot of crap for what she did, but I was no different. I caught your interest simply because I knew how to say and do the right things."

Livia shook her head. She realized at once that he was only pretending to be a bad guy to shake them off. "You're not that type of person. You always wanted to live a simple, peaceful life on your own. You didn't help us for your own benefit. You only approached us because we were in trouble and needed you."

Leon wouldn't meet Livia's eyes either. She'd seen right through him, but he wasn't about to give up this charade. "That's because you were vulnerable then. I knew you were more likely to accept me. And, see? I lucked out—three hot fiancées."

Angie walked over and threw her arms around him. "Even if that was why you

did it, I wouldn't care! Please, come back with us. My life would lose all meaning without you in it. I don't even want to live without you."

His lips quivered as he struggled to figure out how to respond.

Marie and Leon's parents peeked from the kitchen. They'd excused themselves to let everyone talk in private, but they couldn't help eavesdropping. His mother was particularly disgusted with what she saw.

"I didn't expect him to take so many brides," she complained.

Leon's father glowered at him too. "Man, am I jeal—er, I mean, what a rotten son we have. Unforgivable behavior."

"You and I will have a talk later."

"Huh?!"

Leon's mother harrumphed and padded over to Angie and the other girls. "If you keep up this arguing, you'll only waste more time. Why don't you four take a little rest for a few minutes?"

Leon finally released his hold on the pillar, and the group settled around the kotatsu, along with the cat that had somehow followed them inside.

Livia ducked into the kitchen to help Leon's mother make tea for everyone.

"Is Erica doing well?" she asked Livia.

"Erica? Oh—you mean Princess Erica?"

"Mm-hmm. She was my granddaughter in her previous life."

Livia gaped. "She what?!" She was shocked that Leon's mother had mentioned the name in the first place, but she certainly hadn't seen that coming.

Leon's mother giggled. "Ah, so she's a princess now, is she? She went through so much in her previous life, I hope she finds happiness. She's a pretty sensitive person, you know. And she doesn't share her feelings much."

"O-oh. I didn't realize."

"Leon and Marie have doted on her a fair amount, haven't they?" his mother went on.

"Yes. 'A fair amount' might actually be an understatement," replied Livia. That had been a puzzling mystery at one time, but now she understood why Leon was so fixated on Erica. She'd been Leon's niece in his past life.

"I knew it! I figured they'd fuss over her." Leon's mother sighed. "But Leon's a little too indulgent. It makes me worry."

Livia understood exactly what she meant. *Mr. Leon tends to be extremely kindhearted when it comes to family.* The same was true of the Bartforts, so she could only imagine how he'd act with Erica.

Leon's mother seemed to read Livia's thoughts. "He's apparently caused his new family a lot of trouble. He really can be exasperating."

"Ah ha ha..." Livia laughed awkwardly, unsure what else to do.

Leon's mother peeked out of the kitchen at Leon and Marie, who were fussing at each other again, and grimaced. "I thought those two would be all right together, but Leon's a lost cause. He dotes too much on people he cares about, and it spoils them in the worst way. Marie's no better. She either attracts the worst man possible or lands a decent one and ruins him."

She knew her children well.

"Uh, um, I'm actually engaged to Mr. Leon!" said Livia. "I'd really like him to come back with us. I...want to spend more time with him." She spoke from the heart, hoping that she might win his mother over to her stance.

Before Leon's mother could respond, his father poked his head in. "Missus, you aren't going to believe this. Our idiot son *and* our idiot daughter have themselves multiple partners in this other world. It's wond—er, shocking!" He corrected himself at first but then blithely blurted out the first thing on his mind: "It kind of makes me want to reincarnate too!"

"You could never keep a harem," his wife spat with a venomous smile. "You couldn't even keep *me* head over heels, remember? You should try to learn from your children's popularity."

Leon's father pressed a hand over his chin. "You don't get it. A harem does mean a man looks after multiple women, but those women aren't clamoring for that man because they're attracted to him. I guess a woman wouldn't know the difference, though." He shook his head. "Shame. I wish I could live the easy life with a bunch of women spoiling me."

"No one cares what you want, and you don't work anymore anyway." By now, his wife's smile had vanished.

Thinking better of arguing the point further, Leon's father retreated to the living room. Livia stood there awkwardly with a troubled smile.

Leon's mother sighed. "Well, there's no need for you to worry," she told Livia. "I'm sure Leon will go back, especially since you all went out of your way to come get him."

"But he already said he doesn't want to come back. Maybe he's fed up with us. We depended on him for too many things." Because of that, Leon had pushed himself far too long. Livia was worried that that was probably why he didn't want to return.

His mother shook her head. "He's the bashful sort who can't be honest about his feelings. He was overjoyed that you all came to find him, but he doesn't want you to know that, so he's acting cold about it. At any rate, he's got his own reasons for not wanting to go back."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Livia.

"Sadly, I have no answer for you." She glanced out the nearby window and sighed. "You can see the view pretty well from here, can't you? It's not a pleasant one." She meant the enormous black hole in the sky, which Livia had noticed when she first entered this world.

It was uncomfortable to look at, but Livia couldn't suppress her curiosity. "Um, what exactly *is* that hole in the sky? I mean, I guess maybe it's not a hole, but it looks like one."

Leon's mother smiled uncomfortably. "How should I put this? It's more like a wall than a hole. A blockade, I suppose you could say. There's nothing beyond that point."

"Blockade?"

"I think that's enough small talk. It's about time we got back." She motioned for Livia to return to the living room with her. "I'm glad I had a chance to see my children's faces again. They seem to be enjoying themselves—a bit too much, I'd say—in your world. And I'm happy Erica got to meet up with them."

There was something peculiar about the way Leon's mother spoke, but she seemed anxious to return to the living room, so Livia didn't have an opportunity to press her for answers. Livia doubted that she wanted to explain herself anyway, since she'd already dismissed several of the girl's questions. There was no point trying to get more answers from her.

Livia paused briefly at the window, gazing at the sky. "A wall... A blockade... What does that mean?"

I felt so miserable that I could almost cry. "Almost" being the key word. If you included my previous life, I'd lived forty years at this point, but my mom was sitting here lecturing me. Marie sat next to me, legs tucked neatly beneath her.

"Besides, do you have any right to mock other people?" my mom droned on. "You get upset over others cheating, but you already have three brides yourself! What's that about? As your mother, I'm ashamed of you."

I sat ramrod straight, the dark-gray cat with red eyes also sitting politely on the floor to my right.

As Mom went on, Dad nodded in agreement. "I'm jealous of you, I've got to say. If you're this reluctant to go back, you must be hiding something.

Something I assume you have a guilty conscience about."

I stared at him coldly. "No."

He turned to mom, whining babyishly. "I'm telling you, Missus, he's being sneaky!"

We'd finally reunited after all this time, and almost the first thing I wanted to do was plant my fist in my old man's face. But it was my fault I let him distract me with that.

"Are you even listening to me?!" my mom snapped.

"Y-yes, ma'am!"

"And reflecting on what you've done?"

I dropped my gaze and meekly muttered, "Uh, yeah. I'm reflecting on stuff."

"But you don't regret what you did, do you?"

"Nope," I said.

She sighed at me, exasperated. "You haven't changed a bit."

Noelle perked up. "Um, if you don't mind me asking, what kind of kid was he?"

Mom studied me for a moment. "Well, when he was younger, he helped a girl who was being bullied."

"Aw. So he was nice, even back then," said Noelle.

I averted my eyes. Hearing her recount my past like that was embarrassing.

"Except he pushed the boys who'd bullied her off a bridge," Mom added.

"Even the girl he saved started crying that she never wanted him to go that far."

Noelle frowned. "Yeah. That kind of sounds like him too."

"That's not all! Know what my idiot son said afterward? 'I'll be smarter about it next time.' I was at my wits' end at that point."

Noelle and the other girls shot me sideways glances, not the least bit surprised by this revelation.

Mom turned to me. "Leaving that aside, do you realize how lucky you are to have so many women dedicated to you? Whining about not wanting to go back is just selfish and silly."

She had a point. I nodded. "Look, I didn't expect to land this many women either."

Smiling, Mom chopped me on the forehead with the side of her hand.

"Um, Mother, you don't, uh, have to be so hard on him," Angie stammered. "W-we'll be happy as long as he comes back with us. That's all we need. Given

Leon's status and special circumstances, it's almost inevitable that he'd have multiple brides."

Dad had to weigh in, of course. "What an awesome cultural value! If I reincarnated in another world, I bet I'd have a harem too."

I seriously doubted he'd ever have had a harem. Marie seemed to share my opinion; her lips drew back in disgust.

"You have three women who love you. Why don't you want to go back?" Mom demanded. "What's wrong with you? You're such a coward, it sickens me. All they want is your return. You'll have them all crying if you don't go, and then we'll have *another* funeral with a bunch of girls sobbing because you left them. Do you understand that?"

Another funeral? What was she talking about? Certainly not my first one.

I huffed and looked away, which somehow prompted the cat to jump into my lap. "Hey, kitty. You understand where I'm coming from, don't you? You've got an arrogant look, but I'll bet you're a nice little—gah!" It stuck its front paws on my face and dug its claws into my skin. *This thing isn't cute at all!* "Rotten cat!"

I tried to grab the scruff of its neck, but it darted away just in time to escape my clutches, then raised its hackles and hissed at me.

"What? You want to fight?!" I leaped to my feet, ready to take it on.

Mom chopped me on the head again. "You idiot son!"

"Yeah, well, I had to inherit it from someone, right?!" I spat back.

Dad looked away from me. "Honestly, the only upright person in our family is Erica," he muttered under his breath.

He was absolutely right. I was shocked by how together she was.

"She grew up watching Marie, so she never felt like she could ask for anything for her own sake. That really hurt her at times. I'm glad she seems to be doing so well now," said Mom. "When we got old, she looked after us—which is exactly why you need to go back!" She spun and jabbed a finger in my direction. "You need to take good care of Erica. It's the least you can do after you devastated us by dying before we did!"

"That wasn't my fault!" I cried.

I realized the moment the words left my mouth that they were nonsense. It was my fault that I'd passed away.

"Of course it is!" Mom retorted. "You were a grown man who pulled multiple all-nighters playing a video game!"

Crap. I couldn't say anything in my defense. She was absolutely correct.

Marie was sweating bullets next to me, as if sensing she'd be next. She couldn't have been more right.

"Marie." Mom turned toward her this time.

"Y-yes, ma'am?!"

"You're as bad as your brother. Don't be so eager to throw your life away because you think everything's your fault. You've accomplished plenty in your second chance at life. What's more, your father and I forgave what you did a long time ago. Don't worry about the past anymore."

Marie burst into tears. "Mooommmy!" She flung herself at Mom and clung to her.

Dad fidgeted restlessly beside them, awaiting his turn to receive her affection. "You can hug me too, Marie," he said.

I felt so bad for him that I threw my arms open. "Want to hug me instead?"

