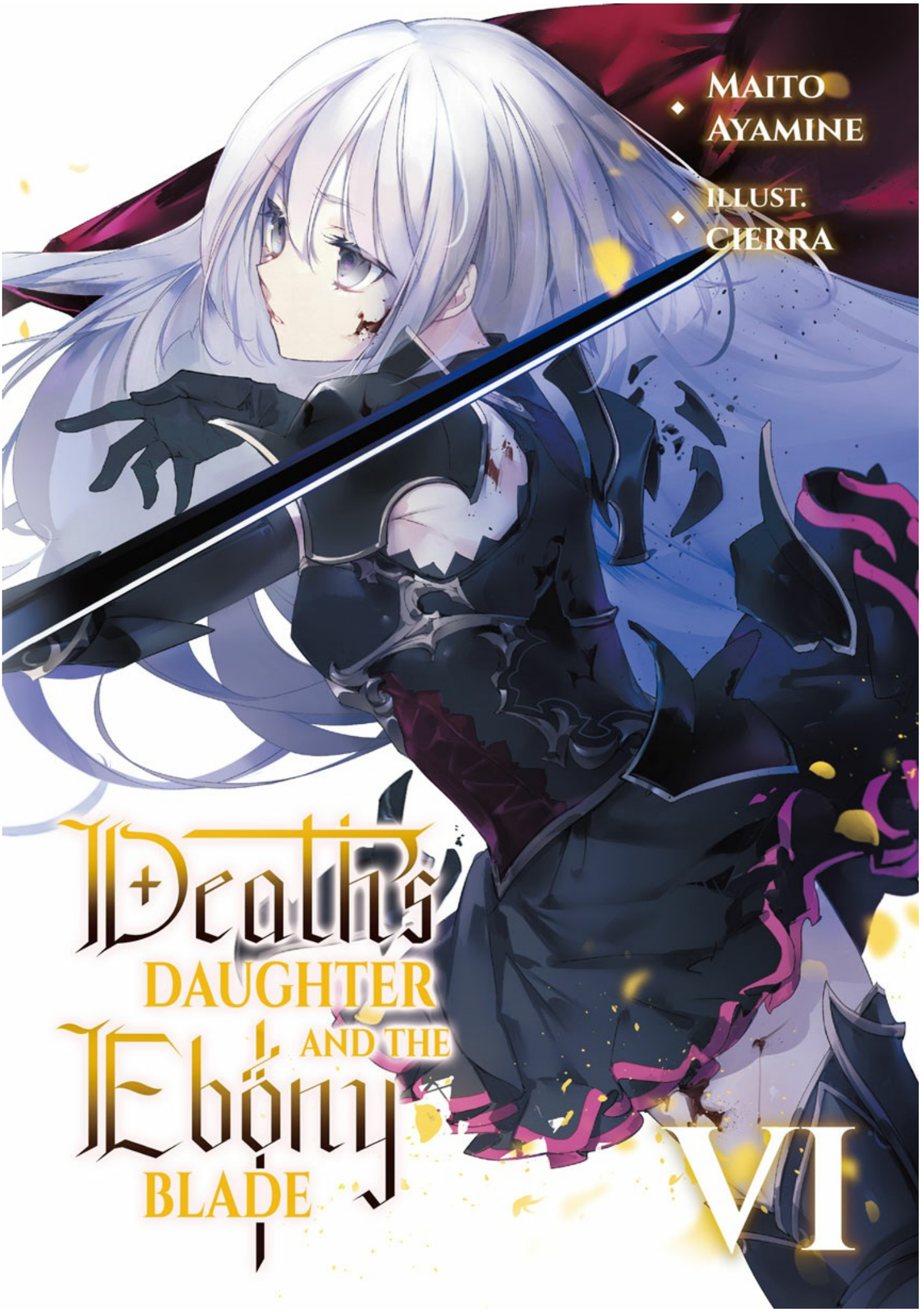
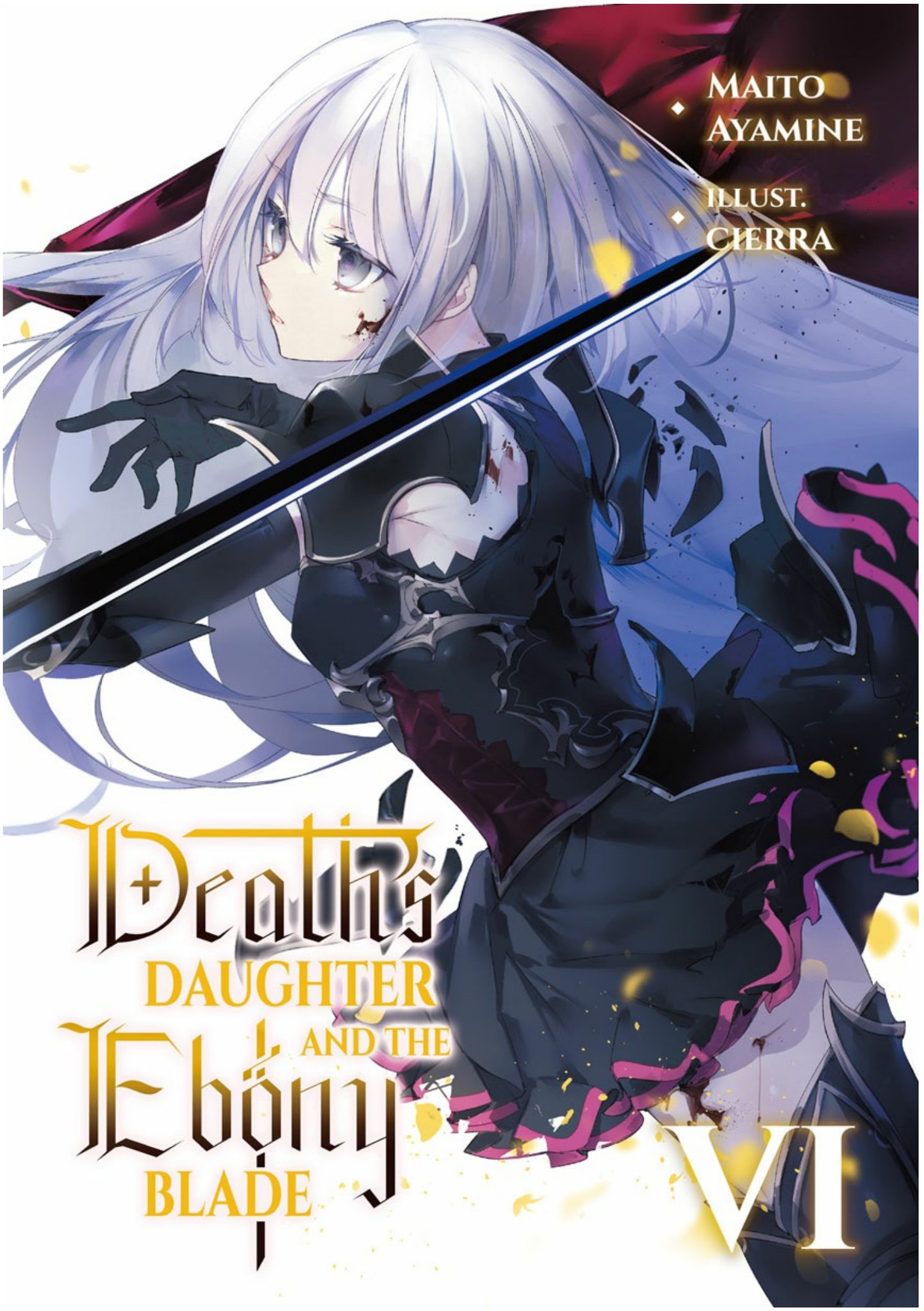

Maito Ayamine
Illust. Cierra
Death's Daughter and the Ebony Blade
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VI

Prologue: A Light of Determination Dancing in the Night

Far from civilization, in the deepest depths of the mountains, a little girl sat playing alone, surrounded by gray squirrels. Sensing an unknown presence behind her, she turned. Through a gap in the dense thicket of trees, she caught sight of a creature dark as pitch.

There were many creatures that made their home on this mountain, but never before had she encountered this one. At once, the girl's large eyes lit up with a gleam of curiosity.

"Who are you?" she asked.

The creature made no response.

"You aren't a ghost, are you?"

Ghosts only came out at night, or so the girl's father had told her. Still, she didn't think it seemed so unusual for a ghost to appear in the daytime. There had to be ghosts who liked bright places too, after all.

"You can see me?"

"Of course I can. I've got really good eyes."

She could see clear as day even on a moonless night with her ebony black eyes that she had inherited from her mother. Out under the light of the sun? It wasn't even a question.

The black creature turned toward the girl. "Ah, yes. Now I see..." It drew closer, making not a sound with its footsteps, before sitting down next to the girl as though the two of them did this every day. Now that the creature was so close, the girl saw that it was indeed entirely black. As she gazed in fascination, she was suddenly struck by a sense of déjà vu.

What could it be? she wondered. Try as she might, she couldn't recall ever having encountered a creature like the one before her now. And if she *had* ever met such a funny thing before, she definitely would've remembered it.

Harboring a sense of discontent, she returned to her original question.

“So was I right? Are you a ghost?”

“There are no Spiritua shells here. Such lifeforms only exist in higher planes.”

“Spiri…what?” The girl cocked her head. All this was beyond her.

“What I mean,” said the black creature, watching the gray squirrels darting busily around at their feet, “is that I am not what you refer to as a ghost.”

“You’re not? Really?” It was obvious, not least from its entirely alien appearance, that the creature was not human. Yet at the same time, it was not an animal. It was faceless, and it trailed a black mist along the ground besides. It looked an awful lot like the ghosts from the girl’s picture book.

The girl examined the mysterious creature again from a number of different angles.

Eventually, it said, “I am what you humans would call a God of Death.”

“You’re lying,” the girl replied without hesitation.

“Lying?” The creature turned to face the girl directly for the first time. “How very fascinating. What makes you think so?”

“Well, the God of Death in my picture books is totally different,” she said. “Wait here a minute, okay?”

The girl picked up a blackboard left lying on the ground, then took a stick of white chalk from her pocket and started to scribble on it as she explained.

“A God of Death looks bony, like this. All bones. And then its clothes are all super ragged… Oh, and they have a great big scythe,” she said, adding a scythe to finish off her drawing, then holding out the blackboard proudly to show the creature. “This is a God of Death.”

The self-titled God of Death peered closely at the blackboard. “I see. Indeed, if this is an accurate portrayal of a God of Death, then I must be something rather different,” it acknowledged. The girl, satisfied to be proven right, lost all interest in what the creature really was.

“What’s your name, by the way? I’m Olivia Valedstorm. I’m eight, and I live in

a house at the bottom of this mountain. Oh, and this is my little sister, Caroline. She's five years younger than me. Isn't she sweet?" She sat the doll her mother had made for her on her knees, then giggled.

"I am called Z," the creature said at length.

"Z," said the girl. "All right. That's a funny sort of name, but I'll remember it."

Z reached out and stroked her cheek. "This has been mystifying me..." it began.

"Oh, yes," said the girl. "There are all sorts of 'mysterious' things in this world. Like how I'm not allowed to leave this mountain until I'm older. Why do you think that is, Z?"

The girl had been strictly forbidden from venturing away from the mountain for reasons unknown to her. When she asked why, her parents said only that they would tell her when she was older. Once, the girl had woken up in the night to see her usually kind mother and father discussing something that must've been serious, for they wore expressions that scared her. She had quickly burrowed down under her blankets and tried to breathe as quietly as possible. They had been saying that they had to take care not to let her leave the mountain. What followed had been too difficult for her to understand. Since that day, the girl had stopped talking about wanting to leave the mountain. This was in part because she couldn't forget the looks on her parents' faces that night. More than that, she knew that if she left, it was sure to break her parents' hearts.

"Do you not fear me?" asked the creature.

"Huh? No, not at all. I mean, look at how happy they all are." The girl pointed at the gray squirrels that were scurrying around all over Z. Gray squirrels were extremely timid creatures—they wouldn't go anywhere near anything they felt in any way threatened by.

"Perhaps there is some meaning in our meeting here a second time," Z said after a pause.

"Huh? A second time? This is our first time meeting, you know. But enough about that. What do you say to going to the lake?"

“What you say makes no sense. Why do you speak of lakes?”

“Because you can catch lots of the best fish this time of year, of course.” The girl stood up from the log she had been using as a chair, patted off her bottom, then took Z’s hand. Pulling the black creature along with her, she set off cheerfully toward the lake to the north. Neither her mother nor her father knew of the lake. It was her secret place. For a long time now, the girl had resolved that as soon as she made a friend, she would tell them of it.

“There is no purpose in my going,” Z said slowly. “I do not feed upon that which humans consume.”

“Then what do you eat, Z?”

“Do you want to know?”

“I really want to.”

Z gazed at the gray squirrel on its hand, then at last, said, “Human souls.”

The girl cocked her head. “‘Souls’?” she repeated, uncomprehending. “Whatever those are, they don’t sound very tasty. The fish in the lake are delicious. So I’ll eat your portion for you. We’re friends now, after all.”

“‘Friends’...?” Z repeated, sounding the word out. “That word is unfamiliar to me. What does it mean?” It leaned forward, clearly interested. Despite knowing so many difficult things, Z didn’t even know what a friend was!

“Well, a friend is someone you hold hands with and play together, like this,” the girl explained, puffing out her chest and forcibly interlocking her fingers with Z’s. “And you should use my name. I’m Olivia. I just told you!”

She turned to Z, a carefree smile on her face as she swung her arms back and forth, while Z stared mystified at their linked hands.

This encounter was a fragment of what the girl remembered of the first time she met Z.

The year was Tempus Fugit 983. Two trees, commonly known as The Twins, stretched unto the heavens as if in a race to see which could reach them first. At the uppermost heights of those branches stood two men, perfectly balanced

with their arms folded, both dressed from head to toe in black and their scarves billowing wildly in the gusty northwest wind. One of the men, whose name was Nefer Quan, slowly removed his mask, a black piece adorned with bolts of levin dancing along the surface.

“We have them at last...” he said. “Here, we shall see to it that the Deep Folk meet their end.” He looked down on the cottage hidden among the trees, his mouth stretching in a twisted smile. The other man, one Safiss Troah, followed his companion’s example, licking his lips with a forked tongue not unlike the white snake that adorned his own mask as he removed it.

“When do we do it?” he asked.

“The day after tomorrow. When the moon waxes full.”

Safiss’s eyebrow twitched. “The full moon? That‘s very cautious for you, Nefer.”

“It‘s more trouble for us if they give us the slip.”

“As if we’d let them go. Not to change the subject, but did you hear about Cassael’s boy?”

“With the old master singing his praises to high heaven like he has been, I couldn’t ignore it if I wanted to,” Nefer said with a grimace.

“Isn’t that the truth,” Safiss said, laughing under his breath.

According to what Nefer had heard, Cassael von Sieger’s son Felix not only already possessed Odh in quantities far greater than any child should, but had also learned to control it despite his tender age of only five years old. Some were already saying he had the makings of most powerful Asura in history. Elder Zebulla Shin, who led the Asura, was chief among those singing the boy’s praises—a fact which proved that the stories had not been distorted.

“In any case,” Safiss went on, “the birth of one with such gifts is cause for celebration. We need not fear for the future of the Asura.”

“Well, I hope not.” A yellowed leaf flew by, carried by the wind. Nefer caught it between two fingers.

“‘You hope not,’” Safiss repeated slowly, giving Nefer a searching look. “Has

something given you cause for concern?”

“Everything has its end,” Nefer replied matter-of-factly. “Even the greatest of nations or the wisest of men cannot escape that fate. It would be the height of conceit to think the Asura are the exception to the rule.”

Safiss’s expression turned hard. “You would do well to be careful how you speak. I can turn a deaf ear, but others might well take it as disloyalty to the Asura.”

Nefer brushed his forelock which was being swept to the right by the wind. “It’s because it’s you that I speak so,” he said with a grin. Safiss sighed and rolled his eyes.

“Forget it, then. We do the deed the day after tomorrow, correct?”

“Right,” Nefer said. His eyes were fixed on a man who came out of the cottage with an axe on his shoulder. Their mark followed him out, cradling a baby in her arms as she smiled and waved off the man as though she hadn’t a care in the world.

That much mercy I will show her. I will give her a choice at the last. Nefer laughed, a hollow sound that whirled through the sky with the dead leaves as quietly, the wheels of fate began to turn.

Elliot returned from his usual outing to buy food, lowering the hemp bag from his back and setting it down on the table before sitting down himself.

“You’re late back today.” Olivia sat opposite him dandling Caroline on her lap.

“Olivia…” Elliot began, and Olivia, seeing the hard look on his face, smiled sadly. “Ah,” was all she said.

It was while he was shopping that Elliot had felt something amiss. Among the many eyes looking this way and that around the town, he had for a moment sensed someone looking at him in a way that made his hair stand on end. To confirm what he felt, he left the center of town, bought what he needed at a shop he did not usually use, then returned again to the town center, glancing nonchalantly as he went at his own footprints. He found another set of prints that appeared to be tailing him. They way they positioned their center of

balance and the precise length of the strides, as though they had been measured, showed him that this was no amateur. Elliot, assuming that the location of the cottage had already been exposed, took pains to act as though he hadn't noticed. The fact that he was being tailed meant that they were waiting for their moment to strike, but if they realized he had caught on they could well resort to brute force—and that meant Olivia and Caroline back at the cottage would be in danger. Now that they had been found, there was no escaping the danger altogether, but he had to avoid being away from their side at all costs.

"They still don't know I'm on to them. I want to set off tonight under cover of darkness."

"All right. Do you know how many there are?"

"I can only guess, but I think there are three or four, including the ones watching us."

"I agree," Olivia said at length. "It should be about that many, considering how it was in the past." She stared off at a fixed point in space as though deep in thought about something. She didn't respond even when Caroline, standing on her knees, patted her little hand against her mother's cheek. Elliot rose without a word, coming to stand close to Olivia as he stroked her beautifully arranged black hair. Caroline watched him, then started to stroke Olivia's hair herself.

"Don't worry," Elliot said. "I will never let anything happen to you or Caroline."

Olivia was quiet for a moment. "Yes, I know," she said at length. Her lips had been drawn in a hard line, but now they softened in a ghost of a smile as she looked down at Caroline, who still insisted on stroking her hair. She reached for the hemp bag on the table. "In that case, we'll need to fill our bellies. Prepare yourself, I'm going to utilize every cooking technique I've ever learned in this feast."

"Then I'd better make sure I'm as hungry as possible," Elliot replied, slapping his belly playfully. Olivia laughed aloud. Caroline, meanwhile, picking up on the word "feast," bounced up and down, her breathing growing rapid with

excitement. Even with danger closing in on them, Elliot couldn't help but smile as he looked at his beloved daughter.

"We can count on Caroline, that's for sure," he said. "I just know she's going to be someone great in the future."

"That again…" Olivia said. "But you never know, you might be right. Nothing seems to phase our little girl." Olivia smiled at Caroline, who had both hands outstretched to try and grab at an earth pumpkin that peeked out of the bag. Her eyes were without question a mother's eyes, brimming with boundless love.

"Of course, it'd be enough for me for her to grow up well."

"And for me. I couldn't ask for more than to see her grow up healthy…"

The pair lapsed into silence. Then, putting on an apron, Olivia put her hands on her hips and declared, "Let's get to it!" As she laid out the different ingredients in the kitchen, Caroline watched her, clapping her hands together, her ebony eyes aglow.

It was the dead of night. Several shadowy figures raced through the trees of the forest, all blue in the dark. These were the Asura, pursuing the other shadows who had slipped from the cottage under cover of darkness. They had not managed to draw even an inch closer to their mark for no other reason than the traps that covered the forest, stopping them in their tracks at every turn. Safiss, running beside Nefer, clicked his tongue in frustration.

"This is all because he noticed the tail!"

"It was a mistake to try and give our younger members some exper—?!"

Nefer dived low to the ground to avoid the great log that came hurtling at him out of nowhere. Meanwhile, Safiss's twin blades flashed as he drew them from his back to save himself from being caught in the net that flew up from beneath them. The other two Asura who had been assigned to tail Elliot, as it happened, had quickly ended up snared in a trap and Nefer and Safiss had yet to detect any sign of their catching up. The pair turned back, then sighed and resumed their pursuit.

“These are no ordinary traps,” Safiss said, tearing a scrap of netting from where it had caught on his shoulder.

“That’s right... Who’d have thought he’d even be able to deceive us Asura…” Nefer replied. “I think that man must be a Boundary Master.”

“A Boundary Master? Like they have in the Kingdom of Silquedo?”

“Well, I don’t claim to know everything, but I don’t know of anyone else who can set these kinds of traps.”

Back in the mists of Duvedirica’s distant past, or so it was written in some ancient texts, the Kingdom of Silquedo had dominated the continent. The warriors of that country were supposed to have excelled in the creation of traps. The traps set by the best among them reached the level of “boundaries,” winning them much praise from the King of Silquedo. These great warriors came to be known throughout the continent as the Boundary Masters. It was said that the ancestors of the Asura too had crossed swords with these Boundary Masters who, according to remaining records, had proved formidable adversaries. In the end, the Kingdom of Silquedo had been trampled into ruination by the class three dangerous beast known by some as the Bringer of Calamity and by others simply as “The Maw” and faded from existence.

“But from the stories I heard, The Maw came back and wiped out all the survivors, though what they did to earn a grudge like that I don’t know.”

“I wouldn’t be so surprised if one or two had escaped.” Nefer knocked aside an arrow that came shooting toward him with a knife hand strike while beside him Safiss tossed aside the arrow clasped in his fist with an air of irritation.

“It matters not. The moment that man decided to put himself in our way, his death was assured.” They slipped past trap after trap that sprang up as though in prediction of their movements, until Safiss pointed triumphantly up at the sky.

“Look, the clouds have parted just enough. What do you say we begin?”

“I suppose.” Nefer had wanted to spend some more time observing closely the traps of a Boundary Master for future reference, but Safiss, who had a tendency toward impatience, appeared unusually hungry to get going. Nefer

stopped, removing his mask, and looked up at the perfect silver circle of the moon. Before a minute had passed, the power of his Odh coursed through his body. All his muscles bulged, his nails growing sharp as knives. Even among the Asura, Nefer's ability was extraordinary. It was a technique only he could use—physical hyperactivation through Odh.

"You know, it's been a while since I saw you do that, but—"

"Don't say another word," Nefer cut in. "I'm going ahead." Without waiting for Safiss to reply, he kicked off, breaking his way through the traps at with elegance—and occasionally with brute force—as he drew inevitably closer to his mark.

This game of hide-and-seek has been fun, but now that I've taken this form, it's almost over. It wasn't long before Nefer had the Deep Folk woman and the Boundary Master in his sights. Sharp and bestial fangs glinted between his lips.

Elliot turned, sensing the power unleashed behind him, and saw a man closing in on them with the savagery of a wild animal. They were very nearly out of the forest now. Before them lay only an open field.

I miscalculated. I never imagined he would make it this far through my traps. This one far outclasses the other Asura we've shaken off. He had exhausted all his traps already. The rest would all come down to how fast they could run. And yet their pursuer was gaining on them with uncanny speed. It was only a matter of time before he caught them.

"All we can do now is fight." Olivia's voice was flat as she dashed along ahead of him. Caroline clung to her back gurgling with laughter, apparently mistaking what was happening for some sort of game.

"It would seem so," Elliot replied, steeling himself. But then Olivia called out to him again.

"I don't think you understood me properly, so let me clarify. I'm going to fight. Alone."

Elliot stared at her. "What are you talking about?"

Olivia had come to a stop just beyond the tree line. "I'm going to fight alone,"

she repeated without turning around. It was obvious this was neither swagger nor whimsy. And so there was no way Elliot could allow it.

“I swore I would always protect you and Caroline.”

“Yes…” Olivia said. “You did.” She undid the strings that fastened Caroline to her, then turned back to him with the little girl in her arms. She smiled down at Caroline’s happy face, then with loving tenderness, she rubbed her cheeks against her daughter’s.

“Then let me keep my vow.”

“The truth is,” Olivia said, “you’ve already kept it.”

“Already—?!” Elliot began, but Olivia reached out and, with the utmost gentleness, stroked his face. It was as though she was treating him like a child who wouldn’t listen.

“This time, it’s my turn to protect you and Caroline. And besides, unless I finish this feud between the Asura and the Deep Folk myself, those of my people who have died will be angry with me.”

“From the start…” Elliot said slowly. “You meant to do this from the start.”

“I’m sorry. I thought if I said anything, you’d be against it. You’re so full of goodness.” She pressed Caroline into his arms. Her eyes were fixed on a point in the forest.

“Wait!” Elliot shouted. “I never said I accepted—“

“Give this to Caroline…” Olivia cut him off, taking off her necklace before fastening it gently around Caroline’s neck. Its glittering red jewel was shaped like a diamond and, Elliot knew, had been passed down as a treasure in the Valedstorm family for generations.

Olivia pointed northwest and said, “That way lies the Forest of No Return. Even the Asura won’t be able to make it out if they enter.”

Elliot and Olivia had been hiding in the Holy Land of Mekia, which meant that indeed, if he pushed on northwest, he would arrive at the Forest of No Return. But true to its name, that forest was a fearful place from which none who entered ever emerged. Olivia was now telling them to flee into it. As Elliot was

understandably baffled, Olivia went on.

“There’s a saying that’s been passed down since long ago in the Valedstorm family: “If ye be in true need of aid, seek thee then the Gate to the Land of the Dead. The ray of shining crimson shall be thy guide…’”

“I don’t know what that means,” Elliot said. “But I assume this Gate to the Land of the Dead is in the Forest of No Return?”

“Yes.”

“And this gem will lead me there.” He looked down at the great gemstone in Caroline’s hand with doubt in his eyes. It looked like it could easily fetch a spectacular price if sold to someone with refined enough taste. At the same time, however, it didn’t look like anything more than that.

“Trust me, Elliot,” Olivia said. “That gem will lead you to them, I know it will.”

“‘Them’? Is there someone at the Gate to the Land of the Dead?”

Olivia hesitated for a moment. “The god that watches over the house of Valedstorm. It called itself a God of Death.”

“A God of Death…?”

“I am entirely in my right mind. Our first meeting was when I was eight years old. It was entirely black, without a face, with black mist always coiling around it…” she said. “I should absolutely have been scared. But strangely, I felt no fear whatsoever. If anything—” A small smile tugged at Olivia’s lips, as though she had remembered something. Elliot honestly had no idea what she was talking about. But if there was one thing he knew for sure, it was that Olivia never lied.

“All right,” he said. “So for now all I have to do is go to the Forest of No Return and find this God of Death?”

“Right…” Olivia said. “Thank you. For trusting me.”

“I would trust you to the ends of the world, Olivia,” he replied, and she gave him a radiant smile. He pulled her close. The icy wind blew around them, robbing Elliot of the chance to breathe in her comforting scent.

“You must go. I’ll come after you, surely as the sun will rise.”