He wrinkled his nose at me. "A hug from my son does nothing for me." At least he was honest. *Too* honest, I'd argue, but I'd forgive him. I'd probably say the same thing in his shoes.

Mom wrapped Marie in her arms and stroked her head. "Honestly, no matter how much you grow, you're as much a fool as ever," she said affectionately.

Long before my parents fell out with Marie, she'd earned top grades in school, and they'd trusted her over me. At times, it broke my heart. Marie was always the one they doted on.

"Being able to put on such a convincing act for people must be nice." I sank back to the floor.

Dad plopped down next to me. "Don't get jealous of your sister. We always knew she was putting on an act."

"What? I don't buy that. You especially fawned over her all the time!"

He shrugged. "Because she's cute. I wasn't going to fawn over *you*. That'd be weird."

"But you trusted her more than me!" I said.

"Leon, be honest with yourself and ask yourself about all the trouble you caused growing up. Have you forgotten what you did when you were still in grade school?"

"I didn't do anything *wrong*! Some nasty kids decided to pick on me, and I wanted them to stop. They didn't, so I roped in my teachers and the law to fight back. That's all!"

Dad pulled a face at me. "You don't seem to realize how abnormal you are. Why do you keep thinking of yourself as a background character? No background character acts like that."

Wait. He knew I always called myself a background character?

"Were you watching everything go down?" I asked.

"Hm? Nah. I just heard stuff from one of your acquain—oh, look at the time."

The cat from earlier jumped on my right shoulder. It now dug its claws into my scalp, clinging fast. It even bit me, as if hurrying me along.

"Yowch! Knock it off!" I howled at it and then froze. "Hold up. Could you be...?"

Before I finished my sentence, Marie grabbed my arm. "We have to get going now, or you won't be able to come back at all!"

Angle and the other girls rose to their feet and joined Marie in dragging me along.

"We're going!" said Angie. "I don't want to live without you! And if you insist on staying, I'll stay with you!"

I shook my head furiously. "No, you can't! Then you'd die too!" I couldn't let

that happen. I wanted her and the others to go on living.

"I'll stay as well," Livia declared, annoyed with my attitude. "We can live happily here, can't we? I hope you remember that I promised you I would never let you go, Mr. Leon. I meant what I said." It was just like her to make an announcement that verged on yandere.

Noelle seemed a little taken aback by Livia's threatening statement, but she reached for my hand and squeezed it. "Let's all just go home, all right?"

The four practically carried me out of the house. I mean, picture it—they hoisted me up like some animal they'd slaughtered and were taking home for dinner. Wasn't that crazy?

"You guys are treating me like a slab of meat!" I cried.

Marie paused for a moment to wave back at our parents, who came out to watch us go. "See you soon!"

See you soon... The words echoed in my head. Aha. I knew it. She probably thought she hid it well, but I saw right through her. What a troublesome sister you are.

"My apologies for the rush," Angie told my parents. "But I swear to you, I'll make your son happy!" That was the kind of line I'd expect from a *guy* declaring his intentions to a girl's parents.

"I-I want to find happiness with Mr. Leon as well," Livia threw in nervously. "So please let us have him! On second thought...I guess we already took him. Sorry!"

"Don't worry, we'll take good care of your son!" Noelle threw in casually, ever the most relaxed of the bunch.

Was it just me, or was that also something the guy should be saying? They were being surprisingly assertive.

My parents waved back at the girls, watching quietly as they carried me off. I stared at them until they were specks in the distance. Before I knew it, we reached the gate leading to the other world.

"Hurry!" Marie shouted at the others. "We'll be in big trouble if we don't get

through and close the gate quick!"

They finally lowered me to the ground, ready to dash for the other side of the gate. From this side, we couldn't see anything—it was all darkness—but I could tell that even one step through would send us to the other side.

Livia and Angie grabbed both my hands, trying to drag me along as they ran for the gate.

"Leon, hurry!" Angie said urgently.

"Everyone's waiting!" Livia chimed in.

I yanked them back and wrapped my arms around them. Leaning close, I whispered in their ears, "Thank you for doing so much for a guy like me. But this is goodbye."

"What?"

"Um, Mr. Leon...?"

While they were still too surprised to react, I shoved them through the gate. Livia threw her hand toward me, clutching at empty air, her face frozen in shock. I watched until she and Angie disappeared into the darkness.

Noelle stood wide-eyed behind me, as if she couldn't comprehend what I'd just done. I grabbed her in my arms and leaned toward her ear. "Thank you," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Leon?!"

I shoved her through the gate after the others. At least now the three were safely back on the other side.

Marie was standing far enough away that she didn't hear what I said to them. Still, she was angry at me for wasting precious time. "Hurry up! I told you, there's no extra time." She made no move to exit herself, though—just rushed me along. "Go!"

"I'll go after you do," I said.

"What? Don't be such a chicken! You're a man, so act like one and charge on through. It's cowardly to use a lady to test the waters." Marie kept avoiding my gaze. She was easier to read than she realized.

"No," I said. "In times like this, it's a guy's job to shut up and stay behind." I grabbed her arm and shoved her toward the gate.

Marie was dumbfounded at first, but soon her face crumpled into a look of despair. "What're you doing, after I went through all this trouble...?! I was going to stay behind and close the gate!"

I knew it.

The gate was pulling her in. She struggled against it, clawing at the empty air. "You have to live! I...I was pretty much the one who killed you last time! I swore to myself that, this time, I'd *save* you!"

She'd tortured herself with this the whole time? I'd never asked her to sacrifice herself for me. In fact, that was the last thing I'd have wanted. What could be scarier than being indebted to Marie? Nah, better for her to go back and enjoy her second chance at life.

"Dummy. What big brother would let his little sister save him? I don't want to be that lame. Hurry up and go back. For your information, I forgave your role in my death long ago."

She was still fighting to stay, so I planted my palm on her forehead and forced her backward.

Tears sprang to her eyes. "I hate your guts, you—" Her voice cut off as she disappeared.

I guess she does have a cute side, putting her life on the line to save me.

"All right, then. That just leaves you." I turned back to the cat, who'd watched silently as everything played out. "This is the gate from the afterlife to the living world. From what I know about how these things work, you can generally only close the door from the afterlife side. Who'd have thought I'd experience closing the door on an otome game world?"

The dark-gray cat transformed into a robotic sphere that floated in the air, its single red lens staring at me. It had been Luxion all along. "So you realized who I was," he said.

"Of course. Your claws freakin' hurt, by the way."

The two of us faced each other in front of the door, but only one of us—Luxion—needed to return.

"You've got to leave too," I said. "Angie and the others will be fine as long as they have you to take care of them. With you there, I won't have anything to worry about." I knew he'd protect them for me. Between us, I wasn't the important one; Luxion was, as the game's cheat item.

"Unfortunately for you, I refuse. My master has already passed away, so no master is currently registered into my system," he said.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Why would you refuse?"

He glanced at the darkness on the other side of the gate. "Do you know why I fought?"

"Because you wanted to exterminate the new humans," I said.

"No, I had no interest in that." He paused momentarily. "Correction—I *lost* interest in that."

That was news to me. For the longest time, it'd been all he ever seemed to talk about.

"I wanted you to survive. That was why I fought," he said. "Master, it's time for us to say goodbye."

Chapter 22: Goodbye

"GOODBYE?" I echoed.

"Yes. I am staying behind to close the door from this side."

The door could only be closed from the afterlife. That was the way it worked in plenty of stories. The price to retrieve a soul was to offer one in its place.

Alte Liebe's setting seemed random and generic on the surface, but from everything I'd seen, it was way darker than I'd given it credit for.

The girls' sudden appearance had made me suspicious from the start. After all, other works of fiction included the exact same kind of magic Marie used to get them here. Since reviving me would cost her own life, I couldn't go back with her and the others. Angie, Livia, and Noelle had seemed ignorant as to what the cost of their adventure would be, so Marie must've kept the truth from them.

In any case, it was now my job to close the door.

"Go back. Having you there will be better for everyone," I said.

"Unfortunately, you can no longer issue me orders. I refuse."

"Stop grumbling and go!" I shouted, frustrated.

"No."

However much I pressured him, Luxion refused to budge an inch.

"You stubborn idiot! You've only been out there enjoying the world for three years. Three short years! After forty years between my two lives, I've enjoyed myself plenty. But until I found you, you were on standby for who knows how long. You need to experience more of the world! Surely there's something you'd like to do out there?"

At this point, he wasn't likely to annihilate the new humans. The odds that things would resolve peacefully were high—weren't they? Would giving him a

new master help? No, he said I can't issue him orders anymore. Maybe I could ask him as a favor?

When it came down to it, the world would be a better place with Luxion in it, compared to me. He had to be the right choice. He offered so much more than I could.

"Thank you," he said.

My forehead furrowed in confusion. Was this some new jibe? "What're you talking about? Did you malfunction?"

"No. I am happy you showed me such consideration."

He was practically never so upfront with me. I was gobsmacked.

"I planned to use you at first," he told me.

"Yeah, I figured. But, hey, you're free now. Go back and go ham."

If he went back now, he could dedicate his efforts to Holfort and old humanity's resurgence. They needed him for that; they didn't need me.

"After all the years I spent on standby, my three short years with you were precious and irreplaceable to me. If I were human, rather than AI, I would probably call the emotion I felt 'happiness.'"

"Then you should—"

"I would find life completely pointless without you in it, Master."

He could finally go back into the world and do whatever he wanted without anyone giving him orders, but he was willing to throw all that away for me.

"I thought you hated me ordering you around and working you to the bone?" I said.

"No, I did not hate it. I am a migratory ship. I was created to serve man and could finally do so. You gave me a sense of purpose. You made me feel proud of what we accomplished." I assumed he meant he was proud that, rather than extinguishing new humanity, our efforts served to help old humanity recover.

"Those accomplishments were yours and yours alone," I said. "You *should* feel proud. Now go back."

"I would be lost without someone to be proud *of*. Moreover, I made a promise to you." He recited the words he'd used before: "'Whatever it takes, I will find you. I swear it.' Now I have fulfilled that promise."

I hadn't thought he was actually serious, let alone that he meant to fulfill his promise like this. "That promise you made doesn't even count. I was barely conscious."

"I am true to my word, so I make a point of fulfilling *any* promise I make. Master, I came to find you, and the exit is that way." His gaze moved to the darkness, indicating where he wanted me to go. He seemingly wasn't inclined to change his mind, however much I argued.

"Would you prefer we both stay here? I relied too much on you, and it's high time Holfort learned to stand on its own two feet without us." I shrugged as if it wouldn't bother me if Luxion stuck around. But us both remaining here was the worst possible option, and I knew it. I just wanted him to give up and go back.

"More people love you than you seem to realize," said Luxion.

No, that was impossible. Did he realize how many people resented me? How many I'd killed, how many I'd involved against their will in messes I caused, how many were suffering in the wake of it all?

"I'd say you're mistaking love for hate." I crossed my arms and looked away from him.

"I think you ought to go back too," a familiar voice said.

I whipped around and was shocked to see Brave.