“Right. Caroline and I will be waiting,” Elliot said, betraying what lay in his heart as he stepped away from Olivia. Just like that, he turned, and set off running like the wind toward the Forest of No Return. At his chest, Caroline gazed at the gem in her hands with a smile of perfect innocence.

No sooner had Elliot and Caroline disappeared from her sight than, appearing as though riding on the wind, the Asura came to a halt before her.

“Is this game of chase over then? I have to say, it was highly entertaining. If only we hadn’t been Asura, your schemes might have succeeded quite quickly…” The Asura went on. “Do you plan on acting as a shield to allow the Silquedo man and the babe to escape?”

Olivia gave no reply. Instead, she reached up and released the fastener on her black cloak, revealing her raven-colored armor as she drew a shining silver knife from its scabbard. She placed one foot slightly behind her and lowered her weight.

Seeing Olivia preparing for battle, the Asura with his wolf-like face put his hands on his hips and gave a sneering laugh. “It appears you don’t fear me nearly as much as you should. What do you think you’re going to do after bringing out that toy now? Were you so busy escaping that you left your real weapon back at that hut?”

“I wonder which one of us is really underestimating the other,” Olivia said slowly. Her Odh was all prepared; now, she sent it out into her knife. Around where the blade met the hilt, a sword appeared, glowing pale gold. The Asura let out a whistle of appreciation.

“Now that’s a surprise,” he said. “Your ability to corporealize your Odh is incredible. Even among the Asura, there aren’t many who could match that. Allow me to apologize for what I said earlier. I should have expected nothing less from the Valedstorms, when in your veins flows the blood of Gracia, once mightiest among the Deep Folk. By the way,” he said abruptly, “how shall we do this? Shall I start with the Silquedo man? Or the Deep Folk baby?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You might not think it to look at me, but I’m known among the Asura for my

bountiful mercy. Attending to their final moments will mean you can die free from worry." The Asura's mouth stretched in a thin smile that gave Olivia an excellent look at his pointed teeth. She felt a surge of fury as though all the blood in her body was boiling.

"I will not allow you to touch a single hair on their heads! Not that of the man I love, nor of our beloved child!" She slashed at the ground with the blade of light, drawing a boundary line between herself and the Asura. It was a statement of Olivia's ironclad determination not to let the man come any further. The Asura gazed at the deep gouge in the earth as though mystified.

"You mean your wish is to go on first, without being there for either of their final moments? It matters not to me, if that is what you choose." His eyes slid away. "Here at last…"

Olivia followed his gaze and saw another masked Asura bearing down on them at terrific speed.

"You still haven't started? Quite the leisurely pace you're setting."

"I didn't expect to enjoy my chat with the Deep Folk woman so much. Got carried away."

The other Asura snorted behind his mask, then his eyes went to Olivia's hands. "What's this? So she can corporealize. Well, I never…"

"Well? This really looks like it'll be quite fun, doesn't it?"

The masked Asura scratched his head. "This is a bad habit of yours, Nefer. All we need to think about is fulfilling the contract," he said. "Oh, and I suppose the Silquedo man and the baby are still fleeing?"

"As you can see."

"Then I'll leave this one to you. It's still Deep Folk, even if it is only a baby."

The masked Asura made to run straight past Olivia. She slashed out at him with her blade of light, but he twisted, leaping away to easily avoid her strike.

"Weren't you listening to what I said? I'm not your opponent here," he said. No sooner had he hit the ground than he took off running. Olivia changed the blade into a whip that flew out to coil around the man's ankles. She threw him

hard up into the air, then finally brought him slamming down into the ground.

“I told you! I will not let you lay a finger on them!” she shouted. From within the billowing dust, she heard soft laughter mixed with sneering voices.

“I wasn’t told anything like that.”

“She did say something along those lines, come to think of it… But more importantly, she can change the form of her Odh at will? This just gets more and more interesting.”

“Allow me to amend what I said earlier. She’s trouble. Let’s deal with her together.”

“You got it.”

The two Asura began to advance slowly toward Olivia, one on each side.

Elliot, Caroline, give me strength! All the clouds had now cleared, and the moon bathed the land in its enchanting silver light. Olivia leapt into the sky, as though she might pluck out the glittering stars…

Chapter One: Prelude to the Final Movement

I

The region known as the Turner Plains hosted a variety of geography, from a maze of hills and forests to wetlands and rivers. In the hills stood a man and a woman, both clad in blue armor. At first glance they looked just like soldiers of the Azure Knights, but it was clear from the incredible aura that emanated from them both that they were nothing of the sort. Two unknown corpses lay sprawled at their feet.

“It’s about to begin,” the man said, an ear to the rumble of battle drums that rose from both armies. He removed a dark mask adorned with an inverted gold cross. His name was Mirage Lebnan, a tall man with short-cropped hair. He addressed his companion, Krishna Siren. She removed her own mask, similar to his own but with a butterfly design instead, with a gauntleted hand, before taking a spyglass from the pouch at her waist and holding it to her eye.

“So it seems,” she said. “By the way, when were you planning on entering the fray?”

“We’ll wait until the fighting is at its most chaotic. I don’t want to leave any chance of failure.”

“If you want to be sure, wouldn’t it be better to strike while the target is asleep? You do know we’re the descendants of an ancient line of assassins, don’t you?” Krishna pointed out. As she did so, she raised a hand to a passing butterfly, allowing it to land on her finger.

“That would work well enough if our mark were an utter fool. But she’s Deep Folk, and skilled enough that she took down Madara single-handedly. Rather than attack while she’s asleep, when she’ll be on the alert, we’ll have a far easier job while she’s distracted in the heat of battle.”

Krishna didn’t agree or argue, only swept her spyglass from left to right

before returning it smartly to its holster. She then leaned in as though to inspect Mirage's face.

"It's been some time since I saw you without your mask," she remarked. "Did you always look like that?"

Mirage stroked the beard he had recently started to grow out as he replied. "Don't tell me you've fallen for me?"

Krishna stared at him for a moment in silence. "After a great enough shock, one loses the ability to speak," she said. "Are you in your right mind? I really am so very eager to know when it was that I *fell for you.*"

Mirage returned her knife-sharp glare with a look of puzzlement. "What? Was I mistaken? And here I was convinced after you were first in line to pair up with me..."

"*That's* all it took to get you saying such things?! I am shocked beyond words. You are easy to work with, it's no more than that. It quite fills me with dread to think your imagination runs so wild." Krishna finished with a dramatic sigh, after which the pair settled into silence for a time.

Eventually Mirage, his mind already running on to other things, broke the silence. "By the way, about Felix—" But no sooner had the name passed his lips than Krishna's full, alluring lips curved mysteriously. A moment later, a flock of wild birds resting in a nearby tree let out a raucous screeching and, as one, took to the wing.

Mirage glared at Krishna. "Showing off your bloodlust like that is unseemly."

"Whatever do you have to say about Felix? According to our intelligence, he is to command the whole of the imperial army in this battle, is he not?" Krishna seemed like she might start whistling a tune, such was the enthusiasm with which she turned her gaze on the imperial camp. Mirage opened his mouth, then closed it again, letting out a small sigh instead.

"No, never mind," he said.

"Oh? You really oughtn't bottle things up like that. By the by, once we've finished off the Deep Folk girl, I plan on putting that arrogant boy in his place too."

“You can’t have forgotten what the elder said,” Mirage said at length. The last time the subject of Felix’s execution came up, the elder had said in no uncertain terms that none of them were to strike at him.

“Naturally, I have not forgotten the words of our honored elder,” Krishna replied. “Having said that, however much talent the boy may possess, that doesn’t change that the elder is too soft on him. Surely you agree?”

“Felix is to be the next elder. It’s only natural our elder is a bit soft on him.”

The present elder had to decide upon their successor. So it was written in the *Combined Covenants of the Asura,* passed down in an unbroken line since the Asura’s founding. They could protest all they liked, but if the elder did not change his mind, there was nothing they could do. To the Asura, contracts and covenants were everything.

“Even as he makes no effort to hide that he is distancing himself from the Asura?” Krishna retorted, then laughed softly. “It’s absolutely ridiculous.”

“That’s how much talent the elder sees in Felix.”

“That is how he’s ended up ignoring the noble calling of the Asura to lose himself in idiotic war games. Is hunting the Deep Folk not our ultimate calling? It wouldn’t hurt for someone to teach him a bit of a lesson.”

“Teach him a lesson, eh...” Mirage chuckled under his breath. Krishna’s eyes took on a glint of suspicion.

“I certainly didn’t *mean* to amuse you,” she said.

“Well, confidence is a fine thing, but I’m not going to help you, at any rate.”

Krishna sighed. “So you share Nefer’s thoughts on the matter, in the end. Whatever’s turned you all craven, surely you don’t seriously think he could take *all* of us?” Her tone was mocking, and Mirage didn’t quite know how to respond to that. Eventually, he decided this was the time to tell her a story from long ago.

“It was only once,” he began, “but I have sparred with Felix before.”

“I never knew that.” Krishna said, surprised. Mirage went on, paying her no mind.

“No reason you would have. It happened more than a decade ago, after all.”

Mirage remembered that day as though it were only yesterday.

Krishna’s immaculately shaped eyebrows shot up. “More than a decade ago?”

“Felix was eleven years old. I would’ve been exactly the age he is now.”

Krishna’s eyes urged him to continue with his story. Without a word, Mirage removed the armor covering his upper right arm, then rolled up his sleeve to show her. He distinctly observed her eyebrows draw together in a frown.

“Felix gave me this scar not long after the bout began. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you the result.”

“And it wasn’t simply that you were weak?” Krishna replied teasingly. Mirage grinned.

“You seriously believe that, do you?”

“I mean, I don’t...” muttered Krishna, her face stiffening uncomfortably. Mirage rolled his sleeve down again, then reaffixed his armor.

“Well, that’s the long and short of it, anyway,” he said. Krishna was quiet for a moment.

“Just so we’re clear, I never intended to rely on your assistance,” she spat. She then started kicking the corpse at her feet. Mirage felt quite sorry for them, to be humiliated even in death.

This is going to be a headache, he thought. He had no interest whatsoever in standing up for Nefer. At the same time, he saw signs that Krishna and other comparatively younger Asura underestimated Felix. Even Mirage couldn’t stand Felix or the man’s disgust for the noble Asuran blood that ran in his veins, but he wasn’t about to raise a sword to the younger man now. Mirage had been helpless against Felix even when the other was only a boy—now that he was a grown man, Mirage did not stand even a ghost of a chance.

The conversation had gotten off track. Mirage returned to his original point. “It’s not that I don’t understand your anger, Krishna,” he said, “but forget about Felix for the time being. Nothing is more important right now than putting an end to the Deep Folk.”

The girl in question, the true last survivor of the Deep Folk, had killed Madara in self-defense before he could succeed in his mission. Even Krishna had to understand could under any circumstances afford to take the threat she posed lightly.

Krishna clicked her tongue quietly, then said, “You don’t need to tell me to be careful. Isn’t that why we took pains to dress up like this?” She spread her arms out and did a graceful pirouette, her golden hair beautiful as it traced an arc through the air.

“You look better in it than I expected,” Mirage commented.

“Why, thank you,” Krishna replied, sounding as though she couldn’t care less. *Don’t go showing off like that, then,* Mirage thought, privately annoyed.

“I’ll go over it again to be sure,” he said. “We wait for chaos before we kill her. If her strength is spent, all the better.”

“Shall I observe from a safe distance for the early stages of the battle, then?”

“That’s right.”

“And if the battle is decided quickly?”

“We can think about that if it comes to that. Either way, observation will be crucial.”

Their likelihood of success would improve dramatically if they waited until they had grasped the extent of her abilities rather than engaging with the girl the moment they caught sight of her. She had killed Madara, after all. They could not be too careful.

Mirage turned away from Krishna as she indicated her agreement, looking back to where the armies spread out beneath them.

So they call you “Death God” on the battlefield, last of the Deep Folk. I hear from Nefer your mother was very skilled too. Let’s see what you’ve got.

The beating of the battle drums grew in intensity, and war cries began to ring out from the forces on both sides. Mirage and Krishna turned away. In moments, the two of them had vanished into the hills.

II

A black wind sliced across the plain, silver hair and red cloak dazzling as they billowed under the cerulean sky. The first to observe that a lone enemy rider was approaching, kicking up clouds of dust in their wake, was Major Redmond Hein, as he observed the Royal Army through his spyglass.

“What the hell?!” he blurted out. He lowered the spyglass, blinking repeatedly, then pointed it directly ahead of himself once more. The scene it reflected had not changed. What he really ought to have done was to immediately raise the alarm that the enemy was advancing. However, this enemy was acting so contrary to reason that Redmond did something foolish—he only stood there, staring through his spyglass. By the time he realized that the rider was Death God Olivia, the scourge of the imperial army, it was all over.

Olivia wielded a great black spear, and with every swing she sent the supposedly elite Azure Knights flying. It was almost comical, in a way. As he watched her, Redmond couldn’t help but see the spear as a great scythe wielded by a God of Death. Was this really happening, or was it just a terrible nightmare? He couldn’t tell. Unfamiliar fear spread through the surrounding troops like a virus. The Azure Knights might be the empire’s strongest, but they were not all-powerful.

“But you will not see me quail!” As Olivia bore down on him, Redmond put all the strength he could into the spear in his hand. A moment later, the spear he was supposed to have been gripping had fallen without resistance to the ground.

“How...?” he said. No one answered him, but instead, he felt a tepid warmth spreading from his neck. A light touch allowed him to answer his own question.

Now I see... So this was how the glorious Crimson and Helios Knights had been forced to yield to the girl they called Death God. By the time this dawned on Redmond, he had already crumpled to the ground.

“Do whatever you have to do! Stop the Death God at all costs!!” bellowed a mounted soldier who appeared to be the commander. Olivia raked him with her

ebony black spear, sending him hurtling off into the distance, his eyeballs bulging, until at last he disappeared into the ground.

A scarlet pennant was fastened to where the head met the shaft of Olivia's spear, marked with the Valedstorm crest. Anyone who knew their weapons would have recognized it at once as a splendid piece of craftsmanship. Ashton had gone back to Hans, the master blacksmith in the Emaleid Citadel who had made Olivia's armor, and requested him to forge it. The spear took three strong men to lift, yet it gave Olivia no difficulty as she whirled it about her. Little by little, the Azure Knights' forces began to split in two.

Lieutenant Gile Marion watched this unfold from the Royal Army's camp. Blood-curdling smiles spread over the faces of his inner circle of soldiers as he turned to the remaining two thousand who marched under his banner and said with dignity, "The valkyrie has forged for us a shining path. Now, we have only to follow where she leads us." He then bellowed, "Forward, you scallywags!"

A roar went up from the soldiers in response to Gile's exhortation as they poured down the path Olivia had opened for them. The Azure Knights were thrown further into confusion, but for all that, they remained the greatest soldiers in the imperial army and quickly mounted a counter attack. But Gile's forces fought like wild animals sinking tooth and claw into their prey, spilling no small amount of imperial blood as they went.

And thus, the Eighth Legion dominated the early stages of the battle. But there was more to come.

We've come as far as we can, Olivia thought. Wasting no time, she decided that it was time to withdraw.

"Gile," she said. "When I give my signal, get the soldiers to retreat in their ranks."

"To retreat?!" Gile exclaimed. "Not to challenge your orders, Captain, but we have full control of the battle right now. Even assuming we must retreat eventually, surely not yet..."

He continued to shoot off arrows even as he made his appeal. Olivia too never missed a beat, sweeping aside both the spear that stabbed out at her and the

soldier holding it with ease as she replied.

“If we keep pushing forward, we’ll end up facing a costly counterattack. I’d bet all the sweets I brought with me on it, if you like.”

The plan had worked, and they had struck a blow to the Azure Knights. That much she acknowledged, but the disorder in the enemy ranks was already being brought under control—-not only that, but they appeared to be trying to lure the Royal Army deeper behind their lines. Olivia was sure that if they continued to advance, they would be walking into the mouth of a giant snake, ready to swallow them all whole.

Gile cast a swift glance over their surroundings, then clicked his tongue.

“Please forgive me, Captain,” he apologized. “As your right hand, I am ashamed of myself.”

“Even just being able to see it so quickly is amazing, you know. I know I can count on you,” Olivia said with a smile, even as privately she was trying to puzzle out when Gile had become her “right hand.” But it was no good trying to get an answer out of Gile. He would surely only reply with something incomprehensible.

“Ready and willing, ser!” Gile barked back, his face flushed with excitement. His arrows exhausted, he returned his bow to his back and with enthusiasm, drew his sword.

Olivia’s ebony spear danced in her hands, but even as she fought, she was watching for their moment to retreat.

III

It was a short time before Olivia and Gile’s exchange. Lieutenant General Violet von Anastasia planted a long sword of magnificent workmanship into the ground and looked out over the battlefield. Her golden hair rippled in the wind like a field of wheat in the sunshine, and she was so beautiful she looked as though she could have stepped out of a painting.

The war cries from each army accounting the beginning of the battle had

scarcely died away when the runner reached her. Violet brushed her bangs to one side with a delicate finger, then turned her vivid azure eyes on the runner. In society, she'd earned the name "the Lady of the Sky" for those eyes.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Ser! The commander of the Eighth Legion, Death God Olivia, has single-handedly carried out an attack on Major Redmond and his forces. They appear to have fallen into chaos!" After the runner was finished speaking, there was a moment where all was still. Then, like a roll of thunder, a tumult of voices rose up from the assembled veterans. At that moment, Major Redmond had already met his end on the end of Olivia's spear, but Violet and her officers had no way of knowing that.

"Did ye say 'single-handedly'?!" demanded an old retainer, glaring at the runner with the intensity of a man about to attack. The others expressed similar feelings.

Violet only clicked her tongue quietly. *So you went and pulled off something even more outrageous than the stories about you,* she thought. She was aware that Death God Olivia and her blade were always found on the front line. But the idea that she would mount a single-handed attack—not to mention while holding command over a whole army—was beyond prediction, and the soldiers who had come up against her on the front line must have been scared out of their wits. Nothing else could have resulted in the elite Azure Knights being so handily outplayed.

"The enemy forces are targeting the hole opened by the Death God and coming through in floods," the runner went on.

Violet looked down, even as she sensed all other eyes focusing on her at the runner's words. She stayed that way for less than a minute. "This is what we are going to do."

Once she was done imparting her orders, the messenger sprinted away. The standard tactic would have been to immediately dispatch reinforcements, but Violet had instructed her forces to retreat, while quietly, below the surface, constructing an encircling wall with which to strike back.

"But will the Death God catch on to our plan?" the old retainer asked,

stroking his beard.

“I have done a little analysis of my own on our little Death God,” Violet replied. “Though her actions might appear chaotic at first, they always conceal a properly considered battle plan. It’s clear that she’s sharp—she quickly judges her situation. I expect she will see through this plan.”

Though the old man didn’t voice it, the confusion was plain on his face. The corners of Violet’s mouth quirked up as she went on.

“It really doesn’t matter if she does. Even if they fall back, that will give us the opportunity we need to regroup our wavering forces. And if she *does* continue to advance, then we know that we needn’t fear our little Death God and her Eighth Legion.”

A thin smile spread over her face. Violet was no ordinary general—she hadn’t earned her position as Felix’s right hand for nothing.

IV

A mere fifteen minutes after Olivia charged the enemy along with Gile’s unit, Ashton went ahead and issued orders for Ellis and the second unit along with the heavy infantry to provide support for the retreat. As the runners dashed away to each unit, Ashton felt a powerful gaze on his back and turned to find himself face to face with Special Officer Riful Athene, first of the kingdom’s Ten Swords.

I’ve really gotten used to that unusual demeanor of hers, he thought. *Though I couldn’t tell you if it’s a good thing.* Suppressing a wry smile, Ashton set about explaining the current situation to Riful. This time too she wore the Tohka, the elegant battle garb of the Ulu tribe, over her armor.

“Olivia’s ingenious plan to charge them alone was a great success, and Gile’s unit have put on a remarkable performance too. I can say without hesitation that we have held the advantage thus far.”

“Ultra Master Olivia...charging them alone...no one else...could hope to repeat. It must have been a shock even for the Azure Knights, but Ashton...you think...they go no further... And so...you prepared a unit early...to support

the...retreat.”

Though Ashton was taken aback that Riful had so accurately read his intentions, he nodded emphatically. Riful was here because Cornelius had once again sent her to protect Ashton. What set this time apart from the last time was that Riful had apparently volunteered to come. Her motivation for doing so was a mystery to Ashton, but her presence was reassuring all the same.

“The enemy regrouped even faster than I expected. They might look like they’ve been forced into a retreat, but make no mistake, they’re waiting for the chance to mount a counteroffensive.”

The battle was still very much in its early stages. Given their last plan had met with some success, there was no need to persist in clinging to a temporary advantage. In Ashton’s opinion, such persistence only got in the way of flexible thinking.

“I think...you’re...right, Ashton. The Azure Knights haven’t...shown their hand...yet. If this was it...they wouldn’t be the empire’s most...elite. I support...your reading.”

“Erm, well, thank you,” Ashton replied. Riful was there to be his protection, not his aide, but even so, he thought he ought to thank her. “I’m sure Olivia will have noticed it too, out there fighting on the front lines.”

“Ultra Master Olivia...sees the whole flow...of the battle. She cannot miss...it.”

“As far as this battle goes, I’m with you completely. As for the others, well, that’s another thing...” He went on. “Regardless, the crucial thing in this battle is that we’re always anticipating what happens next.” As he said it, Ashton became convinced that this was the only way they were to have a chance of victory against the Azure Knights.

“That’s...my...Ashton,” Riful said, then, slowly running her fingers along the two blades that hung from her belt, added, “Wanna see...my sword fighting?”

“Huh? Um, th-that’s all right. You showed me last time.”

“Oh...too bad.” Riful’s fingers came away from her swords. She was pouting slightly.

Ashton was flummoxed. He still couldn't figure her out at all. Just then, Ashton's attendant, Private Lochie, came running over with a cup in one hand. He had a smile that still retained a flash of boyish charm.

"Lieutenant Colonel Ashton! I've brought you some tea!" he announced.

"You're a lifesaver. I was just getting thirsty." Ashton took the tea with a word of thanks, immediately taking a sip. It was just the right temperature and, together with its subtle aroma, made Ashton feel giddy, like they couldn't possibly lose. He reined his feelings back to reasonable levels, then sighed with pleasure. "Even on the battlefield, you really know how to brew a cup of tea, Lochie."

"I couldn't ask for higher praise, ser," Lochie replied. He saluted with a friendly smile, then left the way he had come. There was a skip in his step as though he had a tune in him bursting to get out.

Riful stared after him, her brow furrowed. "Who is he?" she demanded.

"Lochie? I mean, he's my attendant..."

"Since when?"

"Since—? Um, let's see..." Ashton thought. "Right, yes. It was just after the battle with the Northern Perscillan Army," he replied, feeling thrown by this unusual fluency of speech from Riful. Her eyes were hard as she watched after Lochie. Ashton was thoroughly confused.

"What's the matter with him?" he asked in turn.

Riful hesitated. "Did Ultra Master Olivia say anything about him?"

"Huh? Olivia? She, um..." He thought again. "She praised his tea-making abilities."

"That's all? Nothing else?"

"Not a word more or less."

"Really?"

"Really. And it's not as though I've got any reason to lie about it," he said firmly.

Riful folded her arms, as though thinking something over. “Then did I mistake it? But no...”

“You know, I haven’t got the slightest clue what’s bugging you about Lochie,” Ashton said. Besides his skill in making tea, and the fact that he was even more inept with a blade than Ashton, Lochie was just another good-hearted young man.

All of a sudden, Riful’s eyes locked onto Ashton. “Of course...you wouldn’t understand,” she said.

“That sounds a bit unkind...”

“It’s not...unkind. You don’t need to...understand. That’s why I’m...here.”

“Right...”

“Only there’s a little...a little thing I’ve gotta do. Don’t worry...I’ll be back...right away.” With that, Riful left, apparently following after Lochie. Ashton stared after her, mutely observing that he understood even less about what went on in her brain than he did Olivia’s.

For half an hour, Olivia continued fighting with her ebony spear, all the while keeping a proverbial finger on the pulse of the battle.

That’s about our time up, she thought. Gile, reading her intent, gave the order at once, and their first unit began to swiftly fall back. The Azure Knights naturally seized the chance to pursue them, but they did so with less zeal than Olivia had expected. *I wonder if that means the enemy read my plans just like I read theirs? I mean, if so, I’m not going to pass up the chance to get out of here.*

Heading up the rear guard, Olivia turned to the oncoming Azure Knights and swung her spear up above her head so that it cut through the air with a savage song. Casting a look behind her, she found herself looking at a force of their allies, coming to support the retreat. *Of course you timed it perfectly, Ashton!* she thought.

An encircling ring was quietly taking shape around Gile’s unit, but he succeeded in breaking through. The Azure Knights, held in check by Ellis’s second unit and facing a solid defensive line of heavy infantry, quickly

abandoned their pursuit.

I get the feeling this battle is going to be a long one... Olivia returned to camp with all the wrath of the Azure Knights upon her.

V

Felix made his camp on the plateau to the northeast of the Turner Plains. Just then, he was listening to a runner giving a report on the opening of the battle.

“That concludes my report, ser!” With that, the runner sped away, armor clinking in their wake. Besides the supreme commander Felix, present at the camp were Lieutenant Teresa, as well as Major Matthew, the leader of his personal guard. The brave officers who served under Felix’s banner were assembled there also, but according to the *Chronicles of Duvedirica*, none spoke for some time.

I can hardly believe that sweet young girl turned out to be the Death God... Teresa thought to herself, remembering the time she had first laid eyes on Olivia when she had guided the girl through Kier Fortress. Even now, she still recalled how Olivia had been so beautiful as to make jealousy feel like foolishness, and her own surprise that one so young had earned the rank of warrant officer. *After the hostage exchange was over, Lord Felix seemed a little unlike himself. That would make sense, if he had already realized in that moment how dangerous that girl was. Though, well, it’s too late to be thinking such things now...* Teresa watched Felix as he reached for his cup of Hausen tea. If nothing else, she sensed in him none of the tension she saw in the others.

Matthew set off the discussion. “Their supreme commander, launching an attack *alone?* She’s out of her mind.” The assembled officers were apparently all in strong agreement with this, as they all nodded vigorously. As though a seal had been broken, they all began talking among themselves about Olivia. Felix listened quietly, taking a small sip of his Hausen tea before silently placing the cup back on the table. Just that gesture was enough to draw all eyes in the room to him.

“Through this last episode, I have come to better understand something,” he

said in a mellifluous voice like clear water. Willing or not, all present in the camp were caught under its spell. Teresa observed this with something like awe.

"The Death God's first move was undoubtedly a far cry from the standard playbook. But following that, she has been quick to seize every opportunity."

"But what does that mean, my lord?" one officer asked, unable to restrain himself.

"It means that Death God Olivia and the Eighth Legion under her command are no ordinary opponent. What I can say is that if we fight within the bounds of common practice, we will be hobbling ourselves."

The insane tactics alongside the painstakingly calculated plans seemed to contradict one another. Normally, they should have been like oil and water, never mixing, and yet Olivia had managed to blend them smoothly together. He could see how even Violet, with her unerring tactical acumen, had suddenly found herself outplayed. She would undoubtedly have been clicking her tongue in that quiet way of hers. Felix explained all this, allowing himself a small smile as he finished.

The officers once more began to discuss Olivia, their faces colored with anxiety. As though to allay that anxiety, Felix said gently, "Though they forestalled us this time, the battle has only just begun, and what is more, from what I have seen, their soldiers are several levels below the Azure Knights in discipline and training. Though the fact remains that this is not an enemy we can afford to take lightly, there is no call for undue fear. That I promise you, as commander of the Azure Knights." Before their eyes, the fire returned to the officers' faces. With the absolute trust that Felix drew from his Azure Knights, just his words now were more than enough to rouse their spirits.

"Well, then, my lord," Matthew said, slapping his knees with a cheerful grin. "I suppose that means it's our turn."

Felix nodded firmly. "Just so, Matthew. I wouldn't dream of passing up the chance to cross swords with the army of Death God Olivia." Confidence shone out of his face as he smiled. The Azure Knights had only to show their might to its fullest degree, he told them, bringing the discussion to a close, for the scales

of victory to naturally come down in their favor.

VI

It was high noon on the fourth day since the outset of the battle. Captain Gauss Osmeyer positioned his forces in front of the deep expanse of marshland in the southwest of the Turner Plains. There he raised their battle flag, emblazoned with the Valedstorm crest—the symbol of the Eighth Legion. With around three thousand soldiers under his command, most of whom he had previously fought alongside of in the many battles they had come through under Olivia's command in the Independent Cavalry Regiment, there was no question that Gauss's regiment were elite.

"All the same, it is rather a bold move..." said Gauss's aide Slash Reis, his mouth twisting. By way of response, Gauss flashed him a savage grin. It was no fit of fancy that had led to his deliberately choosing this place, rimmed by hills and treacherously marshy underfoot, for his battleground. On the way, they had engaged in a few skirmishes with the Azure Knights, and his impression was that they combined the offensive power of the Crimson Knights with the defensive capabilities of the Helios Knights. It was only right that they were called the empire's most elite warriors. No doubt the soldiers of the Azure Knights were better trained; meeting them head on would therefore be the height of stupidity. The only way to narrow the gap, even slightly, was to hit the Azure Knights where they did not expect it. If they ended up fighting in the swamp, both armies would inevitably get bogged down. Though it meant sacrificing protection, Gauss had forbidden in advance all but the lightest equipment to his soldiers, in order to prioritize ease of movement.

"Will our enemy oblige us by going along with it, I wonder?"

"That's up to you."

"Say what? Why's it up to me, ser?" An even more dim-witted expression than the one he usually wore came over Slash's face. Gauss glanced at him, then clapped him vigorously "Ow!" he yelped. "That *hurts.* What if you dislocated my shoulder, eh? Unlike you, ser, I'm built delicate. I'll thank you not to go whacking me with that monstrous strength of yours."

“You know,” Gauss said, “I think it’s safe to say there’s one thing I’ll never outdo you on.”

“You, never outdo me on something?” Slash replied earnestly. “My handsome face, perhaps?”

Gauss cuffed him hard on the head, grinning. “Can’t work it out?”

“If I can’t, it’s only because there are so many possibilities.” Slash kept up the easy banter even as he rubbed his head.

Gauss reached out, pinched his cheeks, and tugged hard. “There you go, that’s the stuff. You be sure and give the Azure Knights a healthy dose of that flagrant disrespect, you hear?”

“I go’ it! I go’ it, sho shtoff tugging!” He held up both hands in a gesture of surrender and Gauss released him, letting his cheeks snap back. Slash sighed. “So basically, you want me to goad our foes into following us into these marshes, ser?”

“That’s right. It’s what you’re best at, isn’t it?” A silver tongue to provoke an enemy was just another weapon in the arsenal. In that sense, Slash was the perfect man for the job—he might have been born with his tongue wagging. Gauss, however, did know of another who outdid even Slash in this regard. *Even I can’t get a rein on that one,* he thought.

When it came to being difficult to handle, Slash had nothing on Ellis, who now commanded a detached force of her own. Even Slash seemed to forget how words worked when it came to her.

Slash rubbed his reddened cheeks, looking surly. “There’s a thing or two I could say to that, ser, but I’ll do it if that’s what your orders are. I ain’t taking no responsibility if they don’t take the bait, mind.”

“Don’t you worry. They’ll take it, you can be sure of that. I’ve got a hell of a lot more faith on that count than I do in your sword arm.”

“You’re too kind, ser. I’m so honored I might cry,” Slash replied, making a show of wiping away non-existent tears.

Sure enough, an hour later—

“The enemy you were waiting for, ser.”

Gauss’s regiment of light infantry rendezvoused with a unit of the Azure Knights.

Colonel Vieth Leda found the Eighth Legion camped on the other side of what looked like a deep swamp. He gave the order for all his forces to halt.

“They’re obviously trying to lure us in, aren’t they?” his aide remarked.

Vieth nodded. It was plain that their enemy desired a battle in the marsh, and that could only mean one thing—they were attempting to use the terrain to compensate however they could for the difference in their forces’ abilities. What they had not accounted for was running into a unit considered elite even within ranks of the Azure Knights.

“Shall we take the bait?” Vieth’s aide asked. He realized the unconcerned tone was a sign of confidence, not an absence of caution.

“While that might be amusing, I don’t see why we should act as they want us...?”

As he spoke, a sudden stir rippled through many of the soldiers around the camp as they began to point. Vieth’s gaze followed to the source and saw a lone Royal Army soldier coming toward them. He wondered if they were dragging out the old custom of greeting one’s opponent before a battle, but the man didn’t carry himself like commander. He seemed like an aide at best. That would have made Vieth suspect a trap, except that they were on the edge of a marsh. If one were setting a trap, there could be no worse location.

Surely not. They can’t be planning to surrender? He gave the stand-down gesture to the archers nocking arrows to the string, watching as the Royal Army soldier came to a halt right in the middle of his own forces.

“I have a message for the glorious Azure Knights!” he began in a sing-song tone. “Smeared in mud as we are, we thought a mud-slinging battle would be just the thing. But what say you? No, don’t answer! I know *just* what you’re thinking! The *magnificent* Azure Knights, flaunting such *gorgeous* outfits, they *falter!* You’d best run back to the capital with your tails between your legs while

you can! And to only show your faces on the battlefield now—it's simply too much! You *resplendent* Azure Knights should have stayed where you were—quailing before the Royal Army, hiding your faces in the skirts of the ladies of the imperial court! And the best part! The very best part, is then you'd never soil your oh so *pretty outfits!*"

Vieth felt waves of hot rage of his soldiers wash over him. He realized his hand was sticky and looked down to where his hands gripped his reins to see blood trailing from nail-shaped crescents in his palms.

"I shall say it once more, o *splendiferous* Azure Knights! Get up off those pretty rumps of yours and run back to the capital! Run back to your master, inciting his pointless wars based on childish fantasies, Ramza the Good—or should I say, Ramza the Fool!" The soldier spun around then, without warning, he dropped his breeches and gave his buttocks a resounding slap. The waves of rage transformed into a raging inferno that threatened to swallow the entire unit whole.

"Do we take the bait?" His aide repeated. Now, however, his expression was utterly changed. He glared over at the Royal Army soldier with a look of such malice he could have sent a demon running scared. Vieth took a handkerchief from his pocket and fastidiously wiped away the blood. He took the magnificent pike proffered by his attendant with a firm grip.

"Toward us, I would endure any abuse. But I cannot sit idly by and permit a mere soldier to insult his imperial majesty. Just sending them to hell is not enough." He turned to his soldiers. "Listen, all of you! The Royal Army stands before you! You will exterminate them!"

The Royal Army soldier bolted and the Azure Knights pursued, rushing forward like a river in a storm. Watching from on high, a flock death-eater birds circled through the blue sky.

Chapter Two: Blood and Conspiracy on the Wind

I

The White Forest, the North of the Empire

Far beyond the reach of the powers of man lay a world sealed in white. It was a world of rampant tyranny and commonplace cruelty, but hidden away in a corner of that world, one might stumble across a little log house. The snowy winds blew fiercely, seeming as though they would freeze even the darkness, but the faint light glimmering in the window were a beacon showing that here, there was some small comfort.

“It’s not like you to think so hard, Lasara.”

As Lasara sat back in her rocking chair, gazing deep into the flames of the hearth, the fairy Silky Breeze flitted in front of her face. Lasara tried to swat her away, but the fairy easily evaded her. She sighed. “Don’t talk to me like I’m another happy-go-lucky fairy.”

“Well I’m sorry.” Silky Breeze crossed her arms firmly and puffed her cheeks out. “You wouldn’t know, seeing as how you’ve never met any other fairies, but there’s not another one out there who does as much thinking as me.”

It was true, Silky Breeze was the only fairy that Lasara had ever laid eyes on. All the same, the idea of meekly accepting the fairy at her word galled her. Lasara had once asked about the other fairies. According to Silky, they were painfully timid and cautious, and so would never go near anywhere with the slightest human presence. Why then, Lasara had asked, had Silky come to her when she was a human?

Silky, with an ill-mannered air of superiority, had replied, “I’m no coward, and besides, you looked like an interesting sort of human.” In other words, Lasara had thought, Silky was a weirdo.

“All right, if you’re so pleased with yourself, I’ll ask: what in the hell *are* you

thinking about?”

In response, Silky flashed her an alluring smile, then pirouetted neatly on the spot, her black dress flaring out spectacularly. Lasara stared at her so unmoved she surprised even herself.

“And that’s what you’re thinking? I can’t make any sense of it.”

“What?! You didn’t understand?! It’s this! This here!” Silky grabbed at her skirts, which were drowning in ruffles, and spread them to show Lasara, who saw the fairy’s gaze grow as sharp as she had ever seen it in proportion to her irritation.

Silky shook her head in disappointment. “You must be getting old, Lasara.”

“I don’t need you telling me that!” Through the secret arts of the Longevity Principle, Lasara had lived two hundred and seventy seven years and four months—more than three ordinary human lifetimes. She didn’t need the fairy reminding her what she knew far too well already.

“Now, what’s this about your dress?”

“Just now, that was a sign of senility, wasn’t it?” Silky sighed dramatically. Lasara narrowly managed to choke back the retort that rose to her lips. She wouldn’t get anything out of arguing with Silky. In lieu of a verbal response, she instead thrust her chin out to indicate to the fairy that she should continue.

“You haven’t seen this black dress before, have you?”

“I do not keep notes on every blasted thing you wear...but no, I have not,” Lasara admitted.

“This dress is what I’ve been losing sleep over in order to get it ready before Felix comes to see us again. Well? Seeing this, even you can’t say I never think, can you?” Silky wriggled her nose and stuck out her chin, before finally shooting Lasara a sidelong glance. Lasara, if she were honest, cared little and less. On top of that, the fairy spent most of the day asleep, so frankly Silky’s argument carried next to no weight whatsoever. If anything, Lasara had been a fool to seriously engage.

She sighed. “And now I have gone and wasted my time on trivialities. I am

ashamed of myself.”

“This isn’t trivial! There’s nothing worth thinking about more than Felix!” Silky flew circles around Lasara, irritating as a fly, kicking out wherever she found an opening. Lasara lost the battle to her annoyance and raised her left hand. The Heavenly Orb Mage Circle tattooed there flashed once, and Silky was imprisoned inside a tiny jail cell.

Silky gaped for a moment, then grabbed the bars.

“That’s not fair! Pulling out magecraft just like that.”

“Quieten down a bit. With all this racket, I can’t hear myself think.”

“Hooey! My magecraft’ll smash your quack smells to smithereens!” As she fumed, Silky’s whole body glowed with pale light—the magecraft of the fae. While mages used the circle tattooed on the back of their hand as a catalyst for their powers, fairies did not necessarily require a catalyst. It was no struggle to see which casting method was superior, and yet contrary to Silky’s expectations, the jail did not fly apart. She flushed crimson, kicking furiously at the bars.

“Why won’t it break?!”

“I *am* a great mage,” Lasara pointed out, “and I can’t have you forgetting it. And in any case, it doesn’t matter how you pretty yourself up. The youngster won’t be back for some time.”

At this, Silky’s kicks stopped abruptly. “Why not? Why? Why? Why won’t he be coming?!”

“He’s in the middle of an idiotic war.”

“Huh? He’s in a war?! We’ve gotta go help him!”

“You must not.”

“No! I’m worried about him!”

“Even if you went, the help you could give him...” Before she could go any further, Lasara clamped her mouth shut. She could imagine all too well what a boon Silky’s magecraft would be to the empire.

One corner of Silky's mouth curled, and she made a show of pushing back her bangs.

"Oh? What sort of help could I give him?" she inquired.

"You really are an impertinent fairy. How many times must I tell you? You put one toe out into the world, and they'll make you their plaything. Or do you want to make yourself a clown?"

"And I told *you*, no lug of a human is gonna catch *me*." Silky stuck her tongue out. Lasara, reflecting that she wasn't made for parenting, found herself thinking back on another child.

Not to validate Silky's shenanigans, but I do fear for the youngster. After all, he's facing one of the Deep Folk... Heeding the indistinct fears she had been unable to shake, Lasara had sent a bird to the imperial capital to collect information. It had brought her back the news that Felix had left Olsted with an army. Pursuing further, Lasara had learned that his opponent was Olivia Valedstorm, the Deep Folk girl they called the Death God. *This time I will be unable to merely watch from afar, I suppose. I must rouse myself...*

Lasara clicked her fingers and the cage imprisoning Silky vanished without a trace. For a split second, their eyes met. Then, fist raised, Silky charged at her. Lasara reached around behind the fairy then, catching one of her wings between thumb and forefinger, leaned in toward her.

"A fairy can't live without wings!" Silky raged. "Release me!"

"We're going out."

"Huh? By 'out'...you meant we're going to see Felix?!" Her face lit up with surprise and delight. Lasara gave her a serene nod.

"Just so. I'm not comfortable leaving you here alone."

"Uh huh, yep, I'll take anything right now as long as I get to see Felix!" Lasara released the faiyr, who shot away at once, leaving a trail of stardust as she flew loops around the room. But just as quickly, she pulled up short, looking at Lasara with worry in her eyes. "Lasara, do I look good in this dress? Do you think Felix will like it?"

Though Silky's behavior might leave a lot to be desired, even Lasara couldn't find anything to fault in her appearance—as a rule, therefore, she looked good in anything she put on. And in any case, black always set off a woman's beauty. Lasara didn't know Felix's taste in women, but the one thing she did know was that he'd compliment Silky like a proper gentleman.

Seeing Silky's worry deepen, Lasara felt an urge for mischief rise within her. She kept her evil smile to herself as she slowly and deliberately raised a hand to her cheek.

"There's nothing *wrong* with black..." she said, "only, I think I'd go with white."

"White? Hmm. Honestly, I'm not that big on white..." Silky twisted her hips from side to side to check her dress. It was all Lasara could do to keep a straight face.

"You don't know? Then allow me to enlighten you. In the human world, it's customary for the dress worn on one's wedding day to be white. It symbolizes your purity to your betrothed."

Silky's face flushed before her eyes. "Wedding...with Felix...wedding...wedding..." The fairy went on muttering, her wings trembling like an injured butterfly until she plopped down on the table.

"What's wrong?" Lasara asked. Silky didn't reply. She tried waving her hand in front of the fairy's face, but even that elicited no response.

Did I take the joke a bit far? she wondered. Still, the fairy was quiet at least so, counting this as a win, Lasara started getting ready.

II

Sofitia Hell Mekia, seventh seraph of the Holy land of Mekia, sent out a veritable horde of owls to the various battlefields. The battles now unfolding represented a crucial moment, and she meant to be fully informed on how they progressed so that she might steer Mekia toward its rightful future.

Sofitia's Private Chambers at La Chaim Palace, the Holy Land of Mekia

The flickering light of the fire in the hearth filled the room with a gentle glow. One who stumbled across the threshold might have been forgiven for thinking they had wandered into paradise, seeing Sofitia there in her flowing lilac robe like an angel's raiment. She held a cup of black tea in one hand as she walked over to a heavy table that rested in the center of the room.

On the table were three magnificently carved black boards, atop of each of which were a great many pieces. Sofitia reached out and picked up a black piece from the central board in her delicate fingers, then moved it toward the line of gray pieces.

I should have expected no less from Olivia. She went above and beyond what I had imagined. I suppose she had no choice.

It was a month since the owls had brought her word that the battle for Kier Fortress had begun. When another owl then returned with the news that that the Azure Knights had met the Eighth Legion, she had felt a great surge of shock, but also of elation. She did not need to think back on her military history to know that never once in ages gone by had anyone faced down an enemy army of thirty thousand—and thirty thousand of that enemy's most elite warriors—and mounted a lone charge against them. Under normal circumstances, this could only be considered the act of a lunatic, but with Olivia and her extraordinary skill at arms, it was a different story. It was said that the girl whom Sofitia wanted nothing more than to make her own had rushed forward like a demon, tearing the ranks of the Azure Knights asunder as she went.

Sofitia raised the teacup to her lips, then turned her attention to a white piece on the same board. *The Eighth Legion controlled the first stage. But Felix von Sieger's Azure Knights are not made of such weak stuff that they would let it end there.* Felix had proved his individual mettle when he fought off Amelia and Johann, both of whom were mages. He had already moved into the realm of the inhuman. His ability to lead was the issue at stake, but though Olivia's lone charge had thrown him at the start of the battle, his recovery had been swift. Though Sofitia still lacked sufficient evidence to make an accurate determination, she nevertheless judged him to be a commander of more than

average skill.

From what the owls report, it seems the difference in training between the two armies is significant, just as I thought. The Azure Knights' advantage will only grow the longer the fighting is drawn out. If Olivia's Eighth Legion is to seize victory... Sofitia saw the face of a young man with a gentle face in her mind's eye—that of Ashton Senefelder.

The young man had more than amply demonstrated his exceptional talents in succeeding in pitting the Eighth Legion against the Azure Knights alone. Whether the Azure Knights' advantage now grew or diminished would be dictated by the extent to which he was able to control the battle. The reason for the imperial army's string of losses could be summed up thusly: besides their inability to suppress Olivia herself, just as key was their failure to notice Ashton, manipulating from the shadow cast by Olivia's dazzling presence.

When one has eyes only for the light, one tends to forget the darkness. This is a typical example. Her eyes briefly caught on her own provocative reflection in the window, before returning once more to the board. As a rule, she excluded the word "regret" from her vocabulary. As ruler of Mekia, she had little time to waste on such pointless concerns, and yet there was something about Ashton she could not get out of her mind. She had decided early on, in consideration of his personality, to abandon the idea of recruiting him to the Winged Crusaders. It was a decision she did not regret, but searching her soul she felt something unresolved toward him. Sofitia was a stranger to love and had no desire to make its acquaintance, but she could still tell that Ashton was smitten with Olivia. She could hardly have governed a nation if she were not sensitive to the hearts of others.

Though I imagine there are a fair few exceptions, she acknowledged.

First to come to mind was Alfonse sem Galmond, King of Fernest. He was, it scarcely needed to be said, the embodiment of mediocrity. He had not even the decency to be ashamed of having driven a great nation into the ground. Instead he lived a life of indolence and ignorance of how he disgraced himself. Sofitia despised no one more. It had only taken a little charm to set him drooling, and as if that weren't bad enough, he had the gall to assume she felt amicably toward him. Sofitia remembered how her face had threatened to twist in

disgust at the presumptuous tone he had taken with her. That Fernest had survived as long as it had under the rule of such a fool was in part down to Olivia and Ashton's strength, but neither could the not-inconsiderable talent present in the upper echelons of the Royal Army be discounted. At the banquet back in Fernest, Sofitia had taken the opportunity to converse with a number of their senior officers, amongst whom Cornelius had stood head and shoulders above the rest. Though he was affable and subdued, Sofitia saw in him unfathomable depths, and there was a gleam in his eyes that missed nothing. Sofitia set no stock in hypotheticals, but all the same, she thought that Fernest would be in a very different place if Cornelius had been king.

This is no good. I am becoming distracted. Right now, it was Ashton she ought to be thinking of. Not Alfonse, and not Cornelius. *Olivia said it was out of fear for him that she remained with the Royal Army. At the time, I thought if he were out of the way, it would be the solution to my problem. But now, I see I was greatly mistaken.*

It was *Ashton*, not Olivia, who she ought to have invited to the Winged Crusaders first. She knew well that Olivia did not have a shred of loyalty toward Fernest. If Ashton had appealed to her, chances were that she would have agreed. Even Claudia, that knight who stuck Olivia's side like a rash, was not likely to stop Olivia if she decided to leave.

In conjunction with what Johann had told her, the owls' investigations had indicated that he would not condone betrayal. Likewise, he could not be swayed by gold. At present, she had nothing with which to effectively tempt him.

If I am going to win him over, I will have to put a stop to this war, in some way or another. Ashton started out as a conscript. He has no love for battle. He will no doubt leave the army when the war is over. And then there will be nothing for Olivia to fear...

Sofitia wanted only one thing from this battle, and that was for the imperial army and the Royal Army to devour one another. She expected that if the Eighth Legion captured Emperor Ramza, the empire would sue for peace. Why had Fernest struck back by invading the empire? Yes, they were riding on the wings of a string of victories, but more than that, the Royal Army was exhausted

and lacked the strength to keep the war going. Fernest would undoubtedly enter into peace negotiations with the empire. For the Holy Land of Mekia, that would be when the real work began. Sofitia would use the territory ceded to them by Fernest as a foothold to gradually chip away at the kingdom on an economic front. In the meantime, she would bring Olivia, Ashton, and other people of talent under her wing, amassing power. It would require several years at the least. Once she had Fernest fully in the palm of her hand, that was when she would announce her intention to unify the continent. If they exterminated the weakened imperial army, the incurable opportunists of the United City States of Sutherland would submit, like as not. With three quarters of the continent under her control, the remaining minor nations might as well not exist. In reality, things would not be so straightforward—many obstacles lay ahead. Even so, Sofitia was confident that she could see it through.

Sofitia's eyes slid once more to the window, outside of which the icy night grew deeper. Her face reflected in the glass was alight with a ghastly smile.



Main Command of the Winged Crusaders

"Blessed Wing Lara. The Seventh Soaring Squadron have commenced attack on the fortified tower to the right of the fortress, as scheduled."

"Thank you for the report."

"Ser!"

The messenger left. "Don't you find this battle absurd? We won't even get any good experience for the guardians out of it, let alone a demonstration of the Royal Army's strength." From atop her silver chariot that glittered all the colors of the rainbow, Lara Mira Crystal looked down at the battlefield, her brow furrowed. As a senior thousand-wing, Johann knew that Lara was trying to shape the Winged Crusaders into the greatest army in Duvedirica.

Beside them rode Senior Hundred-Wing Historia von Stampede, leader of the Twelve Angels, her head bobbing up and down at irregular intervals as she held tight to her reins. With half an eye on her, Johann's mouth twisted as he answered. "With all due respect, Blessed Wing Lara, this is not a training exercise."

"Lara's such a meathead that she doesn't see the difference between the battlefield and a training ground. I wouldn't waste your breath..."

Johann spun around to face Historia, but found her eyes still closed and her head still bobbing. As he stared in disbelief, Historia suddenly cried out.

"Ow!" Clutching the back of her head, she glared up at the chariot. "That hurt, you know!"

Lara gave her a look cold as the depths of winter. "It's your own fault for falling asleep in the middle of a battle."

Johann thought it served her right. He couldn't have ever worked up the nerve to nap right in front of the commander-in-chief of the Winged Crusaders if he tried. Even Historia had no comeback. She only pursed her lips unhappily.

That's Blessed Wing Lara for you, Johann thought. It had undoubtedly been Lara's magecraft that had dealt the blow to Historia's head. Though it seemed like a simple trick, in truth, it was not. She had probably compressed air to

create a sort of projectile, but it would have taken the most extreme delicacy in her manipulation of her magecraft to keep the impact to a level where a person felt only a jab. It was not Lara's vast mana reserves nor the invisible blade of wind she could conjure that put her so far beyond Johann and Amelia. No, the essence of Lara's talent lay in her ability to instantly formulate spells. Large scale, high level magecraft like Johann's Blazered Shower or Amelia's Verdantwine Myriad ate up a lot of mana, but neither required anything particularly advanced in the way of magecraft manipulation. Lara's spell had been far more difficult. With enough time, Johann could produce something similar, but if ordered to do it at a moment's notice, he would have had no choice but to immediately throw up his hands in surrender. He looked at lara in admiration, but for some reason found her looking back at him in dissatisfaction.

"Was that a complaint?" she demanded.

"Was what a complaint, ser?"

"That comment about training soldiers on the battlefield and what have you."

"Oh, that. I didn't really mean it. At the end of the day, this isn't our battle. I was only admiring your skill in waking up Historia. You really are brilliant, Blessed Wing Lara."

Lara stared at him a while longer, then silently turned back to face ahead of them, leaving Johann puzzled by the odd exchange.

Historia pulled her horse up alongside him. "Don't let it bother you. She's just happy you complimented her. There, that's proof." She pointed casually. Johann followed and saw that the tips of Lara's ears were very slightly flushed. To Johann, this was a one in a million occasion.

"She's got a soft side under all that." Historia winked, then grinned. Johann whispered in her ear that this had been a very educational experience.

"I can hear everything you're saying." Lara's interjection was entirely without emotion. Historia flinched back then, announcing she was going to observe the front line, she kicked her horse and fled. Johann, now unable to use the same excuse, couldn't help but feel that he'd been beaten to the punch. To do something about the uncomfortable atmosphere, Johann cleared his throat.

“I have to say, I’m loving her tactics.” Of course by “her,” he meant “Olivia.” Who could have foreseen that she would charge alone against a force of thirty thousand soldiers? She was as unconstrained by common sense as ever, Johann thought with a broad grin.

“That melodramatic display wasn’t tactical in the slightest.”

“I can’t argue with that, but it was effective nonetheless.”

Lara sniffed, making her displeasure plain. She never used *tricks* in battle—she had no need of them. All that mattered were her unyielding guardians whose experience allowed them to flawlessly execute her battle plans, tactics, and orders. To a person like that, the news the owls had brought of Olivia’s lone change must have seemed unbearably crude.

Continuing to talk about this is only going to put her in a foul mood. Setting aside the subject of Olivia, Johann asked a different question.

“By the way, I know your orders are for us to not use magecraft, but what if the Royal Army loses the advantage?”

Lara gave him a cutting look as she replied coldly, “My orders will not change. You heard what the seraph said, Johann.”

Johann cowered a little before her. The Royal Army were unaware that the Winged Crusaders had mages. In this day and age, mages had a reputation akin to miracle workers. If the Royal Army knew who they had among their allies, they would be all too eager to see if they could utilize the mages’ powers.