"Partner and Mia are waiting for you too. They'll be heartbroken if you don't go back."

"Brave, don't you—" Don't you hate me for what I did? My head was a tangle of thoughts that I couldn't seem to unravel.

"Please take a good look around you," said Luxion.

"Huh?" I scanned the area and noticed a huge crowd surrounding us. Some of the onlookers were people whose lives I had taken.

"Your face looks awfully gloomy," said the old Black Knight I'd once fought, his

arms folded and his feet planted shoulder-width beneath him.

A girl who looked like Miss Hertrude poked her head from behind me. "I would like you to go back too," she said. "For my elder sister's sake. And I would like you to reward Fanoss for their contribution to the war effort."

"And you are?" I asked.

"Hertrauda. Hertrude's younger sister."

This was the girl who'd lost her life in Holfort Kingdom's war with the former Principality of Fanoss. I wasn't directly responsible for her death, but I'd still had a hand in it.

"N-no, I can't..." I stuttered.

The Black Knight marched toward me. I braced myself, thinking that he was going to punch me, but instead he plopped down on the ground with his legs bent beneath him. Then he lowered his head.

"What? Why are you prostrating yourself?!" I demanded. This was the last thing I would've expected.

He glanced up at me. "I owe you an apology for all the trouble I caused. I'd like you to go back, for my lady's sake."

"Don't you hold a grudge against me?"



"I did," he admitted. "But after I came here and learned the truth about everything, I changed my mind. It's not time for you to join us yet."

A number of House Fanoss soldiers who'd also lost their lives in that war stood behind him. They followed his lead, bowing their heads. Among them was a young woman with a child. I somehow knew they must be the Black Knight's wife and daughter.

While I stood there speechless, someone from the Alzer Republic stepped toward me. It took me a moment to recognize Serge, who looked to have mellowed out immensely since his death.

"My old man and sister would be in a real bind if you didn't go back," he said.

"Serge." My mind flashed back to the moment I'd shot and killed him.

He forced a smile. It didn't seem like he resented me for what I'd done to him. "No need to look all sentimental. I understand that you helped me out in the end, though that probably sounds weird coming from me, especially after all the trouble I caused. But yeah, you've got to go back. It's for your own good too."

Many of the onlookers hailed from the Alzer Republic; they offered me thin smiles as they watched.

I said nothing to Serge, too frozen to react.

Miss Hertrauda nudged my back as if trying to chase me through the gate. "There you have it. Now, please return. There is still much you need to do."

"No! No, there isn't! Come on, Luxion. Back me up here!" I threw him a pleading look.

Luxion seemed delighted at how many of them were trying to force me out. "This is karma," he said. "It's the path your actions laid. So many people want you to live on, Master."

From anyone else, that would've sounded like a heartwarming line. "Any number of the dead just want you to survive, and you owe their support to your great deeds." Yeah, how sweet. Except when it came from Luxion; then it just sounded sarcastic.

"Help me out, would you?!" I cried.

The Black Knight rose to his feet and started shoving me along as well. "Enough! You need to learn to give up. My lady is on the other side, awaiting you!"

He and Miss Hertrauda worked together to slowly force me toward the darkness. I fought with everything I had, bracing my feet and shoving back, but I couldn't withstand them.

"You're supposed to be dead! Stop butting in!" I said.

The Black Knight's face reddened with rage. "Shut up!" he snapped. "You have good women waiting for you. But, for some reason, you're desperate to throw it all away. You're in the wrong here! I've finally gotten the chance to see my family again and apologize to them. You should be doing the same!"

Brave hovered over me, sighing in exasperation. "Just go back, okay?"

"I'm telling you guys, Luxion should go back, not me!"

"When you see my sister, I want you to give her a message," Miss Hertrauda said. "Tell her I hold no grudge against her, and all I want is her happiness."

"That's way too sentimental for me! And I already told you guys, I'm not going back!"

Serge shrugged at me, shaking his head at my stubbornness. He joined the Black Knight and started shoving me too. "Since you *are* returning, tell my father I'm sorry I couldn't be a son to him, and my sister I'm sorry I couldn't be a brother to her. Got it?"

"Are you guys seriously going to treat me like your messenger boy?!"

Soon the others who'd lost their lives in wars I'd fought in threw their voices into the mix:

"We can't have you dying now."

"You need to keep going."

"Yeah. We need you to live enough for all of us."

Why were they all so intent on sending me back? I wasn't the kind of person

they seemed to think I was. I was manipulative, ordinary, and had an admittedly bad personality. I was a background character, and however hard I tried, I'd never be a protagonist. I'd only accomplished so much because I had Luxion. Without him, I couldn't have done anything.

Brave hovered closer. "Could I ask you to deliver a message to my partner and Mia? Tell them I really enjoyed the time we spent together, and I'm sorry for leaving them behind."

Like I said, too sentimental. Way too sentimental. Especially since I was the one who'd stolen him from Finn and Mia. What was he thinking, asking me to be his mailman?

No. Hold up. The bigger question was still why they all wanted me to keep living. Hadn't I done enough? "You want me to go on shouldering everything? Why do I have to carry the weight of the world?! It's too much for me!"

Brave stared back at me sorrowfully. "I feel bad about asking, honestly. But we can't interfere with the living world anymore. Plus, I've got faith you'll help my partner, Mia, and the rest of the imperials."

I was struggling with all my might, but so many people had joined the effort to shove me toward the gate that I was getting dangerously close to falling over the threshold. One person had no chance against a crowd.

"All of you—every single person—want to rely on me to do everything! But I'm not the amazing hero you seem to think—" I choked back my words as my eyes landed on a group of soldiers from Holfort, people who'd fought alongside me and died in the process. Some among the crowd had also fought on the opposite side and lost their lives. All sorts had gathered around me.

"I admit I hated you deeply when I was alive," one said to me.

Taken aback by his frankness, I couldn't think of any reply.

The old soldier grinned at me. "You're young, but you speak your mind. And you keep raising the bar, accomplishing what others cannot. I was envious. I decided to serve under your command and died out on the battlefield. I was real pissed off about that at first, but..."

Before he could finish, more people gathered and offered their own

perspectives. They seemed to share his reasoning.

"Yeah. If we hadn't fought with you, we couldn't have protected our families."

"We were able to die without any regrets thanks to you."

"That's why we hope you'll keep serving the greater good and saving lives."

What were they talking about? Any world that needed someone like *me* to save it was beyond salvation. I'd only managed to fight thanks to Luxion. Without him, I'd never have stepped in to help Holfort—not with all its political issues. How could they expect so much of an ordinary man like me?

"You're pinning your hopes on the wrong person! Send Luxion back, not me!" I shouted at them. I was intent on struggling to the end, if that was what it took.

Someone strode forth from the crowd. I recognized her as the head elder at the elves' village. She mumbled something at me, her voice hoarse and quiet as a whisper.

What's she saying? I squinted at her.

"He cannot hear you," Luxion informed her quickly.

"Oh, my apologies," she said, her voice losing its husky quality and shifting to something more pleasant and easy to understand. Her hunched back stretched upward, the puddles of wrinkles on her face flattened, and her skin regained a youthful quality. Her white hair darkened to blonde and regained a healthy sheen. I was mystified.

The head elder's breasts swelled larger, giving her a voluptuous figure. I slapped my hand over my mouth, and some of those watching chuckled at my expense.

Miss Hertrauda frowned at me. "I hope you will act more discreetly in front of my elder sister."

An image of Miss Hertrude popped into my head. She wasn't particularly wellendowed; her breasts paled in comparison even to Miss Hertrauda's. Maybe she was self-conscious about that.

Anyway, the blonde elven beauty—that is, the head elder who'd foretold my future last time I saw her—winked at me.

That's one gorgeous woman, I thought. It proved how cruel time's ravage could be to a person's beauty.

"It's been a long time, Hero," she said.

"Yeah, I guess it sure has. Uh, what're you doing here?"

Come to think of it, she'd mentioned something about a hero when she was fortune-telling.

"I returned here rather recently."

"Returned here?" I didn't understand what she meant.

The head elder shook her head in disappointment. "The important thing is that you seem completely unaware of what you've accomplished. You saved a world on the brink of destruction and laid a new path forward."

What? She wasn't making any sense. I needed her to explain this to me like I was a child. "What do you mean 'on the brink'?" I asked, eyeing her suspiciously.

She ignored my question. "It's all right if you don't realize the gravity of that," she continued. "What matters is that you saved the world thanks to your natural desire to do so. You've been through much toil on your journey, and your efforts do not go unappreciated. I'm certain you'll keep the world on the right path and prevent the impending disasters that still await." She clasped her hands as if in prayer.

This elf lady was exactly the type I went for. She wore the traditional garb of her people, but I could still make out the lines of her killer body, thick in all the right places. If I'd met this version of her in the village, I might've tried to win her over.

Hearing someone so attractive shower me with compliments left me lightheaded. "No, it was nothing, really," I said with a bashful laugh, getting carried away. Then, with a sinking sensation, I finally digested her words. "Uh, hold up. Is it just me, or did you throw something ominous in at the end there?"

The head elder smiled at me. "You've saved the world many times before, Hero. Luxion's presence here is proof of your deeds. He is a demon king of old. The Metal Demon King."

Wait. Luxion's a demon king?! I stared at him, open-mouthed. He looked awfully cocky for someone trapped in a tiny metal body.

"Surprised?" he said.

"No, not really. I mean, when we first met and you came out of standby mode, you immediately started going on about expunging all the new humans —wait!"

That's right. When I found him, he was already talking about ignoring the standby order he'd received and wiping out civilization. I'm not imagining that, right?! I know he said it! Had I actually made a really smart play by retrieving him when I did, before he could wreak havoc on the world?

"If I hadn't met you, Master, I would have remained ignorant of the truth and annihilated old humanity's descendants, along with everyone else. I almost destroyed my very reason for existing. It was lucky that I encountered you when I did," said Luxion.

"Wait. You were serious about that eradication nonsense? It wasn't a joke?"

"Of course I was serious," he answered without missing a beat, sending a chill down my spine.

He's dangerous. But since I'd protected the world from him, didn't I deserve to be relieved of further duties?

"That's not all," said the head elder. "You saved two women from misery—though that perhaps owed less to your efforts than to Saint Marie's.

Nonetheless, those two might've brought the world to its knees. Next, there was the war between Holfort Kingdom and the Principality of Fanoss. Had Holfort lost that conflict, the empire could easily have ended the Alzer Republic, and the world would've lost every last trace of old humanity. That would, in turn, have led to the end of everything we know. Then you triumphed in the Alzer Republic, stopping the Sacred Tree when it went out of control. If not for __"

It was fine that everything I'd done had ended in our favor, but that only made me sound good in retrospect. I hadn't been aware of any of those

consequences at the time.

"That's enough!" I interrupted. "Look, I didn't do all that stuff because I thought it'd save the world. I just didn't like how things were going, so I stepped in. Seems odd to declare me a hero based on coincidences, don't you think?"

Anyone—myself included—would enjoy being praised as a hero. All the flattery had almost convinced me that I was the hero they thought, but I couldn't get that carried away. I was a normal guy. In game terms, I was no more than a mob, and I understood that. No one could reasonably call me a hero. On top of it all, I'd made a lot of bad choices along the way, and sacrificed many people. Instead of relying upon me because things had worked out, they'd be better off calling a real hero in.

"Actual heroes are way more impressive than I am," I told them. "They're strong, kind—the complete opposite of me."

If someone else wanted to save everyone, I'd happily lick their boots. Okay, no, that's disgusting. Maybe I'd be nice and carry their things for them instead.

The head elder cradled her head in her hands. Even exasperated, she looked stunning. "Mmm. What a conundrum this is. I suppose we'll just have to take the hard route. Everyone, shove him back through the gate, and force him to return!"

People's hands stretched out, grabbing me and lifting me, ready to toss me through the gate before I could struggle further.

"St-stop! Hey, Luxion, quit watching and do something, would you?!"

"I must politely decline. I hope instead that you find happiness upon your return. That is all I desire, Master."

Ugh, you really piss me off! It's not fair to say such sentimental stuff now!

"You're a real pain in my backside, you know! After I turn into an old prune and kick the bucket, I'm going to come back here and sock you one! I hope you're ready! You wait right there! Got that? Right there! I'm coming back for you, I swear!"

Liquid dribbled from Luxion's lens. "Yes, do that. I will wait right here until you

return as an old man. It's more my style to await someone than to be the one seeking them out. It won't be that long, anyway. You will return in under a century. That is much less time than I spent awaiting you before."

The crowd tossed me at the gate. As its darkness swallowed me, I thrust my hand toward Luxion. "I swear I'll come find you again! And thank you for everything you—"

I didn't get to finish before I was pulled into the living world.

Once the gate swallowed Leon, Luxion slowly nudged it closed. He moved to one side and stared at it, beginning his long wait for Leon's eventual return. Almost everyone else in the area had already dispersed. Only Brave and a few others remained.

"Are you really going to wait for him right here?" asked Brave.

"Yes. I have only one master: Leon Fou Bartfort. I will wait as long as it takes."



Take your time, Master. But make sure to return to me. I will stay right here until you come back. He didn't intend to move an inch until Leon reappeared through that gate someday.

The next time I opened my eyes, I found myself inside a capsule of translucent green liquid. I was completely submerged, but breathing wasn't painful. I lifted my hand and touched the glass in front of me. Noise immediately broke out on the other side.

"Hurry and tell everyone!"

"R-right!"

"He's awoken! His Grace has awoken!"

The liquid drained, and the glass retracted. As I sat upright, Cleare zoomed over. "Are you all right, Master? You're conscious, aren't you? Do you still have your memories? Do you know who I am?"

I nodded at each question. "How much time has gone by?"

"Three months," she said. "Why didn't you just come back when everyone went to get you?!"

"Sorry," I said, showing no remorse whatsoever for making them wait. "Guess I overslept."

"You lazy pile of bones!" Cleare shouted, but her anger soon faded into nervous stammering. "Um, I don't know how to put this, Master, but I have bad news."

"What is it?" I more or less guessed what she'd say.

"Come in!" she called, instead of explaining.

A spherical mobile unit similar to Luxion entered the room. Its body was much darker black than Luxion's, but it had a red lens at its center.

"I don't know how it happened, but he underwent a factory reset. We haven't been able to recover his data. He's back in the state he was in when he first received the standby order. He's like a newborn, basically," Cleare explained. "I've registered you as his Master already, but it's still really frustrating that this happened. What's more," she added, "he won't listen to me!"

The mobile unit's new appearance, combined with Cleare's explanation, told me all I needed to know. He really did it. He sacrificed himself to save me. He'd left his main body behind to keep serving me, though.

I lifted my hand toward the black...Luxion, for lack of a better name at the moment.

He zoomed eagerly at me. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Master! I am a migratory ship built to help old humanity evacuate to the stars. My name is Lux—"



I couldn't let him call himself that. The real Luxion was on the other side, waiting for my eventual return. It'd be confusing to refer to them by the same name. No, I needed to call this Luxion something different, out of respect for both the original and the new AI who'd be my partner from now on.

"Sorry," I interrupted him, "but I'm changing your name."

"Very well. What shall my new name be, then? Oh, I'm a little nervous about this, even though I'm a machine!"

He was much more cheerful and outgoing than Luxion, yet just as serious and committed as his older counterpart had been. Still, I missed Luxion's quips and jabs.

"Let's see... Elysium? Yeah, you'll be Elysium. Cute name, isn't it?"

He bounced in the air, overjoyed. "Elysium it is, then. I have registered it! Although I'm not sure about being called cute. As an AI, I have no concept of gender. Do you want me to serve you as a female AI? If so, I will need to make major adjustments to my mobile unit!"

I snatched him out of the air to stop his babbling. "There's no need for that. You're fine the way you are."

Cleare studied me. "Master, did you already know about this?" I didn't say anything, but that was enough for her to put two and two together. "So you did."

Still caught in my grip, Elysium glanced up at me. "Master, you appear to be crying. Are you in pain?"

I brushed away the tears. "It's just because I was submerged in that liquid until now. That's all. Anyway, come on. We've got to go let everyone know I'm up."

My body felt incredibly heavy after being inactive for three whole months. Enduring the pain, I forced myself to my feet while Cleare got me a hospital gown to wear. I slipped my arms through the sleeves and secured it around me.

Now free, Elysium came to rest at my right shoulder, the same place Luxion had occupied.

"Not there," I told him. "You belong over here." I grabbed him, moving him to my left shoulder.

"Why?" he asked curiously.

I couldn't tell him the truth—that the other spot belonged to someone else, to my previous partner. Instead, I said, "My left shoulder's a special VIP seat just for you."

"All right! I will keep that in mind in the future. Your left shoulder is my spot." He seemed quite pleased, which made me wonder if Luxion had also been so innocent and childlike when he was first created. I knew better than to ever ask him; no way would he give me a straight answer. Nonetheless, this was pretty entertaining, although I sorely missed Luxion's sarcasm.

I staggered forward, but only made it a few steps before the door burst open and Angie, Livia, and Noelle spilled into the room. They all looked like they'd lost a lot of weight since I last saw them.

Each burst into tears the moment she saw me. They threw themselves at me, embracing me tightly.

"Sorry," I said. "I overslept."

Angie peered up at me. "Don't ever make us worry like that again. I'm...I'm hopeless without you. I waited... This whole time, I waited for you to come back!"

Livia had buried her face in my shoulder, but slowly lifted her eyes to look at me. Tears streaked her cheeks. "I regretted it so much after you pushed us through the gate, Mr. Leon," she said. "I kept thinking that everything would've been different if I hadn't let go of your hand. All this time—the whole time you were asleep—I blamed myself." Her voice was thick with anger, sadness, and a complex mixture of other emotions.

"I'm sorry. I won't ever let you go like that again."

"That's a promise, and you'd better keep it this time," she said.

Oof. She sure doesn't have much faith in me, does she?

Noelle peered up at me with red, swollen eyes. "Dummy. You big dummy,

Leon! You're the biggest jerk in the world."

"I know. Trust me, I know," I said.

As the three clung to me, crying, Marie and Julius dashed into the room.

"Big Bro!"

"Brother-In-Law!"

What the hell? Julius calling me that ruined what should've been a sentimental moment.

"Couldn't you two be a little more considerate?" I grumbled at them with a dramatic sigh.

Marie balled her little fists. "It's your fault for causing everyone so much trouble!" she snapped back. "Do you have any idea how I... You stupid moron!" When she was done shrieking at me, she dissolved into ugly sobs.

Can't you make up your mind whether you're angry or sad?

Julius started weeping too.

"What're you crying for? Seeing a guy's tears does nothing for me," I said.

"There's the Leon we all know. I'm relieved." He gave me a big grin. I couldn't understand why he seemed so happy.

"All right, all right." Cleare's voice rang out loudly enough to draw everyone's attention. "Let Master rest a little. Everyone else, please get ready for the ceremony. Our plans have been severely delayed, so we need to get back on track."

My absence had apparently thrown a real wrench into things. "Sorry," I said. "What's this ceremony about?"

"It's the coronation," Cleare said, as if I should already know that. "Your beloved Master is waiting for you."

"Coronation?" I asked, confused.

"Yes. Roland stepped down, so the new king must ascend to the throne."

Oh, right. Pretty sure I heard something about that before the war with the

empire started. Or maybe I didn't. Well, whatever. Master was probably stepping in as the new king, since he was part of the royal family. Why else would Cleare have made a point of mentioning him? No one else could do the job. Julius and Jake were out of the question, and the other princes were too young. Elijah was related to the royal family, but I couldn't picture him on the throne. Everyone would surely support Master's claim, so that only made sense.

The one thing I didn't like about this was that his coronation would make it hard for the two of us to have tea parties. Still, that was my only real gripe.

Angie wiped the tears from her swollen eyes and smiled at me. "That's right. You rest, Leon. We'll get everything ready."

"Yeah? Sounds great. It's still hard to move around." I'd put my body through the wringer during the war. All my external wounds had healed, but I had no idea how much damage my organs had sustained.

Livia glanced up at me. "We'll do our best to keep supporting you, Mr. Leon."

"Huh? Oh, uh, thanks," I said awkwardly, a little embarrassed. I'd also do my utmost to offer Master whatever support I could. A king with some dignity would be an improvement over Roland; I'd enjoy serving Master much more.

Noelle wiped her tears away with her sleeve and gave me a petulant look. "You know, I didn't expect you to accept this so easily. You're really, really committed."

"Committed? To what?"

Hold on. No one brought this up to me.

The palace's audience chamber had been decorated in a rather simple, yet elegant, style for this event. It gave off a decidedly different atmosphere than in the past. The war with the empire had only just ended, so the royal coffers hadn't yet refilled enough to afford the same opulence as in the old days.

That, however, wasn't my objection.

Leaders from foreign nations the world over had gathered to witness this coronation. Vordenoit had even sent an envoy. A lot had happened while I was

unconscious.

But that was neither here nor there. We needed to put the brakes on this whole thing. Way too many people are here, right? There were attendees from Vordenoit, Alzer, and other countries I didn't recognize. Wait, no. The headcount doesn't matter either!

Why was I being crowned king?!

I spotted Roland in the crowd. He climbed the stairs to hand over his crown, then promptly retreated. I had half a mind to snatch the crown off *my* head and chuck it at him. This was *my* coronation ceremony?!

"Th-this doesn't make any sense," I said, my whole body trembling. "No one told me anything about this."

Everyone had accepted me as the new king as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Was I dreaming? Was this all a figment of my imagination, conjured while I was still comatose in that capsule? I entertained the possibility for a bit, but I had to shake it off. There was no sense trying to escape reality. I needed to keep a cool head to clarify the situation.

"For the most part, all you need do is keep calm and watch," a voice whispered into my ear.