Meanwhile, the imperial army had the surprise attack on Fort Astora, and they had made a spectacular display in the battle with the Principality of Stonia. It was only natural to expect, therefore, that they were aware that Mekia had several mages, and would also be duly afraid of them. As such, the mere presence of the Winged Crusaders in the battle would make the imperial army more cautious than was necessary. In Sofitia’s view, this would make for a powerful diversion.

So far, the imperial army haven’t made any unexpected moves. With Lady Berlietta in command, I doubt they’ll stay so docile, but it is clear we mages have them on alert... he mused. *But forget magecraft, what about magic? How*

would the Royal Army react to finding out they have someone with a power so great it defies the rules of war? And how quickly would it turn the blood of the imperial soldiers to ice in their veins?

Olivia would only have to use the magic she had shown Johann, and in an instant, the war would turn in Fernest's favor. This was no prophecy on his part, but a certainty, like how he knew that water would always flow downhill. On the other hand, he also knew that Olivia would *not* use magic, for the simple reason that she had promised someone called "Z" that she would not and was faithful to that promise.

But even without magic, there's no doubt that Olivia holds one of the keys to this battle. And then there's the man who holds the other...

His mind went to Felix von Sieger, beautiful enough to rival Olivia, hailed as the strongest in the empire and the only man to ever defeat Johann in single combat. Neither its instigation nor its outcome rested on individual victories and defeats. And yet Johann felt in his gut that on this particular occasion, it would be Felix and Olivia crossing blades that decided how this battle ended.

"Thinking about women in the midst of battle again?" Lara cut in, looking as though she had put down her facial expressions and forgotten them somewhere. Johann scratched his cheek.

"You know, I've been meaning to ask, Blessed Wing, but do you really believe I only ever think about women?"

Lara gave him a heartless smile. "Am I wrong?"

"You're not entirely mistaken. I was in fact thinking about a woman just now. But don't worry, while she is a woman, she isn't *that* sort of woman."

The soldier in golden armor who sat in the driver's seat of the chariot smirked at his roundabout denial. Lara stomped down on the back of their head.

"And what do you really think?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

Lara raised an eyebrow and clicked her tongue. "You know. Don't hedge."

Johann put a hand to his breast. "I beg your pardon, ser. Assuming that Olivia

will not use magic...”

Johann went on to explain that Olivia and Felix were evenly matched, and that when they did cross swords, there was no telling which would emerge the victor.

Lara listened, not moving a muscle, then drew her foot back to its original position. The soldier looked obviously relieved. “After seeing Olivia fight the Norfess, I urged the seraph to reconsider inviting her to Mekia. She’s far too dangerous.”

Johann had heard from Olivia herself of how she had so easily slain the Norfess—a dangerous beast. Given this was Olivia, Johann had hardly been shocked at the time. He would never have expected Lara to voice her opposition to the girl.

“Now that’s unexpected. Whatever your personal feelings toward Olivia, I thought you would be all for anything that adds to the might of the Winged Crusaders.”

A small smile pulled at Lara’s mouth at the note of surprise in his voice. It might have been the first natural smile Johann had ever seen on her. He felt his heart give a little flutter. “Any ordinary great warrior I would welcome with open arms. But make no mistake, that girl is a double-edged sword. I prefer not to leave my luck to the hands of the heavens. And you might not have come out and said it, but you were never enthusiastic about Olivia joining the Winged Crusaders either, were you, Johann?”

“Well, in all honesty, no,” he admitted. “The seraph might be able to control her for all I know, but I certainly can’t.”

He thought of Olivia like a fire that could feed even on other flames. Once unleashed, it would spread unchecked, eventually burning through things, people, and even nations.

“The seraph believes she can control Olivia, but as her servant, it’s to be expected that I wouldn’t want to keep someone nearby who can slaughter a legendary beast like it’s nothing. Anyone with fangs worse than those of a legendary beast might well one day turn them on the seraph.”

Johann agreed with her. He knew that Olivia was driven by a single commitment. They had no idea how she might act in retribution if they unintentionally interfered with it, and therein lay the problem. Johann was not so compassionate that he would voluntarily run headlong into clear danger.

“If you’re right,” Lara went on, “and the two of them are equally matched, then it would be best for Mekia if they killed each other. It might go against the seraph’s wishes, but I believe that that would be the best possible outcome, in the end.” Her voice was thick with conviction. Johann said nothing. Felix was one thing, but at the very least, he wasn’t eager to see Olivia dead.

Death God Olivia... Memories flashed before his eyes of the time he had spent shopping and eating with Olivia back in the royal capital. He saw Olivia wolfing down grilled skewers, her carefree smile as brilliant as the summer sun.

III

Main Command of the Second Allied Legion

Not long after splitting off from the Eighth Legion, General Blood Enfield and the Second Allied Legion under his command joined battle with a forty-thousand-strong imperial force that appeared to be aiming for a pincer assault.

As the reports came rolling in, Blood muttered to himself, “The way the enemy’s moving, I’d say their objective is to tie us down here. That’s a leap of faith if I ever saw one...”

Lieutenant Colonel Lise Prussie, who was issuing commands to the runners, came over to stand beside him. “This complicates your plans to wrap things up here quickly and go to the Eighth Legion’s aid, doesn’t it, General?”

Blood’s frown deepened. “And when did I say that?” he retorted, but the fact was, Lise was right on the mark. Though he was by no means taking his opponent lightly, it was also not the Crimson or Helios Knights he was facing, let alone the Azure Knights. He had crossed swords with the Helios Knights before, and this enemy didn’t even come close to bringing the same forcefulness to bear. Considering his long stint fighting alone to hold the Central Front, the current situation tactically and strategically favored the Second Allied Legion. A little fire in his belly was understandable.

“If I couldn’t glean a single one of your thoughts without you spelling it out for me, I would hardly be fit to serve as your aide, ser. And when all is said and done, you do tend to worry too much.”

Running his fingers through his hair, Blood conceded, “You got me there. Thanks.” He could not have asked for a more trustworthy aide, but at the same time, it was disheartening to have had his thoughts read so easily. Could it be that he was so terribly simple a man?

“I’m more worried about you than I am Lieutenant General Olivia and the Eighth Legion. Partly because her battles so far vouch for her, but also because she’s a woman, and women always rise to the occasion in a crisis. But I want to talk about something else.”

Lise's directed her sharp gaze at where two battle flags fluttered majestically as though in defiance of one another, one covered in lavish embroidery, the other emblazoned with a sword dripping blood. Though Blood knew that Lise disapproved of Amelia's Winged Crusaders, she had behaved cordially toward them on the surface, at least. After making it this far, however, it seemed that her frustrations had abruptly flared up.

"You really can't stand the Winged Crusaders, huh?"

"To put it bluntly, yes. They show far too much inertia when we're already several days into the battle. You see it too, don't you, General?"

"I do. I see it, and that's why I left them to their own devices." He did sympathize with Lise's frustration, but at the end of the day, the alliance was a sham anyway. He might not know what ends Mekia hoped to achieve with it, but if they didn't want the empire to emerge victorious, he doubted they wanted the Royal Army to win either. All the same, Amelia's ten thousand soldiers were an invaluable asset to the Second Allied Legion. So long as the battle didn't turn too badly against them, he wasn't going to hang around breathing down her neck.

"I trust you're keeping the possibility of their betrayal in mind," Lise said.

"Obviously. It'd be stranger if I *weren't* cautious."

The history of war was nothing if not the history of betrayal—examples were too numerous to list. But that was simply human nature. Blood knew this all too well, and that was why he had stationed Lieutenant General Adam and five thousand soldiers behind the Winged Crusaders as an undisguised warning gesture. He would be there to immediately subdue Amelia on the off chance that she did try to rebel. Naturally, Adam was aware of his role.

When this failed to elicit any more than silence from Lise, he went on. "Well, don't dwell on it. I know I said all that, but on this particular occasion, I don't see betrayal on the cards, even if she doesn't make much of an effort to help our cause."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Mekia's already picked a fight with the imperial army. If they did the same

with us, well, then we'd have the measure of them. But back at the banquet in Fis, I exchanged a few words with that vixen Sofitia, and I'd say she's far shrewder than she lets on. She's no fool to make a bad wager at a moment like this. Unlike a certain other king," he finished, his face twisting.

"Please, ser. Such comments are uncalled for," Lise chastised him, glancing around them. Blood gave a small shrug. She sighed, then went on. "In other words, whatever the future might hold, their priority right now is weakening the imperial army?"

"Right. And I'd add that the Winged Crusaders need to demonstrate their might to the Royal Army. The better a show they put on now, the more it will work to their advantage in later negotiations."

Lise pushed up her glasses. "Do you think she's *enjoying* keeping us waiting?"

"She wants to make sure we see just how formidable the Winged Crusaders are. I mean, she's basically a mass of pride in woman-form and stuffed into a suit of armor."

"Vile woman," Lise said, making no attempt to hide her disdain.

"Don't say that. They've got their concerns and we've got ours. It's never all going to go our way." As he spoke, Blood remembered the look Amelia had given him, like a snake enveloping him in its coils. Despite himself, he hugged his arms to his chest. "All right, I definitely wouldn't want her as a lover, no matter how pretty she is on the outside..."

"I should hope not! There isn't a woman alive to whom you would be worse suited!" Lise exclaimed, nostrils flaring. With a crooked smile, Blood reached into his breast pocket for his cigarettes.

Amelia's Camp, the Second Allied Legion

Amelia stood in before the remnants of the lives she had snuffed out and yawned widely.

"You look bored, ser," said a hesitant voice. The speaker was Senior Hundred Wing Jean Alexia of the Twelve Angels.

“I don’t *look* bored, I *am* bored. I only needed Felix von Sieger to join us, and I could have been having a marvelous time...”

As if Felix’s absence weren’t bad enough, the Azure Knights—the empire’s mightiest—weren’t here either. Her motivation for murder was at an all-time low.

“There is that, but I wonder if there might be another reason.”

“Another reason?” Amelia’s eyes narrowed. Jean clamped her mouth shut as though she’d misspoken. Amelia clicked her tongue. “Spit it out.”

“W-Well...” Jean stammered. “I thought perhaps you might also be bored because Death God Olivia isn’t here...”

Thunderstruck, Amelia immediately started to open her mouth to retort. But in the end, she settled for continuing to glare at Jean.

Amelia saw Olivia as a greedy pig without an ounce of refinement and hated her from the bottom of her heart. And yet the sight of Olivia in battle, dazzling and brutal and coloring even the fear in her enemy’s eyes a beautiful ebony black, had shaken Amelia’s heart as never before. The thought drove her wild with loathing.

To Jean, who stood to attention, stiff with tension, she asked, “What did *you* think after seeing her fight?”

Jean hesitated for a moment. “I understood why the imperial army call her the Death God. Even if she ever turned that sword on me, I’d bet good money that she’d win. There’s no escaping death itself, after all.”

“Mm, I suppose that’s not unexpected for one of your caliber.” Amelia looked down at the cup of tea on the table before her, now stone cold. She had fought Olivia countless times in her mind, but in the end, she had been unable to figure out a way to beat her. The way Olivia used her blade followed none of the logic it ought to have. It was a kind of swordcraft that seemed almost as though it had been developed to fight some inhuman entity. Amelia strongly believed that it shouldn’t even be called swordcraft. It was something else, something unknown.

But none of that means I’ll ever respect her. Not ever! Amelia swallowed the

contents of her teacup in a single gulp, then exhaled. “Let me make this clear,” she said. “This battle would be boring whether that stupid girl were here or not. The next time those words pass your lips again, I will kill you.”

Jean’s head bobbed down. “You have my most sincere apologies. Now, shall we go on the offensive and see how that goes? I wouldn’t put it past Commander Blood to have a few things to say if we lingered any longer.”

Amelia could not have cared less about what Blood might have to say to them. If he issued her any distasteful orders, she would simply refuse them. But she did have to show off the might of the Winged Crusaders.

“I suppose it’s about time,” she said at length. Deciding she’d kept them waiting long enough, Amelia threw her hair back, then rose slowly from her chair and gave orders for all forces to go on the offensive.

IV

Main Command of the First Allied Legion

The chill in the air mounted with every passing day. The old general looked up at the gray skies of early winter and muttered something to himself. Though he took exacting care of his brown armor, these days its age showed, making him all too aware of all the years that had passed him by. So too was his face deeply etched with wrinkles.

Fifty years I’ve been riding to and from the battlefield...

“Does something trouble you, my lord?” At this question from Major General Neinhardt Blanche, appointed as chief of staff for this campaign, Field Marshal Cornelius vim Groening waved the younger man away.

“Looking upon the birds soaring freely across the heavens tends to make one all the more aware of our human bonds. Just now I was asking the gods that if I am to be born again, they might make me a bird.” He smiled as he spoke, but Neinhardt looked back at him with concern. *This is the trouble with old people,* he chided himself silently, then beckoned Neinhardt to his side.

“I seem to recall you were twenty-seven years old, my boy.”

“The honor you do me by remembering such a detail is more than I deserve, Lord Marshal. Only I’m not sure what...” Neinhardt looked uneasy. Ignoring this, Cornelius plowed ahead.

“When I was twenty seven, I already had a wife and a child. Don’t you think you might be falling a little behind?”

“I think I have an inkling of what you’re trying to tell me now,” Neinhardt said at length, a pained look on his face. “But if I may be so bold, ser, I think such things are to each his own. And anyway, I’m not really sure now is an appropriate time for this conversation.”

Behind Cornelius stood three members of the Ten Swords along with the rest of his personal guard. Taking the hint from their lord, they made a show of indifference.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Cornelius replied. “Now is *precisely* the time. Now, is there anyone you care for?”

Neinhardt was silent for a spell, the uneasiness on his face growing more pronounced. “I don’t think so,” he said at last, sounding evasive. Cornelius could only shake his head.

“‘Think’? What do you mean, ‘think’? Aren’t we talking about you, my boy?”

“I’m sorry, ser, it’s just...I’ve never given the subject much thought...” Neinhardt trailed off, scratching his head.

Cornelius sighed heavily. “As I live and breathe...” he said. “See here, obviously it’s a fine thing to make your way in life by the sword. But there are more important things.”

Neinhardt looked at him questioningly. “And what might those be, ser?”

“To join in union with the person you love and together raise and protect the children of the next generation! As such,” he went on, “I, here and now, shall decide a companion for you. You have no complaints, I trust?”

“My *companion?* Excuse me? *Excuse me?!*” Leaving Neinhardt to his incoherent exclamations, Cornelius summoned an attendant then whispered in their ear. Nodding smartly, the attendant ran from the tent. They did not have

to wait long.

“Captain Katerina Reinas reporting, Lord Marshal!” Katerina barked, saluting. Cornelius called her over to stand beside him, the same as Neinhardt, who was looking at him suspiciously. Cornelius grinned at him, then laid a hand on Katerina’s shoulder.

“Listen well, Neinhardt. This young lady is to be your companion. She is a brilliant mind, and a beauty to boot. Far too good a bride for the likes of you, my boy.”

Neinhardt and Katerina both stood stock still as though paralyzed. Then, jerking like rusted gears, they turned to look at one another.

“Captain Katerina...? My...wife...?”

“L-L-Lord Marshal! Wh-What is the meaning of this?! Lord Marshal! Me? His companion?! The major general! His face! *My* face! Why?!”

The words pouring out of Katerina’s mouth now made even less sense that Neinhardt’s. Her eyes moved around wildly, and she stepped nervously from side to side in a state of such obvious dismay that Cornelius felt sorry for her. There was clearly no need to ask her again about her feelings for Neinhardt.

“Major General Neinhardt, you have all the sensitivity of a rock, but after seeing the captain’s reaction, even *you* must be able to put two and two together.”

“*Lord Marshal!*” Katerina wailed. Even then, her voice was sweet as honey, a jarring contrast to the battlefield around them. Her eyes bored into Neinhardt, who scratched his head once more.

“Does the captain not satisfy you?” Cornelius stroked his luxuriant beard, his eyes crinkling.

Neinhardt, seeing the anxiety blossoming in Katerina’s eyes, said quickly, “As my aide, Captain Katerina is beyond reproach.”

“You don’t need to tell me that,” Cornelius said impatiently. “I’m asking what you think of her as a *companion.* Look here. You’ve put your foot in your mouth and upset her.”

Seeing the devastation writ large on Katerina's face, Neinhardt panicked. "O-Obviously I also think she's a very attractive woman."

Cornelius nodded. "We have that on the record. There you are, Captain Katerina."

"Lord Marshal..."

"All right, that concludes our business with the captain. You are free to go."

"I...yes...by your leave, Lord Marshal." There was a sensuous note to Katerina's salute. She flashed a shy smile at the bewildered Neinhardt, then, covering her burning cheeks with her hands, she fled the tent.

Neinhardt looked back to Cornelius, a note of reproach in his eyes. "This is going to make things difficult for me as commander."

"You discredit the role of chief of staff if a little thing like that can rattle you. Now, are you man enough to stick it out or not?"

"I don't know if I'm 'man enough,'" Neinhardt said at length, "but I will."

Cornelius gave a firm nod of approval and with that, Neinhardt strode from the tent. As Cornelius watched him go with a weary smile, one of the Ten Swords, Major General Solid Jung, came up to him, wearing a similar expression.

"I thank you on behalf of my nephew, ser," he said. "He never showed a lick of interest in any of the promising matches that came his way. Had his parents at their wits' end."

"Ah yes, I'd forgotten he was your nephew. An old man oughtn't to meddle in such matters, really, but one can't always help it, you know..." He waved off Solid as the man repeated his thanks, then turned the conversation to his daughter, who resembled him so strongly.

"You must worry after that daughter of yours, too. If you're to have her carry on the Jung family name, you will need to find her a worthy match. From what I've seen, in temperament, she and Neinhardt are birds of a feather."

"That you concern yourself not only for my nephew but for Claudia too does me much honor, Lord Marshal," Solid replied. "But the truth is, ser, I'm not too

worried about her.”

“Oho? There’s someone then, is there? Then I shall refrain from sticking my nose where it isn’t wanted.”

“Well, nothing is certain...” Not long before the commencement of Twin Lions at Dawn, Solid explained, his daughter had returned home with a glow about he had never seen before. “You know she’s not the most graceful girl,” he went on. “My wife was wholeheartedly delighted, but she also told me she’s sure that Claudia isn’t aware of her own feelings. And after the few conversations I had with my daughter, I arrived at the same conclusion.”

“Dear me, that is its own little pickle. Even unconsciously, she’s developed feelings for this man—he must be quite something. I only hope that, by the time she awakens to how she feels, it isn’t too late.”

“That’s all up to her...” said Solid. “All my wife and I can do is watch over here.”

“Well, then. We had better win this war so that you may go on doing so without worry,” Cornelius said, looking smug.

“As you say, my lord.” Solid’s fighting spirit burned in his eyes.

Yes, we must win this war. Whatever it takes... Cornelius turned his gaze up once more and saw a large bird cut across the sky like a blade, seizing a smaller bird in its talons. Its dying cry rang in his ears. Cornelius stayed silent, continuing only to gaze up into the sky.

Lambert’s Camp, the First Allied Legion

“Oh, he’s a sly one all right...” muttered General Lambert von Garcia to no one in particular.

The general helmed the command on the front line at Kier Fortress. After a month of fighting, there had been no major progress. Given the Royal Army never had any intention of taking Kier Fortress, this was, in a way, only to be expected. More impressive was Neinhardt’s virtuosity in running the battle so as to keep the enemy from cottoning on. To the imperial army, it must have appeared that they were desperate to mount the walls and failing to do so. Just

as he had been back at the Battle of Ilys, Lambert was fervently relieved that Neinhardt and his devious machinations were working for their side. What was more, for whatever reason, Neinhardt's leadership had only grown sharper over the past few days. Lambert found it quite astonishing.

But even that'll be over soon, he thought. *In the next few days, things are going to start changing fast.* The latest reports said that the Eighth Legion had clashed with the Azure Knights on the outskirts of the imperial capital, and apparently the Second Allied Legion was in battle as well. Initially, Lambert had assumed that the news of their counter invasion would reach Kier Fortress within three or four days of their attack on Fort Astora, or a week at the latest. Cornelius and the other senior commanders had shared his view. The error, though it had worked it their favor, in their calculations had come from their misjudgment of Ashton Senefelder, the Eighth Legion's tactician. Not a shred of information had slipped through the net he had laid, thanks to which the First Allied Legion had been able to proceed just as they had hoped, and the imperial army had allowed the invading Second Allied Legion to make it as far as Olsted. Now that Operation: Twin Lions at Dawn had entered its final phase, the First Allied Legion shouldered a heavy responsibility.

If word reaches Kier Fortress, the imperial army will be forced to make one of two choices.

They could hunker down at the fortress. Or they could divide their strength and go to the aide of the Azure Knights. The first option couldn't be more straightforward. The First Allied Legion would continue its attack without relenting and wait for good news from Olivia. If they chose the second option, however, there would be problems. The First Allied Legion would have to do everything in their power to waylay the relief forces. On the off chance the imperial army broke through, they could make no excuses to Olivia and Blood. If worse came to worst, it wasn't inconceivable that they might take the weakened Kier Fortress in one fell swoop, but no one knew better than they in the Royal Army that this would not be as easy as it sounded. As all sides acknowledged, until the day it fell to the imperial army, Kier Fortress had been impregnable.

"My lord," came a hesitant voice. "There's a lull in the fighting. I recommend

you take the chance for a little rest.” Lambert looked over and saw his aide, Major General Grell Hite, looking at him with concern.

“I’m not tired. I was merely considering what comes next.”

“If you say so, ser.”

“If anything, it’s you who should take a break, Grell. The real fight is yet to come. To be quite frank, I can’t have you collapsing on me here.”

Grell was a general with a decorated history of valor in battle, and back when Lambert was only a green boy, it was Grell who had hammered into him the way of life on the battlefield. The man had seen seventy three summers. His once muscular figure was gone, and now he was so thin he looked as though a gentle breeze could knock him flat.

Lambert’s suggestion that he take a break had been mostly serious, but Grell’s whole body quivered and broke out into a hearty guffaw.

“Grell Heit might be long in the tooth, but his blade made its name in battle and it’s far from rusted yet. I’ll prove it to you here, if you like.” Seeing Grell turn to his steed, Lambert rushed to stop him. If he gave the man leave, even in jest, he’d take his spear in hand and charge off alone at the enemy. That was the sort of man Grell was.

“Please, you’re going to give me a heart attack,” Lambert said, desperately grabbing Grell by the shoulders who already had one foot in his stirrups. He was older, and his body was frailer, but his spirit burned as hot as it had long ago.

Grell glanced at Lambert, then brought his foot back to the ground and bowed.

“Of course I don’t want to go stabbing my spear anywhere that’ll inconvenience you, General. Still, if you need me to stab anything, I’m always at your service.”

“Understood. I’ll be sure to keep that in mind.” Lambert watched as Grell handed the horse over to the care of an attendant with unspoken relief.

Him, Neinhardt, Travis... Why is every one of the First Legion’s commanders such an odd fish to the last man? I can only imagine what a headache it must be

for the lord marshal to have to give them direct orders.

Lambert went on with his silent muttering, conveniently forgetting as he did so to list himself among his comrades.

V

The Walls of Kier Fortress

That day as with every other day the sun beat down, relentless, upon the blood-soaked earth. At dawn, the Royal Army had resumed their assault on Kier Fortress. Colonel Spencer Dolstoy of the Helios Knights looked down on the attackers and yawned widely.

“How many times have they attacked at dawn now?”

“This will be the seventeenth, ser.”

“They’re so tenacious I’ve circled back around from scorn to admiration. Who knew the Royal Army were such early risers?” Spencer’s voice dripped with sarcasm, tears of mirth in his eyes. His close advisor Major Nile’s face twisted in a half smile.

“I can’t think of better comedy than watching them break their swords on the walls of the fortress they built.”

“Nile, I could not agree more.” Spencer laughed aloud, then in the corner of his eye, he spotted a few Crimson Knights fitting arrows to their bowstrings. “Speed that up!” he bellowed. “Do you think this is a game?”

One of the soldiers in crimson armor stopped shooting, looking openly disgruntled. The others all followed suit.

“I didn’t hear an order to stop shooting!” Spencer continued.

“Colonel Spencer, I’ll ask you to stop there. Defense of this section of the wall falls to the Crimson Knights.” This unwanted interruption came from Colonel Raza of the Crimson Knights. He was an old man, far past his prime, barely able to walk without his cane. Spencer couldn’t for the life of him understand why Rosenmarie continued to employ such a useless old man.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t Colonel Raza,” he exclaimed. “It must have been an arduous journey, climbing the walls as a man of your years. I’m sure it’ll be beyond me when I’m your age.”

Despite his sneering tone, the other man’s face didn’t twitch. “You will cease these arbitrary insults to the Crimson Knights.”

“Arbitrary?”

“Oh, was it not? It certainly looked that way to me.”

“As if you know what anything looks like when you can barely keep your eyes open. Best leave off the jokes, old man, you’ll only embarrass us all.”

Raza peered at Spencer for a moment, then said, “With that face like a troll in a storybook, you’re doing that just fine yourself.”

“So eager to give up what little life you’ve got left?”

“Sounds like a grand old time. But that’s enough.”

“Excuse me?” Spencer spun around, bristling with irritation, only to find himself looking into the frowning face of chief of staff, Major General Oscar Remnand.

“General Oscar!” spluttered Spencer, then, seeing Raza give a smart salute, scrambled to do the same. Oscar, who had come up onto the walls to check on the state of the battle, had not in his wildest dreams been expecting to be met with such a shameful display at this early hour. After the decision was made to weather the siege, the brunt of the defenses had fallen to the Helios Knights, who knew Kier Fortress well. Oscar had entrusted Spencer, one of the more hot-blooded among them, with command of the walls, but looking at the Helios Knights, who made no effort to conceal their dissatisfaction, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he had chosen the wrong man. Spencer had an unfortunate tendency to treat the Crimson Knights like his enemies.

Spencer insisted loudly that he had only been trying to put some life into the Crimson Knights’ pathetic performance. Oscar fixed him with a glare.

“Are you a colonel or not?” he said. “Set aside whatever petty grievances you

have with the Crimson Knights and get on with the battle at hand.”

“S-Ser, you don’t think I bear some sort of grudge against the Crimson Knights, do you? As I just said, they were so slow, I just had to say something to spur them on. This is all huge misunderstanding.”

“Yet Colonel Raza seems to think differently.”

Off to one side behind Spencer, Raza shook his head in disgust. Spencer looked back at him furiously, clicking his tongue in frustration.

“Forgive me, ser, but Colonel Raza is extremely elderly.”

“Meaning what, exactly?”

“It seems to me that his powers of command are severely wanting.”

“So he isn’t worthy of my notice. Is that right, Colonel?”

“As much as it pains me to say it in front of him...”

“Very well. You’ll repeat what you’ve told me to General Rosenmarie, then.”

“B-But...” At the mention of Rosenmarie’s name, Spencer’s composure visibly failed.

“General Rosenmarie will be here soon to observe the state of the battle. You have my leave, so by all means share with her that you think the Crimson Knights are pathetic, and their commander, Colonel Raza, too old and doddering to carry out his duties.”

Oscar could have sworn he heard the rush of blood as Spencer’s face turned pale. He leaned forward so that their noses almost touched, then narrowed his eyes.

“If you ever do this again, I will relieve you of your command before you can blink. Now get back to your post.”

“Yes, ser!” Spencer gave a lackluster salute, then hurried away.

In truth, situations such as the one that had just played out were not uncommon, and the Helios and Crimson Knights had heretofore looked upon the others as rivals. Gladden and Rosenmarie had seen the friendly rivalry as motivational and generally left them to it.

Now, however, they were in the midst of a battle. Oscar was appalled that a man with the rank of colonel could have displayed such poor judgment.

“I shouldn’t have interfered,” he said to Colonel Raza.

“I’m truly sorry you had to witness such a shameful display, ser,” Raza replied. He bent forward laboriously in an apologetic bow. It was lucky it was Ramza, whose genial temperament was well-known, that Spencer had decided to have a go at, or things could easily have gotten out of hand. With one of the more hot-headed of the Crimson Knights’ commanders, it might even have led to outright violence.

“Something wrong?” Rosenmarie, like the avatar of the Crimson Knights in her red cloak, arrived with a retinue of her personal guard into the uneasiness that hung over the fortress walls like the afterglow of a sunset. There was no point in lying now, so Oscar decided to be plain.

“There was a minor upset, but it has been resolved.”

“What sort of an upset?” Rosenmarie’s eyes went from one face to another. When she reached Spencer, he let out a strangled yelp and she stopped. “Hah. Him, was it? So even you choose the wrong man sometimes, Oscar.”

“Given the how long the battle has already drawn out, I thought it best to keep our best pieces in reserve.”

“Fair enough, then,” Rosenmarie said, snorting. The next moment, there was an earsplitting *crash* as a section of the wall exploded.

“Lady Rosenmarie!”

“Calm yourself. This is nothing.” Rosenmarie, who had quickly raised her cloak to cover herself, brushed off the fragments of stone that clung to her.

“You’re not injured?”

“I’m fine,” she replied, then called out, “Raza, are you all right?”

Oscar looked and saw blood trickling from the old commander’s temple. But Raza only laughed, apparently unconcerned.

“This is no more than a scratch, my lady.”

“That’s the old man I know. Still, I don’t want to take any chances. Get a bandage on that, at least.”

“I much appreciate your concern, my lady.” Without needing to be asked, one of Rosenmarie’s guards accompanied Raza down off the walls.

Oscar looked over the rubble, then out at the Royal Army’s catapults.

“You know, this has been bothering me since the battle began,” he said. “When did the Royal Army manage to improve their catapults? They shouldn’t have had the technology, let alone the time to develop a new model...”

Even the imperial army had only recently succeeded in making their own improvements. The fact was that developing new technology was extraordinarily expensive, and the Royal Army’s coffers could hardly be so well filled. It all left Oscar scratching his head.

For some reason, Rosenmarie snickered. “They didn’t,” she said. “The reason their catapults are so powerful is thanks to the imperial technology they appropriated.”

“Imperial technology? But that’s not possible.” Research into new technologies was carried out in the imperial capital, within the walls of Listelein Palace itself. Every researcher there had passed the imperial army’s stringent screening, so even if a royal agent had succeeded in infiltrating their rank, they would have been caught immediately. Stealing their technology was impossible, as Rosenmarie knew well.

“It is this time. I mean, they plundered that prototype catapult in the battle with the Seventh Legion. From what I’ve seen, they’ve trimmed some weight, but they haven’t improved the firepower.”

“They *plundered* a *prototype?!*” Oscar spluttered. “This the first I’ve heard of it!” Oscar couldn’t believe his ears. This was not news he could take lying down.

“That goes without saying. Far as I recall, I didn’t tell you.” Rosenmarie sounded as though it didn’t concern her at all.

“You didn’t... If an engineer heard you say that, they’d have a stroke.” Oscar was naturally indignant, but just as he suspected, Rosenmarie didn’t care. On the contrary, she let out a sneering laugh.

“It all gets leaked sooner or later. All the more so when it comes to weapons.”

“But that’s...”

“Anyway, forget that,” she cut him off. “Summon our key officers with all haste. I’m holding a war council in half an hour.” Before Oscar had time to ask what was so urgent, she swept away. He could only stare, bemused, as the crossed swords emblazoned on her crimson cloak receded.

Just then, there was a great rumbling as another section of the wall shattered. Screams erupted along with shouts of rage, and rising above them all, Spencer’s bellowed commands to strike back. Oscar was struck by a sudden thought.

She’s not going to have us take the field now, is she? But no, there was no chance of that. Shaking his head, he set off at a run down the stairs to deliver Rosenmarie’s order.

Exactly thirty minutes later, as the key officers of the Crimson and Helios Knights jostled to get to their seats, Rosenmarie, who arrived last, threw herself into her chair. “What do you think of this battle, then?” she called out.

Posed with such a vague question, the officers all looked stumped. She watched them silently, until Oscar reluctantly opened his mouth.

“Does something in how they’re fighting strike you as odd, my lady?”

“I’m the one asking the questions here. But forget it. As you’re all well aware, this battle’s been going on for a full month now, yet the Royal Army haven’t gotten anywhere near our walls. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you, but Kier Fortress has three walls. At this rate, we could be here half a year without losing the fortress. Those soldiers aren’t training dummies—they need food, and a lot of it, if they’re feeding that many. No doubt Mekia’s supplying them, but even that can only go so far. So what’s going on here?”

“In other words, my lady, you think it’s suspicious that the Royal Army still haven’t been able to take any of the walls?”

“Exactly.” No sooner had she said it than muttering filled the council room. At once, one among them number slammed his hands down on the long table, then sprang to his feet. It was Major General Cinra of the Helios Knights. He was

a skilled fighter, from what she had heard from Oscar, and had a decent head on his shoulders.

"Is it any wonder the Royal Army haven't breached the walls?" he said. "Defending them are no common soldiers but the mighty warriors of the Crimson and Helios Knights. It pains me to hear such words from your lips, Lady Rosenmarie." As Cinra finished, there was a thump that Rosenmarie felt echo in the pit of her stomach. The room shook slightly as a trickle of dust came down from the ceiling. All the other eyes in the room simultaneously went up, but Rosenmarie paid it no mind.

"Let me ask you a question then, Major General Cinra. What do you make of the fact that, despite those black banners they've made a point of flying, we've seen no sign of the Death God herself?"

"I admit it is unsettling to have seen nothing of that accursed girl. But Lady Rosenmarie, this is a siege, not an open battle. Even the Death God can't *fly*."

When she had dueled with Olivia, Rosenmarie had witnessed the unnatural height to which the girl could leap. *I wouldn't put it past Olivia,* she thought. She meant it seriously, but bringing it up here would only lead to unnecessary confusion, so she left it at that.

"So you think their attacks are being thwarted by the might of Kier Fortress?"

Cinra nodded firmly. "They don't call it the Impregnable Fortress for nothing, my lady. After the hell we went through to capture it, we in the Helios Knights understand how formidable a task it is, and as its former masters, I'm sure the Royal Army know it better than they'd like. Not only that, but this time, we are the defenders. It's no wonder that even the Death God is being held in check."

"And do you all agree with Major General Cinra?" Rosenmarie asked, looking around the room. The majority were nodding, some with more conviction than others. They all took pride in their place among the elite knight orders, as well they might. But that pride now blinded them to the real meaning behind Rosenmarie's words—in fact, they weren't even looking for it. Even after time and time again the Death God had snatched victory out from under their noses with tactics and schemes they had never even dreamed of.

Guyel was so cautious, I bet he'd have reached these conclusion long ago,

Rosenmarie thought. *Some nerve he had, going and dying where I couldn't do anything about it!*

Privately sneering at her own absurdity, Rosenmarie faced her assembled officers. In a clear voice, she explained that the signs of the Death God's presence had been staged.

"The dreaded Death God Olivia isn't here? That simply cannot be. Retaking Kier Fortress would breathe fresh life back into the Royal Army. It makes no sense for them to not field Death God Olivia in the battle—nothing poses a greater threat to the imperial army!"

Cinra's excited rantings cut through the renewed muttering, until the others were all taking up his words as their own. Only Oscar's face showed a different sort of agitation.

"That's exactly what the Royal Army have taken advantage of," Rosenmarie said. Cinra was right. Retaking Kier Fortress *was* all the Royal Army needed to come back from the brink of ruin. That was why Rosenmarie had set aside her pride and decided to weather the siege. But a new lease on life would not undo the battering the Royal Army had taken. In order to turn the tables, it would make sense for them to go after a still greater prize—in other words, to fall upon the imperial capital and take Emperor Ramza. Once, such a goal would have been a mere castle in the air for the Royal Army, but they had since retaken all their stolen territories, with the exception of Kier Fortress. Though it was undoubtedly a massive gamble, in light of their present circumstances, it made a great deal of sense.

I'm finally losing my edge, Rosenmarie thought, then caught herself. *No, I could never have seen through a plan like that. I have to give our foes credit, it was nicely done.*

They had marched on Kier Fortress with Cornelius, the Invincible General, Paul, the God of the Battlefield, and Death God Olivia. Not only that, but the Winged Crusaders, who had done for the Stonian Army like they were children with wooden swords, had joined their ranks. Anyone facing such a formidable host would have assumed they meant to stop at nothing to retake the fortress. Rosenmarie was sure that Gladden would have thought so, if he were still alive,

and even Felix couldn't have seen through the ruse. If he had, he would have sent word.

"Just where is the Death God, then?" Cinra demanded. "Taking a nap before the big battle?"

"I assume she's fighting the Azure Knights somewhere in the empire as we speak," Rosenmarie replied. The room erupted in a feverish uproar.

"The Death God has invaded the empire?!"

"And you say she's doing battle with the Azure Knights?!"

When one assumed that the Royal Army's strategy was built around capturing the emperor, all their inexplicable behavior suddenly made sense. By sending their most renowned generals against Kier Fortress, they had given the imperial army no choice but to focus their attention here. Meanwhile, Olivia had led an army to assault the imperial capital. If Olsted was their true objective, that essentially confirmed that the siege on Kier Fortress was a mere diversion. The reason they had failed to make any dent in the defenses on the walls was because they didn't need to. It also explained—even if Rosenmarie still had some questions—why there had been no sign of the mages, who she was as wary of as she was Olivia. Far too late, Rosenmarie had come to this conclusion after coming up on the walls for the first time in half a month and seeing the Royal Army in action.

Laughter gurgled up from the pit of her stomach. The enemy had outwitted her entirely, and yet she couldn't hold it in. She didn't know why she was laughing, just that it all seemed hilarious.

While the others all stared at her in consternation, Oscar asked matter-of-factly, "What do we do now?" Of course her chief of staff was quick to recover.

"We are left with only two choices," Rosenmarie replied.

"Yes, either we double down on our defense of the fortress, or we ride to the aid of the Azure Knights," Oscar said at once, his eyes on the map on the table.

"Oscar is right, and the Royal Army will be working on that assumption too. Which is why," she went on, "I mean to choose a third option."

Knowing as they now did that the Royal Army never intended to take Kier Fortress, only an idiot would dig in their heels continuing to defend it. But in order to go to the aid of the Azure Knights they must needs evade the enemy in front of them. While not impossible, it would be a considerable inconvenience, and by the time they rushed to the Azure Knights the battle might be over already. It was even possible that Felix didn't need their reinforcements in the first place. What Rosenmarie had learned when he taught her about Odh was that his own reserves of Odh were monstrously vast. Though she would have liked to kill Olivia with her own hands, she owed Felix a debt, and this seemed as good a place as any to pay him back. Thus she chose a third option.

"There's another option, my lady?"

"Oh, yes. Without realizing it, we've been playing along with their little game for over a month now. Now it's time for them to play *our* game. We'll have them play 'til they're dead on their feet." A savage grin spread over Rosenmarie's face. Not Oscar, nor any of the other officers present raised a single word of objection.

VI

Long ago, in the midst of a hopeless battle, one man stood against fifty fierce warriors and single-handedly forced them back. Later, he would inspire awe as the God of the Battlefield, his renown resounding throughout all of Duvedirica.

Now number two in the Royal Army in both name and reality, Senior General Paul von Baltza gazed out over the battlefield, gripped yet again by an inexplicable sense of unease.

Brigadier General Otto Steiner finished running through his orders to his subordinates, then turned to Paul.

“For the past few days you’ve seemed somehow off, my lord. Is something worrying you?”

Paul smiled wryly. Not for nothing had his Otto served as his aide for more than twenty years.

A month had passed since the fighting had begun. The imperial army had not emerged from Kier Fortress, and the battle was proceeding just as the First Allied Legion had hoped. The Second Allied Legion was advancing at a steady pace, and Olivia and the Eighth Legion had engaged the Azure Knights. It was going so smoothly, in fact, it seemed almost preordained. And yet with every passing day, Paul’s unease only grew.

“Please don’t tell me you’re worried about Lieutenant General Olivia?” Otto asked, a little reproachfully. Unusually for him, he was off the mark this time. Paul waved the question aside. Coincidentally, his mention of Olivia’s name reminded Paul of a conversation he had had with her five days before the First Allied Legion marched from Galia Fortress when they met for the first time in a long while.

“Am I allowed to eat this cake, General Paul?”

“Of course, that’s why I have it here. You eat as much as you like. The Man in the Iron Mask isn’t here right now,” he added, winking. Grinning, Olivia immediately speared a piece of cake on her fork, and moments later, she

sported a full white beard of frosting. Paul patted her on the head.

"I know it's too late for this now, my child," he said, "but I'm sorry you had to get mixed up in this adults' quarrel."

Olivia stopped mindlessly shoveling cake into her mouth and looked up at him, her ebony eyes, more beautiful than jewels, blinking at him in puzzlement.

"Why are you apologizing? I volunteered to enlist."

"The truth is, Lieutenant General, I was opposed to it."

Olivia looked at him for a moment. "Because I'm a child?" she asked.

"That's right. Like I said, this is an adults' quarrel, and there's nothing more shameful than dragging a child into that. Otto pushed for it, yes, but in the end, it was I who approved it."

"But way back in the olden days, I forget the name of the book, but it said that people came of age at thirteen and fought in wars."

"That's right. Back in the age of unending war, it was so. Those days were too unforgiving to distinguish between adult and child. Only even then, it was only boys who went off to war at thirteen. Women rarely rode into battle, if ever. I'm sure those people would be shocked to see how we live today."

"Hmm..." Olivia said slowly. "I don't think I really understand how you feel, but all the same, I'm glad you let me join the Royal Army."

She seemed entirely sincere. Her words felt like salve, even though Paul knew he was only indulging himself in thinking so.

Olivia went on happily. "After all, I wanted to make friends, and now I have lots of them."

"Friends, eh...?" Half joking, he asked, "And does that include me?"

To his surprise, Olivia nodded seriously. "Of course," she said. "Oh, but don't tell General Otto. He'll get angry and go on like, 'How dare you refer to his lordship as a friend!'"

Paul chuckled. "Yes, I expect he would. It'll be our secret, then."

"You got it! Our secret." With that, Olivia returned to her cake. Less than

three minutes later she had polished off every crumb of enough cake for three people. Paul couldn't help but smile at her impressively healthy appetite. Taking out a handkerchief, he neatly wiped away the cream from around her mouth. Then, he sat up straight and assumed a stern expression.

"Now, Lieutenant General Olivia, do you remember our visit to Kier Fortress?"

"Yes, of course."

"What about the man I spoke with at the hostage exchange ceremony?" At once, Olivia gave a small nod, and Paul saw an unearthly gleam in her eyes. "So you do remember. Well, as I'm sure you know by now, that one's no ordinary man, no mistake. There's aura within him like he could devour the gods themselves. You be on your guard, you hear?"

"I'll be okay," Olivia replied, nodding firmly this time. Paul patted his knees.

"Well, that's all I have to say. I'll see you when this battle is over."

"Okay! This time, I'm going to take *you* out for cake. There's this amazing cake shop back in Fis. Let's go together."

"Going out for cake? Very well. With that promised, I suppose I have no choice but to not die."

"That's right. You can't eat delicious cake when you're dead. But don't worry," Olivia added, "your teeth won't rot." With that, she walked lightly out of the room, leaving Paul with an emptiness inside him like a light had gone out. To fill it, he took a cigarette from his pocket and lit it.

Lieutenant General Olivia seemed to understand well enough that he's no ordinary opponent, but if it perturbed her, I couldn't tell. Of course, I still can't help worrying, but I get the feeling those fears are different to this looming unease.

Pulling himself back to the battlefield in front of him, he saw that Otto now wore a searching expression.

"Are you perhaps concerned about the commander of the Azure Knights, Felix von Sieger?"

“There’s that too. He’s young, but anything but ordinary. Without a doubt, he’s the most dangerous man in the imperial army.”

“Did he rouse the God of the Battlefield, then?”

“Yes, he roared at me that I was not to fight that man.” Paul laughed softly. Otto’s laugh was quieter still.

“A man who strikes fear even into the God of the Battlefield? I suppose we have no choice but to turn to the Death God, then.” As usual, Otto had no compunctions about pushing the hard work on to Olivia. That was just typical of him, Paul thought as he rubbed his own smooth, bald pate.

“Leaving the fate of the Royal Army on the shoulders of a seventeen year old girl...” he murmured. “We really are beyond saving.”

“But my lord, what’s the other matter worrying you?” Otto inquired, cooly bringing them back around to the heart of the matter. Paul didn’t answer him. Instead, he turned back to the battlefield. The indistinct unease he felt was not going away. Instead, he sensed it growing stronger.

Interlude: A Happy Respite

“Ashton...”

A pause. “Mrm...”

“It’s morning. Would you get up already?”

Ashton felt someone shaking up. He opened his heavy lids halfway and saw Claudia, wearing a frilly white apron and a look of resignation. Ashton sat up, then yawned widely. “Good morning...”

“Bad with mornings as ever, Breakfast’s almost ready, so hurry up and get dressed. You’re teaching me how to fish today, right?”

“Oh, yeah. That *was* the plan, wasn’t it...”

The previous night at dinner, it had happened to come up in conversation that Claudia had never gone fishing even once in her life. A plan had come together with all haste to go on a fishing trip.

“Now get a move on downstairs before it gets cold.” Claudia strode from the room. Ashton watched her go, then scrambled to get his clothes on. He jogged down the stairs, sliding one hand along the banister, then, drawn by the aroma of fresh baked bread, his eyes found a basket on the table.

“This looks great,” he said as he sat down. The maid put a generous helping of cream stew in front of him and flashed him a smile.

“The cooks are living in terror of the day your lady wife gets any better at cooking, lest they become unneeded.”

“Ah, well, I can see where they’re coming from. With apologies to the cooks, the food Claudia makes really is delicious.” Ashton and the maid laughed, just as Claudia came in, having removed her apron, and sat down opposite Ashton.

“Stop talking nonsense,” she grumbled.

“I’m afraid I can’t. After all, it’s all true.”

“Shut up and eat your breakfast. The best time for fishing is before the sun

reaches its highest point, right?" Claudia handed him a bread roll. Ashton thanked her, then took a bite. The crust let out a delicious crackle. Chewing contentedly, he reached for his stew.

Two hours later, Ashton and Claudia arrived on horseback at the lake in the forest to the east. Right away, Ashton handed Claudia a rod with bait on the hook, then got his own rod ready with practiced ease.

"You're good at that," Claudia said, impressed.

"Well, you know, I did it a lot as a child." As he spoke, he turned to the lake and flicked his rod. "Everything comes down to regular practice." Seeing how proud Claudia looked, Ashton suppressed a smile. Claudia was probably equating fishing with her own swordwork drills, but in truth, fishing was no more than a bit of fun. It made him ashamed to hear it compared to her grueling training.

"Seeing as I'm here, I'm going to catch the biggest fish you've ever seen," Claudia declared. She threw her line out into the lake with enthusiasm. Fishing wasn't such a walk in a park that a first timer could catch a whopper, but seeing her so motivated, Ashton couldn't bring himself to put a damper on her spirits. He decided to watch quietly.

"Ashton! Something's tugging like crazy!"

"Huh?" They had only just begun when Claudia's rod flexed dramatically. Ashton tossed aside his own rod, then put his own hands over hers.

"Don't rush. Pull it in slowly."

"A-All right!"

He could tell from her sweaty hands just how determined she was not to let her catch escape. They struggled together for a while, until at last a great shadow began to emerge from the water's surface. At a glance, it looked to be more than half as long as Ashton was tall.

"It's big..." he breathed. "It might even be the master of the lake."

"Forget that! If this keeps up, the rod's going to snap!"

"You mustn't panic now! Keep cool!" he said, trying to reassure Claudia. As he

did so, he took one hand off the rod to mop the sweat from his brow.

“Agh!” Just as he did so, the fish made a desperate bid for freedom with a tug that sent the two of them falling into the lake.

“I can’t swim for some reason! Help!” Ashton cried. Claudia, who had climbed out of the lake, was grinning for some reason, staring at him as he drowned.

“Wh...What?!” He had no idea what was happening. Slowly, his consciousness slipped away...

“—you’ll catch your death if you sleep there.”

Someone was shaking him lightly. Ashton’s eyes snapped open. There was Claudia in her armor, peering at him. He looked around and saw the familiar campground. Here, at last, Ashton understood that it had all been a dream.

“You look exhausted. Are you all right?” Claudia asked.

Ashton sat up, smiling weakly at her. “I mean, we’re all tired,” he said, remembering as he did so the glimpse he had caught of Claudia’s grin as he drowned.

Right. There’s no way Colonel Claudia would ever smile *if I were drowning in front of her. Ah, and...* Ashton smiled in spite of himself.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Claudia asked, worried.

“What?” Ashton replied vaguely. “Oh, no, this is something else. For some reason I dreamed that the two of us were married.”

“M-Married?!” Claudia’s voice cracked violently. “What a—what a crazy dream! Why would I...” She broke off into incomprehensible muttering, turning quickly away from him. They both fell silent for a while, until—

“And?”

“Huh? And what?”

Claudia stared at him. “I’m asking you what it was like.”

“What *what* was like?” Ashton demanded, wishing she’d stop beating around the bush.

Claudia squirmed where she stood then, a little desperately, burst out, “I

want to know what being married was like!”

“Being married...?” Ashton repeated. “It was nice, ser. The breakfast you made was really delicious. And we went fishing together.” Having gotten this out, Claudia clammed up once more. With a puzzled look at her, Ashton went on. “But now I think about it, I should have known it had to be a dream. Only for some reason I didn’t notice anything off.”

“How so?” Claudia asked, her back still to him.

“Well,” Ashton replied, a smile creeping into his voice, “your cooking was *delicious.*”

By the time the words were out of his mouth, and he had realized his dire mistake, it was far too late. Slowly, Claudia turned around, her lips stretching from ear to ear in an enormous grin.

He knew it then, beyond a doubt. The yaksha of Olivia’s nightmares was come.

“What,” Claudia said slowly, “did you say about my cooking?”

But Ashton was already running from the camp so fast he could hardly believe it himself. If Olivia had been there, she would undoubtedly have done the same. As he went, he prayed for the wrath of the yaksha to subside by morning.

Chapter Three: Creeping Assassins

I

By the tenth day of the battle, the fighting between the Azure Knights and the Eighth Legion grew more bitter with every passing sunrise. Atop the desks erected in the commander's tents of each army where not even voices clashed, to say nothing of blood-splattered swords and spears, still a struggle fiercer than that on any battlefield played out.

"Shackson's unit will run diversion. Lieutenant Hank and Lieutenant Libra's units will be in position to launch a pincer maneuver If the enemy shows signs of scattering their forces."

Felix issued one order after another as he moved pieces around on the great deployment map laid out on the table.

Meanwhile—

"The enemy force in the rear is probably a decoy. They want us to split our forces. You can be sure there's a large force nearby waiting to spring an ambush. Have Myne's unit find them and take them out, making sure the enemy doesn't notice."

Even as Ashton saw through Felix's plans and moved to snare him, so too did Felix repay him in kind. They both possessed unquestionable military genius—the tacticians of later generations were unanimous in their conclusion that no one had ever matched them. Logic dictated that, pitted against each other, the battle would turn on pure strength of numbers. Though the Eighth Legion had commanded an advantage in the early stages of the battle, helped along by Olivia catching the Azure Knights of balance with her lone charge, with each passing day, the Azure Knights grew more incisive in their movements. Strangely enough, the course of the battle had started to shift in the direction Sofitia had anticipated.

Ashton began to receive report after report of punishing battles as the number of wounded soldiers crept up. Black clouds brewed in the skies above

the Eighth Legion.

II

Luke’s Cavalry Regiment, the Eighth Legion

Major Luke Crawford and his regiment of four thousand riders spotted an enemy unit camped over the hill. He sent a runner to alert main command that they had located the enemy, while to his own unit he gave the order to halt. There were around two thousand of them. He ought to have the overwhelming advantage...

“The enemy haven’t noticed us...?” he said, glancing at his sister Ellis who rode alongside him.

She grinned contemptuously at him. “No way. If we’ve noticed them, you can be sure they’ve noticed us. A convenient interpretation is a dangerous thing, you know.”

“Then why are they just sitting there, if they know we’re here?”

Tried and true military wisdom said that they ought to retreat. Words could not adequately express the weight of a two-fold difference in numbers, and the psychological impact on the shoulders would be considerable. Given they still weren’t moving, he had to consider that there was a specific reason for it, such as a trap.

“No way is it a trap.”

Luke stared at Ellis. “What makes you so sure?” He didn’t ask, *How do you know what I’m thinking?* The thing about being flesh-and-blood was that sometimes they somehow just *knew* what was on the other’s mind. Of course, Luke didn’t need to think to know what was on Ellis’s mind, given it was almost entirely occupied by Olivia.

“A trap is most effective when you set it where the opponent will run, right? Set one in a place like this, and ta dah! You’ve made your enemy suspicious! That’s hardly a trap. Now, I’m going to need you to stop talking like a moron or you’ll trash the soldier’s morale.” Ellis’s sharp tongue was unrelenting. Luke

scowled back at her as hard as he could to make his annoyance plain, but it slid off her like water off a duck. He was confident that she'd felt nothing at all.

Folding his arms, he went on. "So you think they're totally confident they can handle a force that outnumbers them two-to-one?"

Ellis put a finger to the corner of her shapely lips. "Not that that's *not* uncommon with armies who pride themselves on their might..." she said. "But not the Azure Knights."

"And it's because you've fought them that you think that, is it?"

"There's that, but also my big sister's blinding majesty. I didn't get the sense they underestimated us, at any rate. Even though, to be honest, our soldiers are so much worse it's laughable." At the end, Ellis's voice dropped to a whisper only Luke could hear, perhaps out of consideration for the soldiers around them. She laughed with a touch of self-derision.

So according to Ellis, the Azure Knights would not be letting down their guard, even against an opponent they outclassed. Put another way, there was no weakness there they could take advantage of.

"Well, seeing as we can't read their minds, I suppose we'll just have to go in and see what happens..."