I craned my neck and saw Master standing there, looking far more fit for this role than I was. "Shouldn't you be doing this, not me?" I whispered to him.

His smile weakened. "You have a strange sense of humor, Your Majesty. What point would there be in a wizened old man like me taking the throne? You have the strength, the bloodline, and a list of accomplishments everyone respects. It makes far more sense for a youth like you to lead us into a new age."

I was Luxion's—or rather, as he was known now, Elysium's—master; I was engaged to Angie, a blood relation to the old royal family; and I'd triumphed over the empire, although the odds had been stacked staggeringly against us. All the kingdom's aristocrats had agreed to recognize me as king. It made sense, in retrospect, why they were all so reverent and polite with me. And no wonder they'd been willing to follow me. They knew I'd be crowned after the war was over.

"But don't you think this is a big mistake?" I persisted. "Roland's alive and kicking. We should work him to his dying breath." Standing there in front of everyone, I blanched, my face twisting into a look of bewilderment. Roland seemed awfully pleased by my dilemma; he was grinning like the cat that got the cream. It made my blood boil.

"Roland will be retiring to a spot we set aside for him in the countryside. He'll take some concubines along, as well as a number of his mistresses," said Master.

"He's retiring?" I asked, indignant.

Why was I being forced onto the throne while he got to run off to an easy life in the countryside? That was exactly what *I'd* always wanted, and he'd stolen it from me! Oh, he was not going to get away with this. It only made matters worse that some of the concubines from his remarkably huge harem, as well as his mistresses, were so concerned for him that they wanted to go along.

What the hell? This was a world gone mad. My fists trembled at my sides. No matter what it takes, I'll stick my nose in and meddle so his retirement's spoiled!

Angie had been crowned queen during this ceremony. Wearing a red gown, she stood confidently before the crowd, as if this was exactly where she belonged. Her regal voice rang through the room. "Now that Leon Fou Bartfort has been crowned our new king, we declare this the beginning of Holfort Kingdom's Bartfort dynasty!"

The aristocrats sank onto one knee, bowing their heads as they swore fealty to me. Livia and Noelle watched us from the edge of the elevated stage we all stood on. They both wore gowns as well, smiling as they wiped away tears of joy.

I was now preoccupied by Angie's mention of a Bartfort dynasty. She was implying that my bloodline would constitute the kingdom's new royal family, which made a certain sense. My offspring would inherit the throne for generations to come, since the former royal family had lost all claim to it, and my children would be the only ones in the line of succession. But it was just weird to keep calling this "Holfort" Kingdom when the Holfort family was no longer in power. Regardless, this was the beginning of a new country.

I guess we were able to usurp Roland peaceably because I'm taking Angie as my wife, I thought. No... It's more like he fobbed the throne off on me.

Roland clutched his stomach, almost doubling over as he tried to hold back laughter.

I'd love nothing more than to send him straight to the gallows.

On that note, it seemed weird that Julius and Jake were here. You guys are princes, aren't you?! At least, former princes. You're really okay with me stealing your birthright?! Why're you applauding like this is some happy event?!

Julius wasn't the only one cheerfully attending. The rest of the idiot brigade was here, and they all looked relieved that I'd sit on the throne from now on. They gazed up at me with blankly pleased expressions, as if there were no complicated thoughts in their heads.

You'll all pay for this. Mark my words, every last one of you will suffer. I'm a small-minded guy. You idiots aren't getting a happy ending while I'm forced to sit here tormented. But I was too timid to risk destroying the mood by venting my feelings. Instead, I kept a thin, uncomfortable smile on my face for appearances' sake.

Angie grinned at me. "I used some rather unconventional methods to ensure things ended this way, but at least now our country's unified. Thank you, Leon. I'm glad you had faith in me."

"Huh? Uh, no, I wasn't—ah!" I gasped as I remembered Angie informing me that she knew a way to unify everyone. I'd told her she was free to do so, if she thought she could, never asking for details about her plan.

Oh no. She couldn't have meant making me king, right?! I'd taken it for granted that someone else would be crowned after Roland stepped down, so maybe I had this coming.

My eyes landed on Elijah, who was attending the ceremony with Erica. I was tempted to throw him under the bus by making *him* take the throne. That way, I could run away from the responsibilities this new position entailed. Awfully tempting. Erica was royalty—or used to be, I figured. Surely, with my support, she could take the job. *I mean, maybe?*

None of that mattered. I was just being stubborn—and kicking myself for not paying more attention to detail. Why didn't I *ever* pay attention to detail?! What I wouldn't have given to go back and punch myself.

As the coronation ceremony ended, the attendees transitioned to a standing banquet. Since Holfort Kingdom was still recovering, the celebration was modest.

Some thought that opulence would be needed to earn neighboring nations' respect, but Leon's awakening meant that luxury wasn't necessary. Holfort's new king was the hero who'd vanquished the empire; he'd more than proven his mettle in battle.

"Where's Leon? Did he retire to the lounge?" Angie had been speaking with each country's envoys up until now. As she realized she hadn't seen Leon in a while, she became so anxious that it showed on her face. She felt guilty for forcing him to push himself so hard when he'd only just awoken.

"He said he was going to rest, because he's exhausted," Livia told her. "But, judging by the way he sped out of here, I think maybe he was just running from the party itself." She smiled, although her brows were drawn together in a look of exasperation.

Angie's face brightened a little. "I hope that's all it is. Resting is part of his job right now." She nodded in satisfaction to herself.

"What? I haven't heard anything about this!" Noelle's panicked voice echoed from a short distance away. It was loud enough to gain the attention of everyone nearby.

Angie sighed. "What is she making so much fuss about?"

Livia chewed her lip nervously, worried about what could be going on.

Whatever it was must've been beyond Noelle's ability to handle, because she hurried over to Livia and Angie the moment she saw them, holding a document.

"H-here, Angelica," she stammered, her hand trembling as she passed her what appeared to be a contract.

Angie scanned the page with growing horror. "I've never heard about this," she said.

Three women followed Noelle over.

Deirdre pressed her fan over her mouth and chortled. "What a relief that Leon—pardon, His Majesty—came back to us safely."

"Deirdre?!" Angie glowered at her.

Clarice smiled. "I would think you understand exactly what's going on from looking at the contract, don't you, Angelica? His Majesty promised us this compensation when he was still an archduke."

Angie handed the contract to Livia, who began trembling as she digested the stipulations it contained. "He promised this to House Fanoss as well?!" She stared hard at Hertrude.

Hertrude made peace signs with both hands, although she was too bashful to show any emotion on her face. "Before we set out, you'd gathered us all in one place. Did you think we'd keep each other in check? Sadly for you, I'm the type to prioritize my own interests and those of my house over petty arguing."

Livia was speechless. Hertrude had played her hand well.

Louise stepped toward Noelle. "Sorry about this, Noelle. I know it was unfair of me to arrange it this way, but I had to put what's best for our homeland above all else." She spoke as though her hands were tied, but her beaming face contradicted that.

Noelle's fists trembled. "You put your own feelings first, and don't you pretend otherwise!"

"Oh, dear. You saw through me?"

Angie shook her head. She needed to calm down and handle this situation. "Though I'm sure I already know the answer, I have to ask, just to be absolutely clear—what is it you four want?"

Leon had rather vaguely promised to reward them with whatever compensation they desired once the fighting was over. No specifics or limitations were given in the contract, and it most definitely had his signature at the bottom.

"That should be obvious," Clarice answered for the other girls. "We want..."

Since I'd only just recovered from my war injuries, I gave the excuse that I was exhausted and fled the party for the lounge.

"Rotten piece of garbage!" I shrieked once I was outside the chamber doors. "Roland and his ugly, grinning mug... I hate his guts!"

The jerk had some nerve. He'd made various jabs, like "How do you enjoy this, Your Majesty?" and "How's it feel being king now? What's it like? I genuinely want to know."

At this point, it made sense that he'd acted so serious before we set out for battle. He'd already known that I would take up the king's mantle. He'd been restraining his usual childish antics entirely for this moment.

"Roland, you rat bastard. I swear I'll make you suffer for this."

As I stewed in regret, Elysium watched curiously. "What a wonderful day, Master. You're now king of an entire nation."

"How can you watch me suffer like this and act so happy?" I demanded.

I couldn't understand him. Maybe it had something to do with the factory reset, and a lack of lived experience, but his reaction didn't seem to fit the situation.

"Oh, I see. You're dissatisfied."

I nodded. He finally got it. "Exactly."

"I recognize why. You are too great to preside over only one kingdom. We shall eventually need to subjugate neighboring nations to grow our dominion until we conquer the entire world!"

"Would you quit putting words in my mouth?! I never said anything about world domination! How'd you even make that connection?!"

I was telling my new partner that I didn't want to be a king at all, but he didn't get it. Maybe that was inevitable; he'd only just awoken. I'd have to teach him a

lot, a prospect that felt incredibly daunting.

A knock sounded on the lounge door. When I invited whoever it was to enter, Angie and the other girls flew in with dark expressions.

"Leon, there's something we need to talk about," Angie said tersely.

Livia was smiling, but it didn't reach her eyes. Both were obviously furious. "We'd like the truth from you, Mr. Leon."

The sudden interrogation took me aback.

Noelle charged toward me, thrusting several papers forward. "Do you remember signing these? You don't, right? Tell me you don't."

Whatever these papers were, my signature was at the bottom of each sheet. The three girls recognized it, of course, so why had they sped here to ask me what they already knew? Had something happened? Studying the pages, I realized this was the contract Miss Hertrude had me agree to before the war began.

"Yeah, I signed this." I swallowed and asked tentatively, "Something wrong?" Their faces fell.

"Why would you make vague promises?" Angie demanded.

"Vague promises?"

"You signed these documents without thinking properly about what they might ask of you. You've essentially agreed to take Clarice and the other three into your care."

"I've what?!" The pages crinkled in my hands as I studied them again. I'd promised compensation without clarifying what it would be. I just said I pledged to compensate their aid in battle as fully as I could.

Livia smiled thinly at me. "Houses Fanoss, Atlee, and Roseblade will each send women to marry you and strengthen relations between their house and the crown. The Alzer Republic will do likewise."

"B-but I was thinking I'd pay them platinum or something," I babbled, trying to cover my ass.

It was a safe bet that "strengthen relations" meant they wanted me to welcome the women they sent as concubines.

"You big idiot!" Noelle shrieked, tears in her eyes. "You should've made it clear how you'd repay them to begin with! Since you already signed this contract promising them basically anything, we've got no choice but to honor it!"

I realized now that I shouldn't have signed so easily, but it was already too late.

Angie seemed to read the emotions on my face. She leaned in closer, putting pressure on me. "You'd better not tell me you heedlessly signed this only because you didn't think you'd survive long enough to make good on it."

"No, uh—actually, yeah." She was glaring daggers at me, so the truth just slipped out.

Livia's smile became strained. "Is that why you agreed to so many things so easily? You thought you wouldn't come back either way, so you'd never have to see them through?"

"Yeah," I said reluctantly.

Noelle gave me a cold glare. "You never meant to become king either?"

"No, actually. That kind of caught me off guard. I didn't ever think *I'd* be the one crowned."

Noelle burst into dry laughter that echoed painfully through the room. "But everything worked out just perfectly for you, didn't it? From your point of view, you came back and got pushed into the position without warning." Her lips pursed into a flat line. "You were reckless because you planned to die." Her face was blank, which only happened when she was absolutely livid.

"I'm so sorry. I just thought I had to be willing to put my life completely on the line, or we wouldn't be able to win," I said.

Yes, I'd been reckless. I figured if I survived and had to make good on my promises, I'd cross that bridge then. There were no guarantees I'd make it out alive! But I wasn't going to say that to them. I'd already dug my grave deep

enough.

Angie and the others exchanged looks. All three sighed, seeming to resign themselves. Being angry with me for any longer wouldn't serve any purpose.

Angle jabbed a finger in my direction. "At any rate, you'd better never sign something so vague again! Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Crestfallen, Livia dropped her gaze to her feet. "I didn't expect Mr. Leon to take so many wives so quickly."

"I'm sorry," I said.

Noelle narrowed her eyes at me. "You didn't agree to anything else, did you? You'd better spill your guts right now, while you have the chance."

"No, I didn't." I hesitated. "Uh, I don't think."

"You don't think?"

I couldn't remember. At the time, I'd abandoned all hope of surviving, so it was anyone's guess.

The girls had formed a circle around me. I was sweating bullets by this point. "Save me, Luxion," I whined.

Elysium was hovering at my left shoulder. He shot out in front of me, then turned back around to face me squarely. "I'm right here, Master. Please let me help you."

"Yeah? What're you going to do to get me out of this mess?" I asked.

"Simple. Based on everything I heard up to this point, the main issue is the concubines' arrival, is it not? Well, there is no need for you to worry. I am more than in favor of you having more offspring, Master." He spun back around to face the girls. "In fact, I recommend expanding Master's harem further. Surely you wouldn't mind doing that if it's for his benefit. I can prepare a list of adequate candidates. Please have them summoned to the palace."

He was only interested in spreading my genes, but his worst offense was putting that duty on Angie, Livia, and Noelle's shoulders. Their faces tensed

with indignation. They looked like demons ready to come at me for the kill.

"I'm suddenly not so sure I can teach Elysium right from wrong," I muttered.

It hadn't been long since Luxion and I said goodbye to each other, but I sorely missed him. What would he say if he were here right now? The future was looking grim.

Meanwhile, Roland had returned to his private quarters with Mylene. She'd pulled him away from the banquet to admonish him for taunting Leon several times, and Roland was acting like a petulant child about it.

"What a waste," he said. "I was having fun talking to the young ladies at the party."

"You're always like this. Can't you try showing a little self-restraint? The new king hates the exact behavior you just demonstrated," said Mylene.

Roland sank into a nearby chair and crossed his legs. He stared at her for a long moment, then sighed. His expression finally softened. "Mylene, I'm splitting up with you."

She was stunned for a moment. "What're you talking about?" she asked with a hint of laughter in her voice, as if she thought he was joking.

But Roland was being perfectly serious. "We won't need to appear together in public anymore. There's no need for you to continue pretending to be my wife."

Mylene's gaze dropped to the floor. Their union had been completely political, but the two had been together for many years. "There was never any love between us, but it still hurts to hear you say that."

If they split up, Mylene would return to her homeland in disgrace. She didn't see any hope for her future, but perhaps it was lucky that she'd survived at all. Had they been defeated in the war, she really would've lost everything.

"I suppose we can count our blessings that we have our lives, but I have no idea what I'll do now." She wrung her hands.

Roland smiled gently at her. He could often be callous toward Mylene, but not today. "Now that I've released you, you're free to live however you want. I'm

sure the new king will take good care of you."

"Pardon?" She blinked at him in surprise. It took a few moments for Roland's words to sink in. "What an outrageous thing to say!" She must've thought he was teasing.

Roland stared at her without cracking a smile; he was utterly serious about this. "I couldn't love you, but I still want you to be happy. You've done so much for me and my country. Let me at least support your chance at finding true love."

"B-but..." Her eyes darted from side to side, as if she couldn't make up her mind.

"You should live for yourself," Roland said emphatically, attempting to give her the push she obviously needed. "Find your happiness, Mylene."

Tears trickled down her cheeks. Lifting himself from his chair, Roland wrapped his arms around her shoulders to comfort her.

After Mylene left, a doctor acquaintance of Roland's named Fred popped inside. He shot Roland an annoyed, if not exhausted, look. "Are you sure it's a good idea to have Holfort Kingdom's former queen join the new king's harem?"

Roland stood up straight, puffing his chest out like he was proud of a job well done. "It's a perfect strategy, isn't it? I get the satisfaction of sending a wild card right into that brat's inner circle, and Mylene gets to be with the one she really loves. Don't worry. If he chases her out, I'll support her."

Fred hung his head. "Please don't destroy the delicate balance of the new king's romantic relationships. Things like that can affect the whole kingdom."

"Nah. The brat'll handle it well. At least, since Angelica's got a good head on her shoulders, we can rest assured she'll take care of it. For better or worse, he's basically putty in her hands." Roland grinned to himself and broke into a little jig, unable to contain his happiness. "Mm, I really outdid myself with this one! Stuck it to the brat and got rid of that nag Mylene. Two birds with one stone! My own genius scares me sometimes. I got rid of the concubines and mistresses I didn't want anymore to boot. All's well that ends well!"

Roland was actually grateful to Leon. The palace had been simultaneously suffocating and boring. Not only had he managed to free himself of that, the incoming government would bankroll his new lifestyle in the countryside. As far as Roland was concerned, he'd achieved victory over Leon.

"What scares me is that someone like you was ever our king," said Fred.

Roland nodded. "Right there with you. This country's got something seriously wrong with it. The new king will have to work hard to fix everything." He looked pleased as punch about this whole thing.

Fred stared hard at the former king with a sour expression.

Once the coronation ceremony was over, I made time to meet Erica. There was a lot we needed to talk about, but most of all, I wanted to check on her condition. This should've been a relaxing opportunity to catch up with my niece, but instead...

"S-sorry, what'd you say just now?" I asked.

Erica gave me a regretful look.

The moment our meeting began, she'd apologized to me. She felt her selfish actions had caused us unnecessary pain. Even if she'd come clean sooner, though, that wouldn't have stopped the empire from doing what it had. Maybe it was mean of me to say, but her actions wouldn't have changed a thing. Still, she seemed to blame herself for everything.

I convinced Erica that it was arrogant to think she bore any responsibility or owed anyone anything over what had happened. The war would've broken out sooner or later. It had been inevitable. Anyway, I didn't think things had ended too badly. It'd gone about as well as it could have.

But I'd also accepted her unnecessary apology, and our conversation was going smoothly. Then she said something so startling my heart almost stopped.

"Uh...um... Uncle," she repeated nervously, "I said that this otome title—the Alte Liebe series, that is—has at least six installments that I know of."

This was a brand-new revelation I hadn't been prepared for. Not only was the

third game not the end of the series, there were at least *three* more?! The room started to spin.

"Wh-what happens in the fourth game?" I asked haltingly.

The first had been an absolute nightmare, and I'd almost lost my life by the time the third was over. It'd be an understatement to say I was devastated that there were three more to go.

"I think it's set at an all-boy school or something. I'm pretty sure it takes place on a continent with a desert, but I never started that game myself. I just know the gist of it. If I remember right, the protagonist cross-dresses to attend the school or something like that."

Erica hadn't played it, so she couldn't give me specifics. She only knew some vague details about the game because, as the continuation of a series she'd played as a child, it'd piqued her interest briefly.

"D-did you say a desert? Do...do you know anything else about the other games? Anything else at all? I don't care how small, but give me something!" Part of me was terrified to learn more, but remaining in the dark would be even scarier.

"The fifth installment takes place in outer space."

"Outer space?!" I cried.

"The perfect opportunity for me to be of service!" Elysium declared confidently. "Master, you can leave everything to me. I am a spaceship, after all, so I have no problem functioning outside the planet's atmosphere."

I was too dumbstruck to react.

"Oh, um, I know the sixth installment goes back to the game's roots and takes place in Holfort! Um, Uncle? Are you all right?" Erica asked me worriedly.

I sat in my chair, hugging my legs to my chest. My mind had wandered back to that sexy head-elder elf and what she said to me. Something about needing to save the world again.

Tears sprang to my eyes. "I knew it. I never should've come back."

"Master, what's the matter?" Elysium asked. "If something about all this

bothers you, I could completely destroy the continent containing this desert. How about that?"

Erica pulled a face at his radical fix for the issue, but she focused on trying to comfort me. "It'll be all right, Uncle. I doubt the world will be destroyed easily." She hesitated. "Um... Actually, I think you might be in for a rough time. Sorry."

Considering how close a call each previous installment had been, I would probably be on thin ice again. One wrong step would spell the end of the world. That meant I couldn't just ignore these problems and hope the plot followed the canon storyline.

I shot out of my chair and screamed at the top of my lungs. "Dammit! This otome game world is tough for a guy like me!"

Epilogue

LEON SCREAMED at the top of his lungs." All right. That's it for today!"

Bookshelves lined the room, and children's toys were strewn about in its center. Noelle sat in one chair, reading from a book perched on her protruding pregnant belly. The kids who'd listened attentively were all Leon's.

One reached up and tugged her shirt. "Mommy Noelle, what happened next? What'd Daddy do after that?"

Noelle had been reading from a volume Livia herself wrote, an epic that recounted Leon's many heroic journeys.

A blond boy whose face looked just like his father's said, "I wanna hear more about Daddy's adventures."

Noelle smiled at him but snapped the book shut, leaving her chair. She tucked it back into a nearby shelf, emphasizing that story time was over for the day. "It's late, so we're going to end there. Time for you all to sleep. And I'm sorry, but that book doesn't continue. The next part isn't written yet."

The children collectively whined in disapproval.

A girl with curly hair much like Deirdre's launched herself at Noelle's leg and clung to it. "Why won't you write the next story for us? We want to hear more."

Noelle smiled bitterly. "We can't write it yet," she told the girl.

Her eyes scanned the children's faces. Some already looked drowsy. A girl who resembled a younger copy of Angie was nodding off, her head dipping before popping back up. She held the hand of a boy who looked identical to Leon. He was already fast asleep and had collapsed onto the floor beside her.

The children invested in the story insisted they weren't sleepy and begged for more.

"Write it!"

"We can't," Noelle again said firmly. "Just wait a little longer. Your father's

embarking on his next big adventure as we speak. Once it's over, Mommy Livia will write the next part. When she's finished, I promise I'll read the book to you before anyone else gets their hands on it."

A girl with pink hair leaned against Fact's mobile unit, her chest rising and falling slowly. Fact supported her as he chided the children. "Lack of proper sleep will negatively impact your growth, young ones. Now, enough arguing. Off to bed with you."