If he were Ashton, perhaps he could have deduced the enemy's intentions, but this would likely all be over by the time the runner returned. All else aside, dithering here with a two-to-one advantage would only lower morale for a certainty, just as Ellis said.

"Seems fine. I mean, overthinking isn't going to get us anywhere," Ellis said as though it wasn't her problem, raising her hands in mock helplessness. An excess of caution would only dull their movements and their judgment. Luke had his forces advance on the Azure Knights. He led two thousand riders, while the other two thousand followed Ellis.

The riders would divide to the left and right, swinging around in a large arc to strike the Azure Knights on both flanks. They came over crown of the hill, building speed on the slope. Luke urged his horse on, then called out to his aide, who rode at his side.

“How are they responding?”

“Nothing yet. It looks like they plan on meeting us where they stand.”

“Not wanting for confidence, are they?” Luke said, then shouted, “Ride them down!”

His soldiers replied with a gallant cheer. As the Azure Knights spread out into a fan shaped formation, brandishing their great shields, they cut boldly through their ranks. Luke was with them, throwing himself into the fray.

“Defense! High tower formation!” In one fluid motion, the shield-bearers raised their great shields to create an unbroken wall. Of course the Azure Knights would utilize the Helios Knights’ favored defensive maneuver. Yet the attack had not been as hard-fought as Luke had expected. If they pushed on, taking full advantage of their numbers, they could crush the Azure Knights.

And that’s what’s so odd. No one would hail the Azure Knights as the empire’s greatest if this were really the best they could do. And yet at that moment, Luke was yet to see any sign of a spectacular charge from them. In the end, he went on swinging his sword without arriving at a sure answer. Then, a soldier came galloping over to him, looking utterly panicked.

“A new enemy force is approaching us from behind!”

“Did you say ‘behind’?!” They had scouted out the entire area before beginning the attack. Luke had been told there wasn’t a soul in the vicinity besides themselves and the force they were currently engaging, which now only added to his shock. Loudly, he demanded, “Did the scouts *miss* them?” The soldier insisted firmly that such a thing was impossible then, from behind, was stabbed through by the spear of a sneering Azure Knight.

“By the looks of you, you’re in command of this force,” the knight called to him. “And yet the look on your face says you have no idea what’s going on.”

“I suppose you’ll be kind enough to enlighten me then?” Skillfully guiding his horse with his legs, Luke slashed his blade in a series of blows, but though his attack was in no way lacking in force, the other man brushed him aside, wielding his long spear as though it were a sword.

“You played it too by the book. Of course, I’m the one you made you do it.”

Luke took this in. “So you had an ambush lying in wait?” He put all his might into repelling the incoming spear, but the man’s balance did not so much as waver. A thin smile pulling at his lips, he unleashed a wild series of stabs.

“An ambush? But you checked at the start and found there wasn’t, didn’t you? No, no doubt about it, the soldiers who sprung that attack on you from behind are the ones who were just here.” When Luke only stared at him, the man went on. “And now it seems you have even less idea what’s going on. You idiots were so preoccupied with flanking us, you lost track of our front and rear. And that’s how you ended up here.”

“Your front and rear...” Luke repeated. “I see. That was some brilliant maneuvering. I was totally taken in.” All he could do was laugh at his own carelessness. While his forces had been single-mindedly focused on the flanks, the soldiers who had previously made up the center had slipped out, then circled around to their rear. The fan-shaped formation and the great shields had all been to manipulate them into narrowing their field of view. It also explained why the enemy attack had been so feeble. Luke expected that around now, Ellis must have fallen into the same trap.

The two men exchanged a series of blows, then moved away from one another as though following the steps of a dance. The man deftly pulled on his reins, not gloating in his victory, but rather indifferent.

“Your mobility galloping down the slope, the excellent discipline of your soldiers despite their inexperience. Your maneuvers were crude, but solid. I commend you—you are a commander of no common skill. Unfortunately, luck has not been on your side this time.”

The man spoke as though to comfort him, but Luke knew it had nothing to do with luck. This was a total tactical defeat, and no one knew it better than he did himself. He felt cold sweat on his cheeks.

They’ve backed us into a corner. How are we going to get out...? he thought. *Ellis, you’d better stay alive.*

As Luke’s unit teetered, surrounded by enemies and on the brink of annihilation, Ellis’s forces had hurled themselves into yet another hell.

“We’re gonna be in for it if this keeps up, sis!”

“Quit squealing, I can *hear* you! If you’ve got time to yell, spend it on killing a few more soldiers! And don’t call me ‘sis’!”

The attacks came in without pause. Ellis parried and dodged, sometimes scattering petals of blood as she bellowed at her aide, who swung his spear like a madman at her back.

Much as I hate to admit it, the moron’s right. This is getting seriously hairy. I bet my dumb brother’s in the same mess...

From the outset of the battle, Ellis had felt something amiss in how slow the Azure Knights were to attack—entirely at odds with their expert defenses. But in the end, she had prioritized momentum. In hindsight, it was clear they had been trying to make her do just that. She had been unbelievably careless.

Anyway, we need to break out of here before they surround us completely... Ellis’s sword never stopped moving as she searched for an escape route. Thirty minutes later, a message arrived.

“Ma’am, Sharna’s platoon found a weak spot in their ranks! We can hightail it outta there!”

“Where are they now?”

“To the right of where we charged the enemy, maybe a minute away on horseback.”

Ellis went through her mind and pulled up the information about the area the scouting party had brought back.

But just beyond that should be...damn! They really are sly bastards. Their commander must be a real twisted piece of work. Coming from Ellis, this also served as a compliment. This commander had made an escape route just obvious enough for her allies to pick up on it. They would successfully break through, only for every last one of them to be dragged down into the abyss. They would never evade it, not unless their horses grew wings.

Except for one thing. Ellis smiled.

“She’s finally gone funny in the head...” her aide whispered with an air of

tragic desperation.

“Only thing that’s funny around here are the wisps of hair clinging to that skull of yours. Anyway, get the troops into an arrowhead formation.”

“We’re gonna make a break for it from where the report said, then!”

“Who said anything about that?”

“Eh?”

“Don’t ‘eh’ me. If you’ve got time to gawk at me, spend it on getting the formation ready! Go on, scram!” She poked her aide in the back with the point of her sword to hurry him along. He quickly spurred his horse to gallop. Ellis gave a vigorous swish of her sword to splatter the blood adhered to the blade on the ground.

Except, she thought, *I’m a twisted piece of work myself. I can’t believe my own brother walked into this stupid excuse for a trap.*

When the arrowhead formation was complete, Ellis had them act as though they had taken the enemy’s bait, only to instead charge right at where the defenses were thickest. Naturally, the Azure Knights had not seen this coming, and while Ellis lost a great many soldiers, they successfully broke free of the encirclement. An hour later, they rendezvoused with Luke’s unit, which had also suffered heavy losses. When she saw her brother was safe, she heaved a private sigh of relief.

In the confines of a narrow valley, what remained of their forces locked up in a strong formation, and they just managed to evade the Azure Knights’ pursuit. In all, around four for every ten of their soldiers had been lost. It was a crushing defeat.

III

Olivia, sword in hand, led a flying column made up of a hundred soldiers. It was the sixteenth day since the dawn of the battle with the Azure Knights when a heart-rending cry reached her.

“General Olivia! It’s Lieutenant Gauss, he’s suffered a mortal wound!”

She turned in the direction of the voice and saw a large figure borne on a wooden plank by several soldiers. A moment later, seizing on her distraction, a sword came swinging down behind her. Olivia shifted her weight ever so slightly to one side to dodge the blow, then turned and as she did so cleaved the head off the surprised Azure Knight. Blood spurted as head and body bid one another farewell, but Olivia was already running to Gauss’s side.

“S-Sorry, Captain,” he said. “I went and flubbed it when I was only just getting started.”

The first thing her eyes went to was a deep gash extending from Gauss’s right shoulder across to his left side. His face was smeared with blood and mud, and his chest rose and fell irregularly. Olivia ordered that his armor be removed, then reached into the bag at her waist.

“This might hurt a bit, but hold on, okay?” After washing off the mud and grass smeared over the wound with water from her canteen, she scooped out an amber-colored salve with her fingertips and applied it.

Gauss’s brow furrowed. “That... Did you make that wound salve, Captain?”

Olivia nodded, continuing to rub in the salve.

“Then I’ll be back on the front lines again in no time...” Gauss arranged his face into a smile even Olivia could tell was forced. Going off the state of his wound, there was no hope of his returning to the battle. Even this salve, based on the methods of concoction Z had taught her, didn’t have anything like the power to instantly heal this wound, and Olivia was sure Gauss was well aware of that. As such, she said nothing and only smiled at him.

Sweat beading on his forehead, Gauss gave a laugh as though the air were scraping in his throat. “I bet I’d be the envy of all the others...if they could see me now...if Ellis knew...she’d be grinding her teeth in frustration...”

No one could possibly look at Gauss with this mortal wound and be envious, Olivia thought, growing anxious. She laid a hand on Gauss’s brow and found, as she had expected, that he was burning hot. *His mind must be muddled. He doesn’t know what he’s saying...* She stroked his head comfortingly.

“I’m...right now, I’m...the luckiest man alive...”

“I’ve finished first aid for Gauss, so you can take him,” Olivia said.

“Yes, ser!”

“By the way, who’s in command of Gauss’s unit now?”

“His aide, Second Lieutenant Slash,” supplied one of the soldiers. Another told her that they were struggling to withstand the Azure Knights—so much so that Gauss had been wounded. Without a doubt, the situation was even more dire than they said.

“Tell Slash to rendezvous with Claudia’s unit.”

“Understood, ser!”

After accepting Olivia’s orders, they loaded Gauss back onto the plank, then moved off. Olivia immediately applied her mind to the next issue, calling over one of the runners she had brought with her, one Sergeant Melissa.

“I’m going to stay here for a while and draw the enemy’s attention. Could you tell Ashton I’m fighting here?”

“Is that all, ser?”

“Yep, that’ll be enough for Ashton.”

“Understood, ser! I’ll go at once!” Olivia had gathered up all the fastest runners. Melissa utilized a unique running method by which she raced like the wind across the battlefield.

Olivia returned her gaze to the battle.

“Cut down the Death God!” Before her was another group of Azure Knights, bearing down on her like a raging torrent. Olivia used Swift Step, cutting a path of disarray through the Azure Knights until at last, the corpses in her wake passed a hundred. That was when it happened. Though she felt no trace of a human presence, from behind her there came a sudden crushing pressure. At once, she kicked off the ground, shooting upward. She traced an arc through the air only to be met by a cloud of brightly colored butterflies that brushed by her as it passed.

Hold on... Olivia hit the ground, then a moment later, she found herself on her knees. Her breathing grew uneven, and her vision clouded as though in a fog. It was clear something was physically wrong with her.

“Aren’t they just like fairytale? Did you take a shine to my sweet little butterflies?” One of the Azure Knights walked leisurely toward her, the mound of corpses at her back. As Olivia watched, she felt yet again that abnormal pressure without any human presence. Somehow, she managed to kick off again and leap to the left just as another Azure Knight appeared, seeming to slide along the ground as he stabbed out with his sword. There was a dim glow about blade in his hand, and it vibrated ever so slightly, letting off a faint buzzing that Olivia’s ears only just picked up. A look of surprise flashed across his face, but his body moved straight into position for another attack.

“Now see here. That’s the second time that strike you’re so very proud of has been dodged now. Just what is the meaning of it? I’d like an explanation.”

“If you’re going to be like that, aren’t those butterfly scales supposed to render anyone they touch immobile without exception? This isn’t what we discussed at all.”

“They are. Those special scales disrupt Odh, and yet the Deep Folk girl is still moving even after being bathed in them. It’s truly a mystery...”

“Well, that’s all very well, just don’t let you guard down.”

“What foolishness. I am incapable of such a thing.”

Listening to this exchange, Olivia ascertained that these two were no Azure Knights, but the allies of the man who had called himself an “Asura.” *So that’s why it stank of rats,* Olivia thought, smiling sweetly. The information source she’d been waiting for had arrived faster than she had expected.

“I don’t like her. Death is bearing down on her, so why is she smiling as though she doesn’t care? The Deep Folk really are incomprehensible.”

“You don’t need to comprehend. The Asura follow the ancient precepts and fulfill our contracts. That is all.”

The two of them moved around Olivia to hem her in to the front and rear. Then, they bent low to the ground and sprinted at her.

First things first, I need to do something about my body. Olivia took a deep breath, then slowly closed her eyes. Finally, she honed her awareness fine as a sword's edge and forced the Odh that flowed through her body to stop. Her eyes snapped open. She quickly cast her gaze around at the two approaching figures. *The man's sword has longer reach. His strike will hit first.* With a minimum of movement she perceived the man's blade, thrust toward her with incredible speed, then seized his right arm and collar to slip in close to him and, using the momentum, slammed his head into the ground. There was a sound like a ripe fruit splitting open. Blood and brain matter flew everywhere. The man's body twitched a few times, then fell still. Olivia reached out toward the woman, who was now right at her side.

"How...?!" she gasped. A split second before Olivia's fingers closed around her arm, the woman leapt to one side, putting distance between them. From her cloak, an even greater cloud of butterflies came fluttering forth.

"That's not going to work anymore," Olivia told her. "That triumphant speech earlier was a mistake." Olivia faced the cloud of butterflies that came at her like a whirlwind and, without flinching, ran straight ahead. There was a distortion in the woman's movement. It lasted less than a moment, but that was more than long enough for Olivia. It was no trouble for her to dodge the wild stab of the woman's knife. Olivia stepped lightly around behind her, drawing the ebony blade, and slashed twice, three times. A moment passed, then blood erupted from all four of the woman's limbs as she folded at the knees, face twisted in agony. Olivia crouched in front of her.

"Why?! How can you still move?!"

"You don't need to yell. I'm right in front of you. That was the first time for me, so it threw me a little, but that technique of yours incapacitates the victim by forcing the flow of their Odh out of balance, right? So if you stop your Odh once, then release it again, the flow returns to normal. That's all."

"You *stopped* your Odh to restore the normal flow? Are you serious? As if you could do something that ridiculous!"

"Well, what am I supposed to say to that? I can't help that I did it, can I? But anyway, I let you live because there's some questions I'd like you to answer for

me. Oh, right, you probably already know, but it's useless trying to attack. I severed your tendons and the flow of your Odh."

The woman was silent.

"I suppose that means you understand? Okay, getting right to the point, you *are* one of those humans that call themselves 'Asura,' right? You feel just like that man in the black mask I killed."

The woman's mouth stayed shut.

"I'll take your silence as a 'yes.' Now for the real questions. You all seem to know a lot about me, but I want to know exactly what you know." When the woman still didn't respond, Olivia added, "This time, I won't accept silence." Gripping one of the woman's fingers, she bent it back in the wrong direction. A *crack* rang out across the battlefield as Olivia reached for another finger. "It's handy that you have ten fingers, don't you think?"

She smiled at the woman, who blurted out, "What do you want to know?!"

"Why do you call me 'Deep Folk'? Why won't the Asura let the Deep Folk be? Could we start from there?"

"There is a contract from ancient times," the woman replied at length. What followed was a tale of fates intertwined, stretching back unbroken since time immemorial. A king had made a contract with the league of assassins known as the Asura for the extermination of the Deep Folk. This was the origin of the war between them. She explained that the people known as the Deep Folk possessed Odh in abundance, and that Olivia was their descendant. By killing her, the last of the Deep Folk, they would fulfill their centuries-old contract.

It was so ridiculous Olivia was almost impressed. These Asura were desperately trying to murder her for the sake of a contract with a king whose bones had probably long since crumbled to dust. She couldn't help but feel a little dazed, but she pressed on to her next question.

"Now, if you knew me as a baby, that means you know about my parents too, right?" Olivia did not, in fact, care very much about her parents. Parent or no, the fact was that she couldn't find a way to be interested in people whose faces she didn't even know. Still, they had brought her into the world, so she felt she

had to know how they lived and died.

The woman deliberately averted her eyes. “Your mother was Deep Folk...” she said. “I am told my comrades killed her.”

“Huh. And my father?”

Surprise flashed through the woman’s eyes as she stared at Olivia.

“Your father took you and disappeared into the Forest of No Return.”

“What’s that?”

“You don’t know the infamous forest where all fear to tread?”

“Where is it?”

From the woman’s description, Olivia understood that this Forest of No Return was one and the same as where she had lived with Z.

“So why didn’t you kill me and my father? You shouldn’t have had any trouble killing a baby, at least.”

“None who step foot in the Forest of No Return ever return. Many years ago, comrades of mine skilled in investigation set out to investigate, but in the end, they never made it back. The moment you and your father entered the forest, we considered you dead. That is why we did not give chase—there was no need to risk lives to do so. In any case, your father was badly wounded, so he was sure to die without our interference, and what hope did a baby have of surviving in that dread forest? I myself would like to know how it is that you not only survived, but even made it out of the forest again despite its reputation.” The woman spat out the last words. Olivia looked down at her chest.

Z did say it put a boundary around the forest to stop any humans getting near the Gateway to the Land of the Dead. Even after living in the forest, I’m not sure if I’d have been able to leave without this gem. I guess that would mean once you go in, you can never come out. Deciding that the woman was telling the truth, Olivia at last asked what she really wanted to know.

“Now, do you know of Z?”

“Z?” the woman repeated blankly.

“Right, Z. The God of Death.” She waved her arms around to aid her description of Z’s defining characteristics. Back when she had asked the man in the black mask about Z she had neglected to do so, and Olivia thought that might have been why he hadn’t known.

But the woman said, “I can only assume you’re not going to start making things up now, so I’ll answer you straight. I can say with confidence that I know nothing about any such outlandish creature.”

Olivia saw a hint of confusion behind the woman’s mask of agony, which told her that the woman’s ignorance was genuine. Just in case, she asked if there weren’t any other Asura who might know something, but the woman only gave her a bitter smile and an answer that dashed her hopes. Her search for Z had run into yet another dead end. Still, she had learned about her origins, and that was something.

“Thanks for telling me all that. I feel like I know myself a tiny bit better now.”

“I’m...so glad.” The woman’s voice was strained. Olivia moved on to her final question.

“Okay, so. How many more of your comrades are there who’ll be trying to kill me?”

“Nngh!”

Olivia snapped another finger, saying calmly, “I told you I won’t accept silence, didn’t I?” The woman curled in on herself like a turtle, wailing that there were seven Asura left.

For all that she’d asked the questions, Olivia observed idly, the woman had started talking pretty quickly for someone who called herself an assassin.

“All right, then tell those seven that if they want to try to kill me, they’re welcome to—I won’t stop them. But you’ve already told me everything I want to know, so the next time I see one of you, I’ll kill you on the spot. Okay?”

The woman looked up at Olivia, then, her lips trembling, she gave a tiny nod.

Olivia nodded back, then jumped to her feet. “Right, make sure they get the message, okay? Bye, now.”

Once she was sure she could no longer see Olivia, Krishna realized she had forgotten to breathe and took a desperate gulp of air.

“What a...” she murmured between gasps. “What a *smile...*” Even Krishna, an assassin of uncommon talents, had felt a chill in her soul at that smile. No human, she thought, should ever be able to smile like that.

Right at the end, you found yourself a real monster, she thought mockingly, then looked ahead of her. Krishna had been spared to serve as a messenger, but there was no doubt in her mind that if her own strike had arrived earlier than Mirage’s, it would be her sprawled over there on the ground now. At that moment, her frustration at her defeat at the hands of the Deep Folk girl was overwhelmed by the fear that clung to her. How did one even raise such a monster?

To hell with the Deep Folk. Krishna knew she couldn’t stand against Olivia. The girl was an apex predator. All she could do now was take Olivia’s words and her threat and convey them to the letter to her comrades. Even that would not stop the Asura, not when a contract was on the line, but Krishna, picturing what lay in wait for them, only twisted her bloodless lips.

IV

Olivia returned to the command tent after word reached her from Ashton, requesting that she come with all haste.

“I’m baaack!” Olivia announced, throwing open the tent flaps to find Ashton staring intently at a deployment map spread out on the table. Beside him, Claudia was eyeing him anxiously. The other soldiers all hastily jumped to salute, and Olivia returned the gesture as she went to stand on the opposite side of the table to Ashton.

“If this keeps up it won’t be long before the front lines collapse,” he said bitterly, not looking at her. “This is my fault.”

Olivia looked down at the map and saw he was right. “You shouldn’t beat yourself up. They didn’t outdo you tactically.” She wasn’t saying it to be

comforting. Every move Ashton had made had been perfect. Unfortunately, their opponent was on the same level. When neither commander could outplay the other, victory came down to the ability of individual soldiers. In the case of the Eighth Legion, made up largely of soldiers untested in battle, against the renowned might of the Azure Knights, it had been obvious which would win, and indeed, the Azure Knights had pushed the Eighth Legion to the brink.

"General," Claudia said hesitantly, "we ought to fall back. We received the good news that the Second Allied Legion have the advantage in their battle. If we join back up with them and regroup, we might still have a chance." She kept one eye on Ashton, whose hands were balled into fists. Olivia walked over to the back of the tent, then sat down on the throne Gile had made her.

"That might be a good idea," she said, her words like a single droplet breaking the surface of a lake. She closed her eyes. Claudia's suggestion sounded like it could work, but it would also give their opponent time. Right now, such a thing would be akin to reaching out and downing a bottle of poison. The reason things had gone so smoothly in the lead up to the battle was, in the end, because no one had believed the Royal Army could possibly invade the empire. But now, the empire had learned that this had only been an illusion. Felix was Ashton's equal in tactical thinking. If they retreated now, he wouldn't bother pursuing them. Instead, he would move quick as lightning to sure up his defenses, and that would be checkmate for the Royal Army.

Olivia opened her eyes. Every gaze in the tent was fixed on her.

"Our only choice is to take out their commander," she said.

Everyone looked down, unsure what to make of her words. They all knew that going after an enemy general while at a disadvantage was the height of reckless madness.

But Claudia alone smiled. Like a single tiny blossom, it was barely there, and yet more than anything thus far, it drew everyone to her.

"You never change, do you, General? I thought you would say that."

"You did... So you knew, Claudia."

"I *am* your aide, ser. It just wouldn't be like you to retreat now."

Claudia had first offered the common-sense suggestion, for the simple reason that it was her job, as aide, to do so. Having upheld her principles, she then opened herself to Olivia's recklessness. Olivia couldn't have asked for a better aide, and on top of that, Claudia was her dear friend.

"Just in case, is anyone opposed?" Olivia asked. She looked around the tent, her gaze coming to rest on Ashton.

"As if I would," he said. "I told you before the battle began. I'll follow you anywhere, Olivia. Now and forever."

Soon night would fall on the nineteenth day of battle. Olivia ordered Claudia to assemble their key commanding officers.

From inside, they could hear the crackle of wood in the braziers that surrounded the camp. In the faces of the officers who had come at Olivia's summons, exhaustion was writ large. Luke and Evanson had always been somber, but now even the ever-cheerful Gile had his arms folded, a troubled look on his face. Even Ellis had no sooner sat down than she sprawled flat on the long table.

"I'm sorry to make you all come. I know you're tired," Olivia said. At this, Gile immediately rearranged his features into a forced smile.

"I am not tired in the slightest, ser," he insisted with false bravado. "I have never been tired in my life."

Usually, this would have earned him a torrent of sarcasm from Ellis, but she said nothing.

"Well, I think you've all sensed it, but I'll say it anyway. At this rate, we're going to lose."

No one spoke immediately, but no one looked surprised either. Likely they were all painfully aware of where they stood.

"If we're going to run, now is certainly the best time for it." The fact that it was none other than Luke who gave voice to these bitter words put him at the center of everyone's attention. Olivia wondered if it was because he had been on the front lines for the whole of the battle that he had immediately proposed

retreat.

“Okay, Ashton, could you explain the current state of the battle? I mean, you know I’m still not the best at explaining things.” She smiled at him, and he stood up.

“First of all,” he began, “I apologize to you all. I brought this down upon us with my naïve tactics. I am so sorry...” He bowed low. Ellis, unpeeling herself slowly from the table, was the first to respond.

“It sounds, Lieutenant Colonel, like you think you should be able to win any battle purely on the back of your tactics. Don’t you think your ego’s getting the better of you a little?”

Ashton faltered. “What? No, that’s not it at all...”

“The Azure Knights are *really* strong. And just like their skill in battle, it’s no ordinary strength. It’s as though they have an unbreakable core, and unless we snap it, we have no chance of beating them. Though I can’t tell how much I hate saying it,” Ellis added. It was a rare show of regret from her.

“My sister is right,” Evanson added. “The Azure Knights possess an unwavering strength. When I fought them, I realized its source is concentrated at a single point.”

For the first time, Ellis smiled. “Not bad work for my brainless brother.”

“There’s no need to call me ‘brainless’...!” Evanson began to protest, then stopped himself. “The point is, if we take down their commander, Felix von Sieger, I am confident it will cause a massive upset in their ranks.”

Luke looked from Ellis to Evanson in turn, then heaved a deep sigh.

“Everyone here knew that ages ago without needing you two to tell them. And this absurd scheming of yours.” He rolled his eyes. “Honestly. What were you thinking, using their commander to take the lead?”

“You’re one to talk,” Ellis shot back. “Saying now’s the time to escape even when you knew all that and didn’t even believe it. Birds of a feather.”

As Luke choked on his next retort, the tent was filled by a burst of explosive laughter. As the heavy atmosphere dissipated, Claudia and Ashton exchanged a

blank stare, while Olivia, who of course had no idea what this meant, felt confused.

As if to represent the others, Gile spoke up. “Everyone knows what you’re thinking, Captain. Just how long do you think we’ve been serving under you?”

He spoke like this settled the matter, but Olivia replied earnestly, “It’s only been two years.”

Seeing Gile at a loss for words just as Luke had been, there was another surge of laughter. It was as merry as though they had won the battle and were now celebrating.

While Gile drooped, Ellis clapped him on the shoulder.

“All right, Gile might be as big an idiot as he’s just demonstrated for us, but he’s right about what my big sister is thinking. If she were the sort to run scared at the slightest adversity, I, Ellis Crawford, would not love her as I do.” Ellis licked her lips, then turned to Olivia with tear-filled eyes. Olivia felt a powerful chill run down her spine, followed by a shiver that racked her whole body.

Claudia cleared her throat loudly to settle the atmosphere.

“If you all know then that saves us time explaining. General Olivia will challenge their commander, Felix von Sieger.”

“So our job is to create a path for her to do so?” Evanson asked.

“Just so.” Ashton nodded firmly. “But it will not be easy.”

“That’s why you called us, isn’t it? You can count on us.” Ellis grinned fearlessly. Luke and Evanson’s smiles were a little pained, but they voiced their support. Gile and the rest of the officers were breathing hard, burning to get to it.

Olivia closed her eyes once more, then put a hand to her breast and spoke for the first time.

“I need your help, everyone. I know there’s only so much I can do alone.”

In the twisted world of war, Olivia had understood the limits of what one person could do alone. She had also learned just how vividly colored and rich one’s life became when one had friends who had shared in the same moment in

time. After Olivia spoke, there was a pause where no one so much as breathed. But it only lasted a moment. Ellis shot out of her seat like an arrow from a bow and threw herself on Olivia.

“Leave it to me, Big Sister!” she cried. “I’ll do it! I’ll help you!”

Gile was out of his chair next, ready with a sharp rebuke. “No, I will! I’m the captain’s right hand!”

“Gile, don’t you take another step! And you, move away from the general *now*.”

Claudia, her eyebrows angled down sharply, forcibly peeled Ellis off of Olivia, even as Ellis continued to reach out longingly for her.

Everyone, with the exception of Gile, sighed. Then, Ashton turned to Olivia with the most serious expression she had ever seen on his face.

“This is my task and mine alone. Olivia, I promise you I will forge you that path.”

“Okay. I’ll be counting on you.” She smiled at him, and, for a moment, Ashton flushed scarlet. After she had been so worried about him, for some reason the stare Claudia gave him now was icy. Olivia decided to go with her tried-and-true tactic of turning a blind eye.

Then, her face growing hard, she turned to the others.

“Now,” she said, “is when the real battle begins.”

V

Twenty days had passed since the outset of the conflict later known as the Battle of Turner. The Azure Knights' forces numbered around twenty thousand, and the Eighth Legion had been reduced to fourteen thousand.

It was all but inevitable that, considering they had begun the battle with five thousand fewer soldiers soldiers and had thus far succeeded in containing Death God Olivia, that morale among the Azure Knights had risen to an all-time high. Every soldier in their ranks was in thrall to their youthful commander and his skills at arms and placed their absolute trust in him. Yet Felix himself only felt the lines in his brow deepen as the days passed.

Azure Knights Main Command, Early Morning

"For you, my lord." At the tentative voice, Felix opened his eyes and saw a steaming teacup held out to him. He gently untangled his folded arms.

"Thank you. You're up early. The sun has barely risen."

"You're one to talk, my lord," Teresa replied, smiling. Felix accepted the cup. It contained his favorite Hausen tea, a bitter drink that somehow left a faint sweetness in his mouth as he sipped. He let out a breath, then placed the cup on the table.

"Delicious."

"Shall I bring you another cup?" Teresa asked, tidying the teacup away. Felix refused with a small shake of his head. Usually, Teresa would have left then, but for some reason today she lingered, still clutching the cup. Felix looked at her face and saw her eyes roving this way. But the restlessness only lasted a few moments before she turned to look directly at him. Felix made himself sit up straighter.

"My lord, I *am* your aide, aren't I?" Teresa asked. At first, Felix could not find the words to reply. That Teresa was his aide was hardly something that still needed confirming, and so truthfully, her asking him as much took him by

surprise. It would be one thing if a personnel had occurred, but Felix, for better or for worse, knew of none more capable than her.

Teresa repeated her question, so Felix simply nodded his head.

“In that case, as your aide, I would like to know what is troubling you.”

Felix paused. “Do I look troubled?”

“Yes, my lord,” Teresa replied without hesitation. “Very much so.” Felix stared at her, then rubbed the back of his head. Teresa continued. “If it’s too painful to talk about, then allow me to shoulder the burden. At present, the battle goes in our favor. It is only a matter of time before the Eighth Legion is unable to hold the front line. Despite this, you are troubled, and the reason—the reason is Death God Olivia, correct?”

Felix hesitated, then said, “I’ve been a little, well...uncertain.”

With the exception of a few powerful units, the soldiers of the Eighth Legion had far more bark than bite, as Felix had first assumed. The threat had come via the many tactical plays he couldn’t help but admire. In battle, there was nothing so foolish as musing on what-ifs, but Felix thought if the soldiers of the Eighth Legion had had sufficient training, they would have given the Azure Knights a run for their money indeed. At the very least, he would not have been able to sit here sipping the Hausen tea Teresa brought him.

At first, he’d thought that Olivia was in charge of all their battle plans. But the kaleidoscopic shifts in the enemy’s tactics had planted doubt in his mind, and that doubt had borne weakness. This left them often on the back foot, unable to employ the tactics they were best at: acting first to contain their opponent. They had struggled considerably in the early stages as a result. Nevertheless, as the battle progressed and the might of the Azure Knights came to the fore, the sense grew within Felix that something was wrong, and he could not shake it off. Tactics were subject to the influence of the tactician’s innate character—in ways even tacticians themselves were not aware of. The many plays the enemy had made thus far were alike in that they were all extraordinary, but were entirely different in nature. Like the two sides of a coin, or light and shadow, seemingly contradictory but unable to exist without the other.

Felix had concluded that the Eighth Legion’s tactics—sometimes subtle,

sometimes audacious—had been thought up by Olivia and one other person. Once he understood he had not one but *two* tacticians on his hands, dealing with them was no great feat. Felix only had to divide his mind into two, then employ the appropriate tactics for each of them. After the battle reached its middle stages, he had succeeded in gaining control of the field and driving the Eighth Legion back while the Azure Knights were still able to continue their counteroffensive.

"It may sound strange, but it's precisely *because* we've taken the advantage that I'm uncertainty. The Eighth Legion will likely start to consider retreating next, and while that would be ideal for us too..." He trailed off. He had had an unfortunate report that the fighting was going badly for the forty-thousand-strong detached force that had broken off from the Azure Knights. He was counting on it taking significant time for the Eighth Legion to retreat back to home soil or to rejoin with the Royal Army and regroup. If the Azure Knights used that time to build a solid defensive position, the Royal Army's invasion of the empire would end in failure. The force laying to siege to Kier Fortress as a diversion would likely withdraw as well. Nothing was more important than preventing the Royal Army from invading the imperial capital, and it was still too soon for optimistic predictions, but he saw his objective as eighty percent accomplished.

"You aren't sure whether to settle things with Death God Olivia, are you, my lord?" Teresa said, striking to the crux of the matter.

Felix smiled wryly. "That girl remains a threat to the imperial army, now and in the future. I have to admit that this is our single greatest chance to take care of her once and for all."

"In that case," Teresa said at length, "as your aide, I have some advice. I know you are strong, my lord, but you ought to avoid a direct confrontation with Death God Olivia."

Felix waited, assuming that she would of course give a reason, but Teresa shut her mouth there, turned on her heel, and left. Felix watched her go without a word.

"Am I supposed to just know how my aide is feeling...?" Felix wondered aloud,

but there was no one there to answer him. Smiling to himself, he closed his eyes again.

The sun set without Felix arriving at a decision. The following day, the news arrived that the Eighth Legion was showing increased activity.

“They’ve started to retreat!” At the runner’s breathless cry, the assembled officers all cheered as one. They could be heard exclaiming that Death God Olivia had been defeated, chatting and laughing with expressions of pride.

Weaving through the others to kneel before Felix came one of his three veteran commanders: Major General Balboa Kreutzel.

“I will pursue them at your command, my lord.” Balboa’s grave tone effectively extinguished the cheerful chatter. The officers all turned toward Felix, then, following Balboa’s lead, they knelt.

Weathering the heat of their simmering stares, Felix ran his thumb along his chin.

“Which way are they retreating?” he asked.

“They are moving northeast, ser!”

Felix took the map Teresa proffered, then unfurled it on the table.

“Northeast...” he murmured. “So the Elfiel Canyon?” The Elfiel Canyon, with its great cliffs of red-brown rock, was known for its narrowness.

“Something bothers you?” asked Balboa, reverence in his eyes.

“They likely have an ambush already in position in the canyon. Pursue them, but only to the canyon mouth.”

After the array of tactics the Eighth Legion had employed in the battle so far, they were not likely to retreat without purpose. Felix explained that he predicted that in order to frustrate their pursuit, the Eighth Legion would mount a counterattack at the point where their ranks were the most extended, around the midpoint of the formation.

“A trap...” Violet spoke up in a lovely voice like the chirping of little birds. “A moment, my lord?” Just like that, she stepped lightly over to stand beside him,

then leaned in to stare at the map. As she did so, a strand of her hair brushed against Felix's cheek, and a sweet, gentle aroma wafted over to him. "It is rarely used and so not marked on the map, but there is a path that passes by the mouth of the Elfiel Canyon. A shortcut, if you will, around here." She ran a finger through a forest on the map. "If we send horses, we'll have them by the nose for certain. They'll never expect us to be waiting right in front."

"A shortcut, you say..." Felix considered. "Come to think of it, you mentioned you were born in these parts, didn't you, Lieutenant General?"

Violet's smile was delighted. "I was, my lord. When I was young, I often hunted in these lands."

"You are still very young."

"Oh, my. I never thought to receive such a compliment from *you*, my lord. May I assume there is hope for me yet?" She gave Felix a dazzling smile, and he found himself at a rare loss for where to rest his gaze. He heard Teresa clear her throat repeatedly behind him and, for no reason he could explain, followed her example.

"Then can I leave the command of the pursuit to you, Lieutenant General?"

"Of course, ser! Consider it done!"

"We have already achieved our objective. Please just don't do anything foolish."

Violet, with her sharp mind and unwavering courage, was indispensable to the Azure Knights. He could not lose her now, when victory was all but within reach.

Without lowering her salute, Violet replied, "I know when to withdraw, ser, so fear not—I shall return as flawless as I depart. You may be assured of that!"

Felix nodded tentatively, feeling eyes boring holes into the back of his head as he did so.

Immediately afterward, Felix reorganized his forces, giving command of the first pursuit force to Balboa. Balboa led seven thousand soldiers east, following

after the retreating Eighth Legion. Violet took another force of seven thousand through the forest to the northeast. Staying behind on the Turner Plains, Felix set to work at once on formulating his net of defenses. And yet no sooner had he begun than the face of a certain girl flashed across the back of his mind. His pen, running over the map, scratched to a halt.

That they chose to retreat through the Elfiel Canyon means there's no doubt they're planning on withdrawing to Fernest rather than rejoining with their other force... he thought. *But I wonder if this was really the right thing to do.*

Perhaps something inside Felix was telling him that no matter how bitter the fighting became, Olivia would never have chosen to retreat. That thought had delayed his judgment, there was no doubt of that, but in the end, the Royal Army's invasion of the imperial capital had ended in failure. Naturally, he meant to make sure they never overrun imperial territory again, and the idea of Felix permitting any weaknesses in their defenses from here on out was unthinkable.

This will have to do for now, he told himself, then turned his eyes down once more to the map.

VI

Balboa's First Pursuit Force

Even the icy bite of the wind felt pleasant as Balboa breathed deep, filling up his lungs with cold air. He radiated a vigor that belied his advanced age.

"Even Death God Olivia was left with no choice but to kneel before the Azure Knights! But we are not done yet! It is not enough! Bare those sharpened azure fangs and sink them deep, deep into their flesh!" Balboa knocked aside incoming arrows this way and that with the long shaft of his spear, bellowing to spur on his soldiers. They responded with an earth-shaking roar, driving the retreating royal soldiers into the yawning mouth of the land of the dead.

It was scarcely an hour since the pursuit began.

"Guh...?!" After smashing through a number of small groups in defensive formations, Balboa caught sight of a group of soldiers in black armor. At a quick visual estimate, they numbered around three hundred.

Death God Olivia is supposed to wear black armor. With those numbers, could they be her personal guard? As the unit in black approached, before Balboa could catch the scent of unmistakable danger and be urged to caution, arrows came raining down on his forces like a summer squall. Perhaps because the arrows too were black, it was as though a veil of darkness had settled over them.

"Defensive positions!" he roared. But the order was lost almost at once amid the whinnying of horses and the voices of the soldiers. Most of the soldiers who rode ahead and been thrown into the air or were peppered with black arrows, and they along with the horses they rode collapsed to the ground in droves. From the force of the volley to its unmatched accuracy, it was clear that these were archers of no small amount of talent. Only through skillful use of his reins and spurs did Balboa just manage to calm his wildly bucking horse. He laid a hand on its neck to thank the beast for its fortitude, then took a deep breath into his belly before he let out another bellow that resounded through the battlefield.

"Forward! If you stop now, they'll have you! Ride through them like a gale!" The latest attack had thrown their ranks into severe disarray, but Balboa's riders charged forward with such force, as though they meant to run the black-armored soldiers down. Balboa spurred his horse back to a gallop just as soldiers began to emerge en masse bearing shields large enough to conceal a grown man from behind the archers in black. They formed up three ranks deep in front of the archers, then planted their shields on the ground as though to repel the charge. It was as though they meant to provoke him. Balboa couldn't help but smile.

"What a joke! Crush them!"

Ordinary soldiers would have been wary of the abnormality and grown slow, but those who wore the splendid blue plate did not hesitate even for a moment. They were each of them overtaken by their fighting spirit, and they rammed right into the wall of great shields. The common folk were wont to see nothing but the beauty of that armor, but the Azure Knights had no time for prettiness. No matter if they were splattered with mud or exposed to humiliation, they sought victory to the point of stupidity. That was the essence

of the Azure Knights.

We have no need for individual honor. It is enough for the Azure Knights to be bathed in glory. This wasn't like before, when he had been caught unawares. His unhorsed soldiers drew their swords at once, then swung at the royal soldiers. It looked as though the fight was heading for a melee, but the royal soldiers warded off the attack, then began to retreat once more.

Balboa fought off enemies left and right, his long spear limned with blood. "We have them retreat—?!" He was gripped by a sudden chill. Unconsciously, he tilted his head left, and a moment later, with a noise like the roar of a wild beast, an arrow passed so close that it brushed his temple. This time, Balboa entirely lost his balance, slipping miserably from his horse.

"General Balboa!"

"It's nothing!" Balboa brutally shook off the arm of the soldier who tried to haul him up, then looked up. What he saw was a single man with a bow and a wolfish grin.

"So you dodged my arrow? You really are something," he said. Then, he turned his back on Balboa and strolled away. Balboa put a hand on his knee to push himself to his feet, never taking his eyes off the man.

"Ser, you're injured…"

"This is barely a scratch." Balboa glanced at the cloth his aide held out to him, then shook off the gore on his weapon.

That man's eyes… he thought. *There's no question, from the impression he gave off, that he's some sort of commander. But those were not the eyes of a man who's accepted defeat…*

Despite his unease, Balboa never let up on the pursuit. Two hours later, the Eighth Legion arrived at the Elfiel Canyon. Balboa wanted to continue after them, but that would be going against his orders. Besides, plunging in when one knew a trap was waiting wasn't brave, it was reckless. It wouldn't do to confuse the two, he chided himself.

We've whittled down some of their forces. I shall leave Lieutenant General Violet to do the rest. Balboa gave the order for all units to cease their pursuit.

Violet's Second Pursuit Force

Violet and her soldiers arrived at the Elfiel Canyon ahead of the retreating Eighth Legion. She positioned her forces in a horseshoe formation, fully prepared for the arrival of their opponent. When they wandered in unwitting, a grave requiem would ring out for them.

Violet sat astride her horse, her well-formed lips softening in a smile, when her aide, Major Cassachy approached her, a solemn look on his face. He was related to the Anastasias, and so had known Violet since her girlhood.

Again…? This was the third time. Violet of course knew perfectly well what he was going to say, so, with a look that made it abundantly clear she had had enough, she cut in first.

"I'm not backing up a single step from this spot."

"I know I ask too much, General, but please, go just a little further back. If anything were to happen to you, I could never face your esteemed father Bren."

"You are worrying over nothing. The House of Anastasia prizes valor in battle above all else. So long as my death, if it comes, is honorable, my father will receive the news gladly."

"On the surface, it may be as you say," Cassachy replied. "But separating one's feelings over one's own daughter is not easily done. Especially for the father of a daughter like you, General. I beg you to reconsider."

Violet glared at him, then said harshly, "You will say nothing further. Dismissed." Cassachy fell silent. With a salute, he left, his shoulders slumped. His frequent beseeching for her to retreat was to be expected from an aide. Where Violet's forces now stood was well within arrow shot—and if the Eighth Legion were to make a last-ditch, suicidal charge, within the reach of sword and spear as well. There was one simple reason why despite that, she had chosen to stop here: this was the perfect opportunity to get a first hand look at Death God Olivia.

I will see for myself just what sort of a woman can stir Lord Felix's heart, she thought.

Two hours later—

“The Eighth Legion have shown themselves.” After word came from the scouts, the Second Pursuit Force, having sighted the Eighth Legion’s vanguard, quietly moved into position for battle. Violet raised her arm straight up toward the heavens, and the creak of bowstrings pulled taut ran through the forest. They had made use of the terrain to cleverly conceal themselves. Though the Eighth Legion appeared to be moving with caution, there was no sign that they had noticed Violet’s forces.

Using her spyglass to measure the distance between them, Violet allowed the Eighth Legion to come in as close as she dared, then cried “Loose!” She swung her outstretched arm down. At once, the arrows raced away, tracing a graceful arc through the air to rain down on the Eighth Legion. Though Violet could not have known it at that moment, she had without meaning to taken revenge for the volley that had hit Balboa’s forces, in a different time and place. Amid the expected confusion sown in the Eighth Legion’s ranks by the arrows, they began a counterattack, but it was undisciplined and disordered, and so only added to the confusion. Seeing one arrow after another whistling by with no clear target, Violet couldn’t help a sarcastic smile. In the end, the Eighth Legion scurried back into the hole they had crawled out of, still in disarray. The archers continued their assault until the enemy were out of bow range, leaving a mound of several hundred corpses.

The ambush didn’t go too badly. Though of course, this outcome was only to be expected. As Cassachy issued commands to the soldiers with relief on his face, she called over to him.

“They won’t come out again until they’ve regained order. We will split our forces into three. Two will continue on the offensive. The other one will rest.”

Cassachy replied that he understood, then immediately set to work. Violet’s eyes were already fixed on where the Eighth Legion had retreated, to where the girl had to be.

Caught with a tiger in front and a wolf behind, as they say. Now, then, little Death God, what will you do now? Violet smiled a bewitching smile.

Main Force, the Eighth Legion

That's our schedule way off track, Luke thought, staggered by the spectacular ambush the Azure Knights had staged. It had been settled that they would retreat to draw the attention of the Azure Knights, and as soon as they decided on the narrow canyon as their path, they had deployed a large unit of longbow archers in advance. Even then, Ashton had said with close to certainty that their opponent would anticipate the presence of the ambush. This was a crucial point, as their objective was not a surprise attack, but rather to deter the pursuers early on. Ashton's prediction had proved true, and the enemy unit pursuing them had fallen back as soon as the Eighth Legion arrived at the canyon. They were then to have passed through the canyon, making as though to fall back while in fact circling counterclockwise back around the canyon to return to the Turner Plains and waiting at the arranged location for word from Olivia. If news came that she was victorious, they would advance at once on the imperial capital.

Yet in reality, no sooner had the Eighth Legion exited the canyon than they found an ambush awaiting them, sending them scrambling back up the path from whence they had come.

Even Lieutenant Colonel Ashton didn't expect there would be a shortcut… But now we're rats in a trap. The pursuing force from earlier would undoubtedly be waiting for them should they try to go back the way they had come, like as not only too happy to resume the chase. *Even so, we can't just sit here. So long as they believe General Olivia is with us, we have to do something, or it'll create undue suspicion, and* that *we have to avoid at all costs.*

Olivia and her forces were due to spring their attack the following day at dawn. As such, Luke has had to do whatever it took to keep the eyes of the enemy here.

"Should we force our way through?" his aide suggested. Luke immediately rejected it.

"Even if we managed it, we still wouldn't be able to shake them off. The damage that would do us can't be underestimated."

"So we stay here?"

“Right now, that’s the best solution.”

“Major, do you think the enemy will stand patiently by while we’re holed up here?”

“You should ask them that yourself. But at the very least, we have the advantage of terrain. And our opponent is confident they have won.”

“What does that mean, ser?” his aide asked slowly.

“If it were you, would you be eager to go plunging into danger right after you were assured of victory? For my part, I’d politely decline.”

For all their bravery, their opponents were still only human. Some of them *might* be insane, but the vast majority of people wanted to savor victory, and precisely because of that, they took greater care with their lives.

“There is a logic to that, ser,” his aide admitted, and offered no further protest.

Having said that, if their commander were insane, then this all be meaningless. If only Colonel Claudia or Lieutenant Colonel Ashton were here, I wouldn’t have to rack my brains like this. I lost out on the roles that came round to me this time. Privately heaving a deep sigh, Luke issued his next orders.

Violet’s Second Pursuit Force

“And just what are you thinking?” Violet, who was on her break, had reached out for the bread basket, only to end up not taking any. A lot of time had slipped by since their initial ambush, but the Eighth Legion had done nothing worthy of notice. Every now and then a small shield-bearing unit emerged, only to be met by a volley of arrows from the longbows lying in wait for them to send them scurrying back to their hole. They did the same thing over and over again as though it were all the fools knew how to do, until at last even that ceased.

“It looks to me as though they can’t make their minds up on what to do,” Cassachy said. Violet wasn’t about to contradict him; she thought the same. She seriously doubted they would turn back to the Turner Plains now, and even if they did, Balboa would have something to say about it. The fact was, the Eighth

Legion was out of options.

I was expecting her to try something. *Perhaps not on the level of that lone charge at the start of the battle, but something like it…* There was no way that Olivia, after making such a daring play, would stay holed up in the Elfiel Canyon. Not only that, but unlike her Second Pursuit Force, which had secure supply lines, the Eighth Legion's food would be limited. You couldn't conveniently get around hunger simply by staying still, but cutting back rations would obviously hurt morale. If Olivia was planning something, it would have to be now, while they still had food to spare.

Violet pushed her bangs to one side as the wind tousled them. *What if we tried something ourselves, to get a sense of the situation…?* Olivia's reaction might allow her to work out her intentions. So as to start moving as soon as possible, she turned to Cassachy where he sat, sipping a cup of Hausen tea.

"Cassachy," she started. When he immediately shook his head, she redirected. "But I haven't even said anything yet."

"You don't need to, General," Cassachy replied, absentmindedly brushing fallen breadcrumbs from his armor. "You are planning to move on the enemy ourselves and see how they react."

"Why are you against it?"

"You don't make a hobby of cheerfully sticking your hands into holes when you know there's a venomous snake inside, do you, General? I'm sure I don't need to tell you that *I* don't."

The comparison rankled Violet, but she got his point.

Cassachy quietly held out a lightly steaming teacup. "As Lord Felix said, our victory was confirmed when the Eighth Legion fell back. There's no reason to go running into danger. Our best option is to wait until their food supplies run out, then, when they come scurrying out like gray foxes from hibernation, we strike. No need for us to go out of our way to feed them."

Everything Cassachy said made sense, which made Violet all the more determined to argue.

"It's not a sweet little gray fox lurking in there. It's a Death God, waiting for

any sign of weakness to let her scythe fall."

"If so, surely we ought to drag our feet all the more. At least so that it's not *our* heads her scythe falls on."

In the end, Violet caved to her aide's remonstrance. She hadn't come this far afraid to meet the Death God's scythe; if anything, she would have welcomed it. But she was reluctant to put the soldiers Felix had entrusted her with in danger.

Oh, well, she thought. *Let's see who can endure the boredom the longest, then.*

And so, the battle between the Eighth Legion and the Second Pursuit Force continued…

VII

The sun shone down with new radiance upon the lands that drank deep of the blood of the fallen with an unquenching thirst. Awoken by the dawn, a flock of migratory birds took off toward the southern skies, tracing a path straight as an arrow.

To the west of the Turner Plains, where forest gave way to a rocky area, a unit of soldiers lay hidden. They raised no banners and numbered a mere eight hundred, but they were all of them without question the elite of the elite.

A girl came forward, the light of dawn on her back tinting her long, silver hair with scarlet as it swayed behind her. She stopped before the ranks of soldiers, then gave them a breezy smile.

"Did you all get some sleep? I was out so hard I almost overslept." At this, the fearless determination on the faces of the soldiers dissolved, and in another moment, they were all swept up in a gale of laughter. Olivia cocked her head, unsure what had set this off.

"Oh, very good, General," Evanson said, wiping the tears from his eyes. "I didn't see that one coming." All the rest of them began laughing and chatting happily. Olivia of course knew from personal experience that people cried when they were sad. She had never imagined they could also cry when they were

amused.

Wait. Could it be that I was amused back then? She thought back on the day Z had disappeared. *No, no way. That time I was definitely sad.* She nodded a few times to convince herself, marveling once more at the many complexities of humankind.

"What are you nodding all smugly for?" On her left, Claudia looked as though she'd had enough.

To her right, Ashton grimaced. "Don't bother."

Olivia felt her spirits rising. "Well, even if I don't really know what's going on," she called out to them, "I'm having fun as always."

"In all the wide reaches of Duvedirica, you are the only one who could say something like that at a time like this, General. As Ashton would say, you take everything too lightly." Claudia's head fell heavily to her chest, and she sighed. Leaving Ashton tapping his fingers against his temple for the moment, Olivia softly laid a hand on Claudia's shoulder.

"You know, I've meant to say this for ages, but if you're always sighing, before you know it all your happiness will grow wings and fly away." Olivia held out her arms and mimed a bird flapping its wings. Claudia's eyes snapped open as though hooked by a fishing line just a moment before she let out an even deeper sigh than before. Even though Olivia had *just* given that warning, apparently Claudia had totally ignored her.

"Anyway, ser, it's time," Claudia said, her voice still half a sigh. Olivia mounted the simple platform erected behind her, then, as she always did, folded her arms, and planted her legs apart imperiously. Now she was ready.

Looking especially forgiving, Claudia barked, "Lieutenant General Olivia will now give her address. All troops to attention!"

The look of fearless determination returned to the assembled soldiers' faces. Olivia gave a small cough.

"In war, humans die easily. Dying means no more tasty food—of course that means no more sweets, and no more towering cakes. And that would be very, very sad, and hard to even think about." She paused for a breath, letting her

eyes sweep slowly across the soldiers. “But even harder and sadder than that is the idea of just like that losing my dear friends and comrades. That’s why I use every bit of knowledge I have. That’s why I wield my sword. Not for the kingdom, but so that you’ll all keep smiling…” She paused again. “That’s why I’m fighting now.”

No one so much as opened their mouths.

It was so quiet she felt as though she could hear the breathing of every person there.

Olivia thought the silence might stretch on for an eternity when Claudia’s sharp voice sliced through.

“All troops, salute Lieutenant General Olivia!”

Aflame with fighting spirit, the soldiers stamped their feet together in one fluid motion for a salute that was a thing of beauty to behold. Olivia returned the salute in kind, then slowly descended from the platform to where Claudia was waiting for her.

“General, just now you and the soldiers truly became of one heart,” she said softly, her face aglow with a sincere smile.

Ashton, meanwhile, scratched his head anxiously and said, “You really never stop surprising me.”

So Olivia gave him her most radiant smile and replied, “That’s because humans grow!”

Chapter Four: An Inhuman Battle

Claudia checked her horse Kagura's tack, then looked over at Ashton, who was doing the same in front of her. He had improved a fair bit with horses, though his sword skills had seen no such progress. Under normal circumstance, it would have been Ashton and not Luke leading the Eighth Legion through the Elfiel Canyon to draw the enemy's attention away, but he had obstinately refused to leave their general's side. In the end, Riful had sworn on her blood and her honor to protect him, and with Olivia's consent, here they were now. In truth, Claudia didn't want Ashton to take part in this battle. But Ashton was a grown man, so she made no objection, quietly resolving instead to keep him safe.