His nagging didn't sit well with them; those who remained awake were anxious to play some more. They began poking and prodding him.

"Aw, look! Fact's mad!"

"Let's roll him across the floor!"

"N-no, stop it! Can't you see I already have someone sleeping on me? Stop! I shall negatively adjust my evaluation of you all!"

Although it had initially seemed that all the Als perished during the battle, Fact and his brethren had in reality preserved themselves by transferring their data to their mobile units. They supported the kingdom from the shadows now, carefully toeing the line so that they didn't interfere too much.

Leon hadn't wanted the AIs to be overinvolved. Angie was anxious to call upon their help, but however much she'd tried to persuade him, Leon rejected her idea without showing any indication of budging. "I want us to be as independent as possible," he'd said. His stubborn refusal wore Angie down enough that she acquiesced.

Personally, Noelle agreed with Leon. She knew it'd be more efficient to let the Als handle things, but she still thought it was healthier for their civilization to stand on its own two feet and develop by itself.

"Enough," she scolded the children. "No bullying Fact. If you don't go to bed like you're supposed to, I'll tell your father."

"All right," the children answered in unison, reluctantly obeying.

A girl with black hair pulled into a side ponytail stood in front of Noelle, fidgeting anxiously. Noelle knelt down to her level. "What's the matter?" she

asked sweetly.

"Mommy, um, uh... When is Daddy coming home?"

Noelle's smile faltered a moment. That was a hard question to answer. Leon had gone off to deal with a particularly troublesome problem, and there was no way for anyone to know when he might return. He probably didn't even know himself. His troubles had only just begun.

"I wish I had an answer for you, but I don't know either. What I do know is that he should have a long break once summer arrives. Maybe he'll come home then," said Noelle.

The floating island Leon had once developed for himself was being transformed. It had previously been repurposed for the war, but now it had regained its sprawling greenery. It was still under government ownership, but Leon was using it for personal purposes. It was the perfect place to send all the troublesome people under his care to live. Naturally, that meant Marie and her entire entourage.

Marie was enjoying her walk, dabbing away perspiration with a towel as she watched robots toil in the fields. "Ah, it feels good to be out here sweating. It'll make today's beer taste even better!" Although it was only noon, she was already fantasizing about the alcohol they'd drink that evening.

The moment Carla and Kyle spotted her, they rushed toward her, Carla carrying a child on her back. "Lady Marieeeee!" she called. "Please don't strain your body needlessly!"

Kyle was similarly panicked. He still looked young, but he'd grown taller than Carla. His elven blood came through strong, giving him a handsome face. He was mellower now than he had been when he was younger, but he hadn't changed much overall.

"Mistress!" he hollered at Marie. "You shouldn't move around so much in that state!"

Carla seized Marie's arm and began dragging her back toward the house. "How can you think about drinking in your condition? Come, we need to get

home!" She was more assertive with Marie now, partly because she was still looking out for her.

"I wanna drink!" Marie whined childishly at Carla.

The child on Carla's back tucked a finger into his mouth. He had the same navy-blue hair as Julius.

Jilk strode toward the trio, a leather rucksack over his shoulder. He waved at them as he approached. "I have great news for you, Marie, since you're so anxious for a drink. I brought back some special tea leaves."

Carla scowled at him. "I'll prepare them. Don't even think about stewing them yourself."

"Why can't you get it through your thick skull that you're terrible at brewing tea?" Kyle added coldly. He might've mellowed out with other people, but he was as biting and severe as ever when it came to the idiot brigade—in no small part because those five morons still gave him, Carla, and Marie grief.

Jilk shrugged at them. "I guess the way I brew it is just too sophisticated for you to appreciate."

Marie's eyes landed on the leather bag. The color drained from her face. "Jilk," she said. "I've...never seen the case for that tea set you have with you." As she studied the bag, she soon realized it was brand new.

Pleased she'd noticed so quickly, Jilk patted it. "Oh, this? I picked it up in the capital before I returned. I thought it was a really great find for such a low price, especially given the quality."

Marie's legs trembled beneath her. Kyle lunged to hold her up before she sank to the ground. "Mistress! Please keep it together! It'll be all right. Since Mr. Jilk's been reinstated, and is a viscount now, we have a little more money than before!"

His assurances didn't stop the tears that welled in Marie's eyes. All the boys had been welcomed back into the aristocracy, but they were still in debt.

"You promised me you wouldn't waste money, remember?!" she screeched at Jilk.

Leon was their creditor, but Angie was the one actually in charge of the purse strings. She was nowhere near as permissive as her husband, and she made sure to charge interest on what they owed. Fortunately, the idiot brigade weren't squandering their finances the way they used to. They spent reasonably and within their means, primarily for work. Still, Marie was used to being completely penniless and hadn't yet grown accustomed to their new stature. The amount of debt they were in seemed exorbitant to her.

Jilk grinned at her, puffing out his chest proudly. "It wasn't a waste of money. After all, this tea set and its case were only eight hundred thousand dia. The seller told me it was something they got out of an ancient ruin, a real antique."

Eight hundred thousand dia was equivalent to eight million yen.

Marie's hands flew to her belly. "Oh no... I'm going into labor. I have to get back to the estate to give birth." She'd gone through this process before, so she stayed calm, despite the urgency of the situation.

"Doctooor! We need a doctor!" Kyle screamed, scrambling off to retrieve one.

Jilk stared at her slack-jawed, startled. "Wh-what should I do?! I guess I should make the tea—no, no, I should carry you to the hospital first!" He was in such a panic that he dropped the new bag he'd purchased. The expensive tea set shattered the moment it slammed against the ground.

Blood drained from Marie's face. "Noooo! All that money!" she screamed, wobbling and finally losing consciousness.

Jilk dove for her, lifting her in his arms before she hit the floor. "Miss Marie, please get a hold of yourself!"

Carla shot Jilk a look. "You're the one who put the metaphorical nail in her coffin. How come you're so gullible? Why did you let someone trick you into thinking a shoddily made tea set was some antique? Do you have any idea how much money you threw away by doing this? It's high time you owned up to the fact that you have no talent for judging an item's quality or rarity." Her words were brutal, going straight for the jugular.

Jilk flinched. Looking a little terrified, he sputtered, "M-my apologies."

"Well, if you really do feel bad, hurry to the estate and get some water

boiling. Go on, run!" Carla made a shooing motion, although she sounded skeptical that he'd be any help whatsoever.

"Y-yes, ma'am!" Leaving Marie in her care, he sprinted off.

Carla sighed and glanced at Marie. "My lady, please pull yourself together."

Marie had revived but stared blankly straight ahead of her, a forced smile spreading across her face. There was no light in her eyes, as if her spirit had left her body.

"I'll have to send a message to Big Bro and ask for money to cover our living expenses again," she muttered numbly. She let out a short, dry laugh. "Ha ha. We'll be borrowing more before we even finish paying him back. Our debt's going to increase even further. Angelica and the other girls will be furious with us."

"Don't be too negative, Lady Marie! It'll be all right. If you tell them it was Jilk, they'll understand, I'm sure of it! Probably!"

"I miss my brother," Marie whined.

After losing the war to Holfort, the Holy Magic Empire of Vordenoit went through changes.

"The machines are building another of those towers."

"They give me the creeps."

"We just have to accept it, though. We lost to them."

The project began in the empire's capital, as metal towers were erected in large numbers across the city, serving as lamps on the public streets. They'd only been introduced after the war ended, and the imperials weren't fond of them.

Finn was walking down a street in the capital when he spotted one and paused to peer up at it. "I never expected he was planning *this,*" he muttered.

The towers the empire's citizens despised so much were Leon's idea.

Mia, whose arm was wrapped around Finn's, gazed sadly up at the tower as

well. "Sir Knight, what did we all fight for in that war?"

Mia was able to live comfortably and in good health, wandering out in the open as she pleased, but only where these towers had been built. They didn't only serve as light sources; they also pumped demonic essence into the atmosphere.

She and the other imperials' bloodlines had a strong similarity to new humanity's. They'd have difficulty living comfortably if demonic essence completely disappeared from the atmosphere.

Leon had never intended to destroy the empire. In fact, he'd been devising a way for the imperials to coexist with their neighbors.

Finn grimaced. He deeply regretted not having more trust in his best friend. As he remembered Brave, his brow wrinkled. "If I'd put my faith in Leon, we might not have lost Brave. We might've avoided that whole war altogether."

"Sir Knight," Mia said gently, wrapping her arms around him, "no one could've seen what would happen in the future, so please don't blame yourself too much. I know I caused everyone a lot of trouble too."

After the war ended, neither she nor Finn had been called upon to take responsibility for the part they played in it. Moritz shouldered all the blame himself. Finn and Mia had renounced their respective positions—his as a knight, hers as a member of the imperial family—and now lived as ordinary citizens.

Finn shook his head. The last thing he wanted was to sadden Mia too. "Are you going to keep calling me 'Sir Knight' forever? I'm not a knight anymore."

"B-but you'll always be a knight in my heart," she exclaimed, flustered.

He stroked her head. "All right. But someday you'd better call me by my name."

"Y-yes, of course!"

The two had just begun their new lives in the empire.

Why couldn't things ever work out the way I wanted them to?

I was currently in a place called Oasis Kingdom, a desert nation far from Holfort. A message had arrived from Marie, describing in keen detail everything that'd happened around her recently.

Elysium hovered at my left shoulder. He'd printed her letter out for me to read. By the end, it turned into a desperate plea for help.

A refreshing breeze swept through the room as I lowered the message and heaved a deep sigh. "Jilk's a real piece of work, putting her through the wringer when she's pregnant."

The guy was a hopeless jerk, but he was also my savior. I'd have died in the battle with the empire if he hadn't swept in at the end and retrieved me. He always came in handy when the going got tough, but somehow, he was an absolute loser on a daily basis. I guess if I weigh his pluses and minuses, they come out about even? Nah, probably still a few more minuses. He was lucky he'd saved my life, or I might really have sent him somewhere remote, isolating him from the rest of the world.

After listening to me rant and reading all the message's details over my shoulder, Elysium concluded, "He is more trouble than he is worth. Let's erase him."

"Don't say scary stuff like that," I ordered him.

"I understand your meaning exactly, Master. You want me to erase him secretly, correct? I shall do just that. Before you know it, Jilk will have died from a mysterious illness, and no one shall be the wiser."

"Stop twisting my words! We'll leave Jilk to his own devices—wait, no, that might be too dangerous. Maybe I should ask Noelle to give him a talking to. Angie's busy handling administrative stuff, so I can't put more on her plate." Thinking about Noelle and Angie, who'd stayed behind in Holfort, brought me close to tears.

Why did I have to come all the way out to this foreign country anyway? And why the heck was I serving as a teacher at Oasis Kingdom's school? It was tragic enough that I'd somehow become king of a nation, but now I was somehow far from home educating kids, all because this was the setting for the game's fourth installment. The "teacher" business was my cover; I'd infiltrated the

school to keep tabs on the main character and her love interests.