Looks like everything's ready. Her eyes met Riful's where the other girl sat astride her horse, and she bowed deeply. Then, she cut across in front of the eight hundred mounted soldiers toward Olivia, who was doing squats beside Comet.

"Everything is ready, General. We can move out at any time." Claudia's mind was sharper and clearer than ever before. From here on, she would become a sword, racing across the battlefield at Olivia's side.

Olivia nodded, stroking Comet's flank as the horse snorted, before swinging up lightly into the saddle.

"Let's go then," she said, as if they were only setting off for a stroll. Olivia was every bit herself to the last, and this dispelled any misgivings Claudia might have had about the battle to come.

Olivia's eight hundred light cavalry pressed back against the Azure Knights' onslaught with a fierce assault of their own, penetrating deep into the enemy's ranks. The Azure Knights cut down one of the riders after another, but could not hold back the assault. It was as though death itself rode with them.

"Stop them! Do whatever it takes!"

Riding at the head of the vanguard of death with her scarlet cloak billowing behind her, Olivia saw from the corner of her eye a small group of soldiers charging furiously at her from one side. At once, she curved her body like a bow, then, with all her might, she swung through with the arm that held her spear. The black streak pierced through Azure Knight after Azure Knight on its trajectory, then kept going through more. Its duty was done when it sent the beating heart of the thirteenth soldier bursting from their chest, and they fell from the saddle, clutching the protruding shaft.

The Azure Knights, for all their valor and skill at arms, were not immune to the unknowable terror of facing down that which no common sense could explain. They began to slip, physically and mentally. The fangs of the lion, preying on this weakness, took up a wild dance.

Olivia, drawing the ebony blade from its scabbard, slashed through each oncoming enemy with a single swing, shouting, “Do your best, everyone!” It was too innocent for a general’s rousing speech, but it gave heart to her soldiers. They smashed into the enemy like a wave of pure valor, making the Azure Knights bleed.

“You are mine, girl.” From in front of Claudia as her horse ran forward, a rider came rushing toward her leveling his short spear at her. A glance was enough for her to note his impeccable form, as well as the hostility pouring off of him.

So I’ve been singled out. And by a warrior of skill, no less... This man had to be of some renown, but Claudia, and every other soldier in their unit for that matter, had no thought to spare for individual glory. Every swing of her sword was for the sake of clearing a path to Felix for Olivia. She naturally didn’t have time to waste dealing with this man, and yet...

Even if I get around him here, I doubt he’ll be easily dissuaded in his pursuit. That sort is always roaming the battlefield in search of prey to elevate their own glory. He has the eyes of a starving beast. Claudia shut her eyes for a split second, calling up Heaven’s Sight. As the world around her warped like a waving line, she dodged the strike that came swinging at her throat, leaving an afterimage of herself behind, then slashed down on the diagonal at the man’s back as he passed her.

What?! Claudia immediately swung her horse around, her gaze locking with the man's surprised eyes. Claudia herself was just as surprised. She was sure her blade had struck true in a mortal blow. Seeing him sat unscathed upon his horse threw her.

The man put his hand to his back, then stared uncomprehending at the small amount of blood that came away on his fingers.

"Was that...luck?" he said.

This time, Claudia struck first. She spurred her horse forward, and was three strides toward him when the man reacted. The gap between them dropped away in the blink of an eye. Claudia's target was the tendons in the man's arm holding aloft his short spear. The moment before their horses passed one another a second time, the steel point came slashing down at her, tracing the same path to the millimeter as it had last time. Claudia leaned forward to evade the blow, even as she identified her own target, and her blade flew out to meet it. But the sure sensation of having made contact did not come. She turned back and saw the man's wide eyes.

"Apparently not just luck then," he said. "It simply isn't possible that someone could evade my spear twice by mere luck. And that golden gleam in the depths of your eyes... I suppose you have that strange power too then." There was certainty in his voice. Claudia had felt a creeping suspicion, but this confirmed it: this man knew about Odh and could control it.

"I didn't expect to meet another Odh user here," she said.

"Odh...?" the man said slowly. "Ahh. You know a lot more than I do, it seems." He ran his tongue along the blood slicked edge of his spear point.

Claudia, finding herself in her first battle against another Odh user, mysteriously didn't feel a shred of panic or fear. Her mind was tranquility itself.

"You'll be a worthy opponent," the man went on. "So let's have your name. I am Dariah Bryce."

"Claudia Jung." As Claudia spoke, her mind was racing. Her first and second attacks had left no more than flesh wounds, as though to mock her. *Now that I think about it, there was something obviously off about the feeling when my*

blade struck. After interacting with Dariah, she was sure he was using Odh. The problem was that she had no idea *what* he would throw at her. On top of that, his attacks were becoming gradually more honed. Fighting him would get tougher the longer the battle drew on, making him a thoroughly difficult opponent.

But he doesn't know the nature of my power either. And that means... Making sure he saw her do it, Claudia slipped her feet from her stirrups, then slipped down off Kagura's back. For a second, Dariah narrowed his eyes, but then his lips curved, and he followed her.

"Better able to wield your powers on your feet, are you? What a coincidence. I'm the same. Being on horseback just ends up limiting your movement, you know. But my word..." He paused, chuckling. "The gods of battle saw fit to bring me an opponent of rare talent, it seems."

Walking slowly, Claudia replied, "That's enough tedious nonsense." She leaned forward, then kicked off the ground to slip by Dariah, who was caught completely off guard. His face reflected in her eyes was a mask of shock. That he still had the awareness to jerk himself out of the way was impressive, but he wasn't out of peril yet. As she planted her left foot down and swung across, she was sure his life belonged to her blade. Yet the moment the steel met his neck, something soft, almost like rubber, deflected it. Dariah sprang back a few steps, then, rubbing his neck, he grinned.

"A split second later activating my power and my head would be on the ground right now. So that freakish speed is your power. My blood ran cold for a moment there."

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but are you using the *air* as a shield?"

In what to anyone else would have felt like less than a fraction of a second, Claudia's eyes had caught the mass of air materializing around Dariah's throat, and she knew she had seen it repel her attack.

"I'm honestly impressed. In that brief moment, you really saw through it. Then you must have worked out the rest. Against this power, you can slash and stab with swords and spears all you like—it will all come to nothing. In other words, I cannot be killed through physical attacks. There is only one person in

this world who might have a chance, and that is Felix von Sieger."

Claudia was dismayed to hear him speak so. It wasn't the truth of his power that threw her so—she was at a loss as to why he would have referred to his commander without his full title.

"That's quite a way to talk about your commander," she said at length.

"I mean, it's not as though there's anyone here to go off at me about it. The whole reason I joined up with the Azure Knights was for the chance to meet as many powerful opponents as possible. I'm not here to make a name for myself in battle or anything. I respect Felix's strength, but I've never been loyal to him." Dariah guffawed with laughter.

Two years earlier at the hostage exchange ceremony at Kier Fortress, Claudia had gotten a look at Felix. There was a softness to his bearing unlike anything she would have pictured for the commander of the empire's most elite army, and despite the fact that he was her enemy, she had found herself liking him. In truth, though, she had not expected much from him as a warrior.

"Your own feelings aside, from all I hear, Lord Sieger is a great warrior."

"Yes, so much so it starts to sound clichéd. I hear the Death God is fair hand herself, but that's only because she's yet to try her blade against a *true* warrior. If she goes after Felix, it'll only be a matter of time 'til that 'Death God' name is a thing of the past."

Listening to Dariah cheerfully blathering away, Claudia burst out laughing, her shoulders shaking.

He stared at her. "Something funny?"

"Oh yes. Just listening to what a story you spun entirely out of your own imagination. And you're so convinced you know all my powers. I can't *stop* laughing."

Dariah's face turned grave. "You'll forgive me if I offended you. Naturally, I can't pretend to have understood everything of your power from that brief exchange. Indeed, I can't wait to see its full extent. I'm hoping you'll exceed my expectations yet again!"

“Well, if that’s what you want...” If she wasted any more time on this man, Olivia would go on ahead and she wouldn’t be able to catch up. She sheathed her sword, shuffling her feet as she crouched down.

“Come on, then! I promise you this, I shall cut you down at the height of your powers, and in doing so ascend still higher as a warrior!”

Claudia’s ears were already deaf to Dariah’s words. Reaching down into the depths of her consciousness, she drew up as much of the Odh inside her as she could muster, then kicked powerfully off the ground.

Heaven’s Sight. Swift Step. Gale. Claudia skidded to a stop, sending up a cloud of dust in her wake, then turned slowly back. She was just in time to see Dariah’s body tilt at an unnatural angle, then go tumbling to the ground, his entrails following.

“You got your wish then,” Claudia said without feeling to Dariah, his face still lit up in a rapture of joy even in death.



II

Just a little earlier, Felix had more or less finished drawing up the plans for his defense network and had begun to consider the various forts captured by the Royal Army, when the report came of the surprise attack. He quietly set down his pen as he asked the frantic runner, “How many of them?”

“My lord! We don’t have accurate numbers, but it appears to be less than a thousand.”

“Less than a thousand?” cut in a veteran general, known for his valor. “What do they think they can accomplish with so few troops?”

There was a murmur of agreement from the others.

With close to three quarters of his soldiers engaging the routed Eighth Legion, the remaining forces were thin on the ground at present, but even then, they exceeded six thousand soldiers. That was a simple six-fold advantage. There was only one reason Felix could think of for why, even then, the runner was in such a panic.

“So it’s the unit led by Death God Olivia, then?” The shift in the atmosphere at his words was dramatic. The runner’s head bobbed up and down fervently.

“So what’s going on?! Right now, what’s going on?!” The runner cowered under the barrage of questions from the officers, but answered, nevertheless.

“Our forces are successively taking up defensive formations, but the enemy was advancing too quickly, and the Death God’s strength is so terrible...”

“So it’s only a matter of time until they reach us here, then?” Felix asked. Before the runner could say anything, someone else stepped out in front of him. It was Matthew, the captain of his personal guard.

“I swear on the honor of your guard, I will stop the Death God and her forces, my lord.”

Felix could not fault his spirit, but he also knew well that there were limits to what spirit alone could accomplish. Thus, he turned back to the runner.

“Please convey to each unit that they are to lead Death God Olivia here. Naturally while remaining in offensive positions.”

“My...my lord...?” Matthew sounded confused.

“I will put an end to this battle myself,” Felix said. There was a burst of cheering, mainly from the younger officers, extinguished in an instant by Teresa’s enraged shout.

“My lord, you can’t!” She glared daggers at the younger officers, whose smiles had not yet faded. It was all the more shocking for those who knew her usual gentle nature to see this fearsome transformation. The pleading looks the younger officers gave her, despite the fact that some of them outranked her, struck Felix as so funny that he smiled despite himself. “This is nothing to smile about!”

“I beg your pardon. But are you really so staunchly opposed?”

“How could I not be, when you’re drawing danger down upon our heads?!”

“But can you rule it out? At the very least, I believe I am the only one who can stop Death God Olivia.”

Teresa gritted her teeth. “But my lord!”

“I have made up my mind.”

The only option the Eighth Legion had to turn things around now was to kill the supreme commander—in other words, to kill *him*. And more than anything else, he could not stand by while his soldiers marched helplessly to their deaths.

Teresa’s eyes filled with suspicion. “My lord, don’t tell me you thought all along that it would come to this?”

“Of course not,” Felix replied, but he wondered if, in his heart of hearts, he hadn’t secretly hoped for things to come out this way.

I won’t think that my Asuran blood grants me the power to do this. I am ending things with the girl for future of the empire, that’s all. So Felix told himself as he stood up.

The clash between Felix and Olivia, the culmination of the battle, was almost upon them.

Just over an hour had passed since Olivia's forces charged the Azure Knights when their opponents, who had 'til then stood staunchly in the way of the attackers, began little by little to fall back. The soldiers of the Eighth Legion had no idea what to make of the path forward that suddenly materialized before them, but they did not lower their guards. All of them knew that a moment's weakness could spell naught but death.

Claudia and Ashton brought up the rear of the formation along with Riful, there to protect the latter. As the three of them rode alongside Olivia, Claudia cast her gaze left and right, then murmured, "What do you think they're doing?"

The Azure Knights gave no indication that they had lost the will to fight. On the contrary, it appeared as though were trying to lead the Eighth Legion somewhere. It just so happened that this *somewhere* was the same location that Olivia was aiming for.

"It looks like Felix wants to end things with me too, doesn't it?" Olivia replied. Ever since the first time she had laid eyes on him at Kier Fortress, Olivia had sensed with the force of something like destiny that one day this day would come. She was sure Felix felt the same.

"I agree, General," Claudia replied.

"So by chance, everything played out just as we wanted..." Ashton murmured to himself.

"No one on this earth...can beat Ultra Master Olivia."

Olivia took in all their remarks in silence, her gaze fixed ahead. She didn't slow down, wanting to ascertain the situation. At last, when she judged their enemy was not going to attack, she looked down at Comet. Through the bond of friendship they shared, the horse understood what she wanted and slowed to a walk.

"Let's go slow from here."

The abnormal scene that played out as Olivia approached Felix's command camp would later go down in history. Though the Azure Knights bristled with

hostility, Olivia's forces faced no resistance as they passed through as sedately as though they were out on a pleasure ride, with the pleasant clip clop of the horse's hooves completing the picture. The maelstrom of bloodshed that had stormed just earlier took on the quality of a dream.

Here we are. The Azure Knights' command camp, wide open, came into view, and Olivia saw Felix standing majestically before it, an enormous imperial flag raised behind him. It seemed to her as though he bore the whole of the empire on his shoulders. With a last warning from Claudia not to let her guard down, Olivia slipped nimbly from Comet's saddle.

Comet reared up, whinnying as though in warning, making Olivia laugh. "Don't you worry. I'll be okay." Olivia lightly scratched the horse's back. Then, she turned back to face Felix.

III

"Despite being our second meeting, this is our first conversation, is it not?"

"Yep, that's right. Ever since that first time we met, I thought we'd end up here one day."

"What a coincidence. I felt the same way." The two smiled at one another, then, as though it had been choreographed, both drew their swords.

Ashton, seeing the greatest warrior in the imperial army for the first time, was struck first by Felix's almost uncannily beautiful features. He seemed all the more regal for how he stood before Olivia, the feared Death God, with perfect calm.

"Olivia will win, right?" The words slipped out of him, drawn by a fear he had never felt before. But Claudia didn't reply. He looked and saw her face had gone distinctly stiff. Sweat beaded on her brow. "Colonel Claudia..."

"I can feel it now too," she said. "The Odic force coming off of that man is something terrible."

"Odic force? That mysterious power inside you?" Claudia had told Ashton about Odh once before, and he had listened half-disbelieving. But when he

thought of how Olivia fought, how it tore out the foundations of common sense, he had no choice but to believe it. Just as the army accepted the existence of mages without question, there were still many things Ashton did not know.

“Right. What I can say for sure right now is that the battle to come will be beyond anything we can imagine.”

“That bad...” Ashton gulped.

“Here they go.”

Olivia and Felix both raised their swords to one side. Next moment, there was a crash like thunder as the blades met. Every blow and parry sent a wave of vibrations out through the air around them. In the time it took to blink, their blades flashed countless paths through the air, then, storing power through her whole body like a spring, Olivia leapt high into the sky. Felix shot up after her, and they exchanged another series of blows, this time including punches and kicks. The two of them hit the ground at the same time, springing apart.

“You’re no stranger to fighting. I suppose you are of the Deep Folk after all.”

“Huh? Does that mean you’re one of those Asura, Felix?” Olivia asked. It was such an unexpected question that Felix was genuinely taken aback. If Olivia knew that name, that had to mean one of the Asura had already tried to engage her. That Olivia was still here regardless could only mean that the assassination attempt had failed.

“I know of them, but I am certainly not one of them,” he said emphatically. There was nothing more repulsive to him than being grouped in with that detestable league of assassins.

Olivia cocked her head, looking puzzled. “Oh...” she said. “Just in case, you don’t know Z, do you?”

“Z...?”

“Yes, the God of Death. I’ve been searching, but I can’t seem to find it anywhere.” Olivia went on to give a detailed explanation of the distinguishing features of this “Z.” There was no way any human could fit her description, but Olivia’s expression was dead serious.

So the girl they call the Death God is searching for a God of Death herself... Felix remembered something Lassara had once said: “Behind the House of Valedstorm, there lurks some presence beyond human understanding.” She had been implying that death gods really existed. Felix had responded by dismissing them as figments of the imagination.

Surely not, they couldn’t really...?!

“Maybe you *do* know something?” Olivia looked at him expectantly, but Felix shook his head.

“I’m sorry to say I’ve neither seen nor heard of such a person.”

“Oh...” Olivia said, her voice low and disappointed. Next second, she vanished. Felix raised Elhazard in a guard above his head in the same instant that, like a black streak, the ebony blade swung down at him. The ground beneath his feet caved in from the impact.

Such terrific power! Felix thought.

Olivia put still more force behind her blade, as though she meant to shatter Elhazard altogether. Felix shifted his weight, turning it aside, then aimed a high side kick at Olivia’s unprotected right side. Olivia pulled away, shifting immediately into a defensive stance, but Felix ignored this and kicked straight through. Olivia went flying, but by tucking her knees into her chest and somersaulting through the air she was able to soften the impact. She alighted gently back on the ground, unscathed. Felix didn’t leave her time to catch her breath. He used Swift Step just as Olivia did the same. They crossed swords, backed away, then closed in once more, blade reconnecting with blade. The scenery around them reduced to a single stream as their blows violently shook both the firmament and the heavens.

For now it looks like I have the edge in physical combat, but Olivia is undeniably more agile than I. She really is a tough opponent. I’m not getting anywhere like this... Felix leapt back to put distance between Olivia and himself once more, then returned Elhazard to its scabbard. He then crouched down low, letting out a quiet breath as he did so.

At the sight of Felix sheathing his sword, Olivia cocked her head for a second.

But sensing the same unnatural aura coming off him, she immediately shifted her stance to meet an oncoming attack. She watched Felix like a hawk when there came a noise of impact that seemed to rise up from the pit of her stomach, and he vanished. A cool breeze wove its way across the battlefield...

Olivia's eyes snapped wide open. *Left!! A double right kick!!* She knew at once there was no time for a counter attack, and instead used Swift Step to evade. But even that was nowhere near fast enough. Felix's kick hit her square on.

"Ngh!" Even as she was thrown away once more, Olivia hunted for an opening for a counter attack. From behind her, she felt a fierce pressure, and no sooner did she hit the ground than she used Gale Swift Step. She narrowly avoided the first that came at her like a vast wall, taking a few flying leaps back to distance herself from Felix. With the back of her hand, she wiped away the blood trickling from the corner of her mouth.

That had to be Ultimate Swift Step, the highest level of Swift Step. I never managed to learn that one... she thought. *Felix is even stronger than I thought.*

Felix drew his glittering sword once more, slowly approaching Olivia like a lion on its prey. She had been so focused on the battle she hadn't noticed until now that fog was creeping across the battlefield. *Fog... Then that technique might work. Who knows how much of an effect it'll have on Felix, but it's worth a try.* Olivia focused her Odh to call up the illusion technique, Moon Shadow.

A thick mist swallowed the battlefield, blotting out the light of the sun. Just before Olivia vanished into its depths, Felix was sure he saw more of her, layered over one another. *A hallucination...? No, this is your doing, isn't it?*

Keeping alert, Felix raised his sword in front of him and fixed his gaze ahead. Then, like the slightest of pinpricks, he sensed a distortion behind him. In the same instant, he pulled away to one side, just in time to see the ebony blade stabbing out.

I didn't sense her at all in that attack. Just what is going on...? In general, skilled warriors were also skilled at masking their presence. And Olivia was of the Deep Folk, some of the greatest warriors known to man. It wasn't inconceivable that she had attained such finesse in masking her own presence.

But in Felix's veins ran the blood of the Asura—of those detestable assassins. For assassins, the ability to sense the presence of others came with the territory. His opponent here might be Olivia, but she was still only human. No one could extinguish their presence entirely, not so long as they still lived. It was therefore impossible that he would not have sensed her.

Even as doubts nested in his heart, Felix moved to strike back. He was poised to act when—

"Eh—?!" As before, he sensed no one, yet when he twisted his upper body away from the faint distortion to his left, the ebony blade slid silently through the air there. Felix quickly abandoned any thought of a counter attack, taking a single bound back. He breathed in a lungful of cool air.

It's not just that I can't sense her. That last series of attacks was clearly unnatural. The attack from the side had come immediately after one from behind him. Even with Ultimate Swift Step, Olivia should not have been able to perform such a fear, and besides, the nature of the Swift Step technique made it ill-suited to fine movement.

At any rate, unless I can work out what she's doing, I'll only be at a disadvantage... Felix gripped his sword, then took a deep step forward. He then swung Elhazard in a semi-circle above his head to place the blade barrier Heaven's Path. It covered a range of around ten paces around him. Closing his eyes, Felix focuses on casting out with his powers of perception—

—*Straight ahead!* For a third time, the ebony blade materialized without any presence behind it, but with the bare minimum of movement, Felix dodged it. In the time it took to draw a breath, the blade came again from behind him. This too he evaded by leaping backward in an arc through the air. As the world flipped around him, Felix observed how Olivia melted in with the fog then, as he hit the ground, the ebony blade struck yet again from his right, merciless. There was no time to get into his stance. Knowing it might be futile, he twisted his torso unnaturally, and somehow the blade only grazed his armor.

That was close. If I'd dodged even a moment later... He looked in the direction of the sudden sense of distortion he felt and found that the mark that should have been on his armor had disappeared without a trace. It was as though there

had never been a scratch in the first place. *What in the world...?* Felix's mind raced along, quickly arriving at a conclusion. *It's a risky gamble, but worth a try.* Felix summoned Heaven's Path once more. This time, when an attack came from the left, he deliberately left himself unguarded. The ebony blade clearly sliced through his side, and yet none of the pain he should have felt came. Now Felix was certain. *An illusion technique taking advantage of the fog... Of* course *I wouldn't sense any presence if they're illusions. It's an amazing performance, but now that the illusion is broken, I can deal with it.* He ignored the ebony blade that came slipping through the fog ahead of him, then carefully scoured the area for Olivia's presence. Then, he suddenly felt something off in a different way to the previous times. *It can't be!* He threw his upper body back as far as would go, in the same instant that the ebony blade sliced down in a graceful arc right in front of Felix's eyes, cutting off a few strands of his hair. He stared after Olivia as she vanished back into the fog, cursing himself for a fool. *Why did you convince yourself* all *the attacks were illusions?* he berated himself. *It's obvious from the nature of the technique that that couldn't be the case.*

It was practically impossible to distinguish between the illusory attacks and the real ones when he could sense. But while this might at first have seemed like a puzzle with no solution, there had to be some reason at the root of it.

Well, assuming Olivia hasn't surpassed the bounds of the law of cause and effect.

Felix narrowly dodged the now entirely one-sided attacks, his mind whirling as he searched for the solution.

No presence, nor any sound. The only thing I can just pick up on is that sense of distortion that comes directly before an attack... Distortion... That's it, I've got it! I know what that distortion really is! For anyone in their right mind, the act of taking a life was a heavy one. But the attacks since the appearance of the mist, with the exception of the one that had caught his hair, had all felt light, even bland. Felix's answer was proved right when he not only confidently dodged the next attack, but at last even managed to get off a counter attack.

As much as I don't like using this when it burns up so much Odh... Felix thought as he crouched down low. Then, he leapt up into the sky, sending the Odh he had stored up into Elhazard and then throwing it down at the ground.

The mass of Odh hit with a dull, heavy thud, spraying out around the point of impact to disperse all the mist.

“I see. I admit, I don’t know that one.” Before his eyes stood three Olivias all looking up into the sky. One was the real thing. The other two, Felix thought as he hit the ground again, had to be illusions. “So that’s how you were able to pull off such a feat.”

“It didn’t work on you in the end, then,” laughed the Olivia in front of him. The other two on the left and right were drawn in toward her until the three Olivias layered on top of one another and returned to being one girl again.

“I wouldn’t say that. I used up a lot of Odh with that last technique.”

“That’s funny. Moon Shadow, what I used just now, uses a fair bit of Odh too.”

They smiled at each other then, in the same instant, activated Swift Step.

“Colonel Claudia, unless there’s something wrong with my eyes, for a second it looked like there were three Olivias...”

“There’s nothing wrong with your eyes. I saw the same thing.”

“Then just what was that?”

“Some technique using Odh, I expect, but I don’t know anything more than that. All I know is that this isn’t a battle between humans anymore.”

“It...It really isn’t. I can’t even tell what’s going on...”

That the soldiers of both armies, after the fierce and bloody battle they had just fought, now watched Felix and Olivia in silence as though transfixed by a vision have Ashton the feeling that they felt as he did. He had prided himself that he knew better than anyone just how strong Olivia was, yet watching the battle now unfolding, it hit him that he had simply been deluding himself. There was no visible sign of the two, only the harsh, unsettling clash of metal on metal.

Despite knowing the answer, he turned to Claudia and asked, “Can your eyes

keep up with them?”

But contrary to his expectations, she replied, “Barely, but yes.”

“I thought so. They’re—wait what?! You can *see* them?!”

“Thanks to these eyes,” Claudia said matter-of-factly.

“Eyes?” Ashton turned his attention to Claudia’s eyes and saw to his surprise a glint of goal. He gasped despite himself.

“This is another example of Odic force.”

“You too, huh...”

“When I was a girl, these eyes scared my best friend so much she pushed me away, saying they were unnatural...” Claudia said. “Do they scare you too, Ashton?” She was still focused on Felix and Olivia’s battle. Though she appeared unfazed, there was a nervous tension in her expression.

In his brightest tones, Ashton said, “Colonel, I am not about to change my opinion of you now just because your eyes glow a little. Now as ever, I don’t know what I would do without you as my comrade. I hope that on this occasion you’ll excuse my lack of proper respect to you as my superior officer.”

Claudia was quiet for a moment, then said, “Thank you.” Ashton saw her smile gently, then he focused his attention back on the battle he could not see.

Olivia’s blade came slashing out of nothingness, leaving Felix no choice but to retreat.

So she’s still got tricks hidden up her sleeve. Of course, the same goes for me...but it still makes things rather difficult. Felix seized upon a momentary opening to put distance between himself and Olivia once more. He held Elhazard at his side, then sent Odh running through every corner of his body. When Olivia immediately closed in on him, he used Ultimate Swift Step, then, as a miniature tornado spun up around the blade, he used Elhazard to call up a Third Order Destroying Whirlwind. Olivia was sent spiraling up into the sky. Felix moved straight into a Fifth Order Rending Slash, unleashing a seemingly infinite number of slashing strikes at her.

“Now go to your rest,” he said. With his final blow, he smashed Olivia straight into the ground. The sound of impact rang out along with a large plume of dust, mingling with the voice of a young man crying Olivia’s name.