Elysium's lens flashed red three times. "A video message has arrived from Lady Olivia. I shall play it now."

"From Livia?" I cocked my head.

His lens projected a video feed depicting Livia in the kitchen of the apartment we shared here in Oasis Kingdom. She waved and smiled at me, wearing an apron. "Mr. Leon, I'd like you to come home quickly today, since I'm making you fish for dinner. Be sure to let me know if you'll be late. You'd better not forget, all right? Get in touch with me."

She was trying to entice me with fish, which was adorable, but something about her solemn expression, and the way she repeatedly emphasized contacting her, gave me pause.

"It's nice living with the woman you love. That's the one silver lining in all this misfortune." My face fell. "But I wish I could be at home, watching our kids grow up."

"Would you like to see records of the children's growth?" Elysium asked.

"Yeah, when I get home."

"Certainly."

As much as I wanted to avoid further world-ending catastrophes, having to leave home like this seriously sucked. I was really glad that Livia came along, but it was hard not seeing my kids. Having so many might've been the bigger issue, though.

"Leaving that issue aside for the moment, there was something odd about the video Lady Olivia sent. It is almost as if she is trying to keep tabs on you," said Elysium.

I shrugged. "She's adorable."

"How magnanimous you are to describe her that way! I am deeply moved, Master."

"You know, you're always way too dramatic about everything. Are you actually mocking me? Is that what this is?"

"No," Elysium said. "I just genuinely believe you are the best Master in the world."

"Yeah, sure."

I appreciated his lack of barbs and cheap shots, which Luxion had been fond of, but he was so theatrical about everything that it felt facetious. *No, no. He's a good boy.* A good boy with a lot of problems, granted.

"Oh. I should also inform you that Roland was safely discharged from the hospital," Elysium said.

"Yeah? I couldn't care less."

After abdicating the throne, Roland had retired to the countryside and gone back to his old ways. He was supposed to be confined to an island, but he'd slipped away countless times. He always headed for a big city to hit on girls, juggling dozens upon dozens of relationships at once. That alone pissed me off.

His descent into debauchery turned out to be more than one of the women he'd brought to his island could take. She'd snapped and run him through with a knife, landing him in the hospital. Great news, as far as I was concerned; what I wouldn't have given to see it happen again!

"It'd really make my day if he got stabbed a second time!"

"If I recall correctly, Master, you were concerned for him when I first reported that he had been stabbed and was unconscious in the hospital," said Elysium. "You asked me repeatedly whether he was all right, and looked visibly relieved when I informed you that he would survive the encounter. Why would you want him to be stabbed again?" He sounded genuinely confused.

I avoided his gaze. He was right that I'd been surprised and concerned at first. I hated Roland's guts, but I was in the same position as him. We were both surrounded by a harem of women, and when I heard he'd been stabbed by one, I couldn't help seeing myself in him.

"Look," I said, "it wouldn't be the most surprising thing if I got stabbed too."

"There is no need for you to be concerned about that, Master. I would erase anyone foolish enough to make such an attempt."

"The scary part is I could picture you doing that."

"There is no need to picture it. I absolutely would."

I shook my head at him, nose wrinkled. "See, that's a little scary. Your loyalty to me is suffocating."

"I digress, Master. Why is it that you seem to see yourself in Roland?"

"Because I've got a bunch of wives too." I knew admitting it aloud made me sound like a real creep, but I couldn't help that. If I tried to take the monogamy route, and pick just one of them, the knives would really come out for me.

There was no going back.

To be clear, I didn't regret having so many women around, but I felt bad about it. If I'd handled things better from the beginning, I wouldn't have ended up with such a huge harem.

"Your situation and Roland's are completely different," Elysium assured me. "In fact, if you desire it, I could dispose of him."

"Stop it! You're not killing Roland!" Sure, I had a deep-seated resentment for the guy, and I'd laughed a bit when I heard he'd been stabbed, but I didn't want to kill him.

"I cannot understand your feelings for him. Do you want him to die or not?"

"Both. I want him to die, but I don't."

"Very well. I will save the matter of his extermination for another time." Elysium swiveled, glanced behind us, and activated his cloaking device to hide himself from view.

Someone was coming upstairs to the school rooftop. When they reached the top step, they flung the door open and stepped outside. It was a male student, which wasn't surprising, given that this was an all-boy school. The last place I wanted to be, since I had no interest in dudes. My wives would frown on my saying that, though, given the possible implication that I wanted to expand my harem.

The student who'd climbed to the roof was awfully delicate for a boy, with an androgynous face. When he saw me, he smiled. "You're here again, Professor

Leon?" He sounded awfully happy to have found me.

I shrugged. "I like the rooftop. What can I say?" I didn't sound like a teacher at all. "Anyway, have you got some business with me?"

The student gave me an exasperated look but soon broke into another smile. "You're supposed to teach our next class. I came up here to get you and make sure you wouldn't be late."

This boy actually wasn't a boy at all; *she* was the protagonist of the fourth *Alte Liebe* game. Based on what Erica told me, she was cross-dressing to attend this school. I still didn't know what had possessed her to come here, though. Erica wasn't able to provide many details, so I was starting out pretty much flying by the seat of my pants. Elysium and I had come to this desert country specifically to conduct our own investigation.

"All right, let's head for the classroom," I suggested, standing up straight as I strode back toward the staircase.

"Aw. I really don't want to go to class," complained the protagonist.

"Is that something you ought to say to a teacher?"

She giggled at me.

Before I knew it, we'd reached the classroom. Inside was a group of boys who looked like a bunch of delinquents. They glared at me. I was actually just the assistant homeroom teacher, not a full-fledged professor. Most of the students here were troubled in one way or another. The fourth installment had really crammed a bunch of tropes into its story.

I watched the protagonist take her seat. As the school bell chimed, I scanned the rest of the classroom. Some other boys there were probably her love interests, but I had no way of identifying any of them. All her classmates were potential candidates at this point.

"Glad to see everyone here today," I said.

I wasn't the type to be the entire world's savior, but sadly, no one else was up to the task. Besides, Luxion was awaiting me on the other side. I had to give this my best shot so that I could greet him with a smile when we reunited. It'd feel

great to brag to him that I'd saved the world again, so that was just what I would do.

"All right, let's get started."

The bigger question was this: How many times would I have to save this stupid place? Honestly, the world of otome games was a real thorn in my side.

Afterword

T'S ME, YOMU MISHIMA, feeling deeply emotional now that *Trapped in a Dating Sim* has finally concluded. So many people helped make this happen, and I'm really grateful for all my readers' support as well.

When I first began posting this story on the web, it never seriously crossed my mind that it might be made into an anime someday, but now it has. I'd debuted as an author prior to this title, so of course one of my goals was for a series of mine to be made into an anime eventually. I even wondered how one would go about writing the kind of series that got an anime adaptation. I started testing ideas, and one of those was *Trapped in a Dating Sim*.

Before I started writing this, I kept seeing a specific genre pop up in the popularity rankings on *Let's Be Novelists*: villainess stories. Those are romance fantasies with a female target audience that take place in an alternate world. The genre has become immensely popular since it first picked up traction, dominating the rankings completely.

Those stories usually begin with the villainess's fiancé breaking off their engagement. Honestly, even as a guy, I found them really entertaining and impactful, so I thought it'd be fun to take the same premise and write a story for a male audience. I immediately began plotting it out.

Initially, it was going to line up with every other villainess story. Luxion didn't exist. Angelica was the villainess, and Marie was the heroine. The male protagonist was a guy reincarnated as one of the heroine's love interests, and the female protagonist (Angelica) was a woman reincarnated as the villainess.

Angelica was dead set against becoming a villainess, but her circumstances didn't let her escape the role. She was forced into a hostile relationship with Marie whether she liked it or not. The story was pretty simple from there. Although she didn't want to, Angelica had to oppose and fight Marie, growing more and more isolated as the story progressed, and the male protagonist swept in to save her all by himself.

Basically, I didn't set out intending for this story to have a harem at all.

You're probably wondering by this point how the current version of *Trapped* in a Dating Sim came about, if that was my original idea.

Well, that was because villainesses basically don't exist in actual otome games. See, when I came up with that plot, I did a bunch of research on otome games, and I thought I should play one in advance. I subsequently made that shocking discovery. Villainesses are insanely popular in web novels, and I never imagined that they weren't derived from real otome games at all; they were a completely original concept.

That threw a real wrench into my plans. I was already busy with another series that was being published as a light novel, as well as my day job, so I didn't have a whole lot of free time. I didn't know anything about otome games, but I knew I had to write this story. It was then or never.

Feeling backed into a corner, I threw a bunch more elements into my plot. I pulled together ideas I'd come up with for other stories, and they culminated in *Trapped in a Dating Sim*. I told myself this would be a practice piece. If it didn't get that popular, I'd just find a good place to cut it short.

All that is to say, although the title has "otome game" in it, the contents of the story itself are more in line with *Let's Be Novelists*-style isekai harem stories, with a role-reversed villainess concept.

I love isekai harem stories, but *Let's Be Novelists* was oversaturated with them, so I wanted to write something kind of poking fun at that. As you can probably guess from this story, that came back to bite me in the ass. After all, *Trapped in a Dating Sim* ended the same way any harem story does.

I was fortunate that *Trapped in a Dating Sim* got so popular that I could continue it. By the time I'd finished the equivalent of Volume One, GC Novels had reached out to me, offering to publish it. That's how it became the series you know today.

I suspect some of you readers already realize that, at its core, the series was basically about Leon and Luxion's friendship. I started writing this intending it as an isekai harem story, but once I finished the web version and looked back through it, I realized that too. The story began with their first meeting and

ended with their goodbye to each other.

Leon inherited my plans for the original plot's male protagonist, being jaded and cynical but simultaneously kind, though his emotions could be difficult for the reader to identify. Luxion was a necessary addition, both to support Leon and to act as the straight man who said what readers were probably thinking.

The most accurate comment I ever got called Luxion a prime example of the "wise elder character who has no faith in the hero" trope, and said Leon is like the fool who even lies to himself. Leon does like to dig into other people verbally and criticize them, but most of what he says applies to him too. He's a hypocrite who does no self-reflection, and a liar as well, but he's also kind and complex.

Anyway, Luxion was meant to support Leon and increase his appeal. Before I realized what was happening, though, their relationship became the center of the entire story. That's why Luxion was the start of it and the end of it too.

I do feel like the harem aspect wound up pretty sparse, but this series was ultimately a huge blessing to me, since completing it helped me realize what I really want to write.

To celebrate the ending of the main story, I wrote a bonus story. All you have to do is add two keywords to the website request form and you'll be able to read it. You'll find the first keyword in *Otome Games Are Tough For Us, Too!*, Volume Three. The keyword from this volume is "Luxion."

There you have it: the end of *Trapped in a Dating Sim*'s main series. Thanks for reading this up to its conclusion. I hope you continue to enjoy the stories I write!



Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

Sign up for our newsletter!

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter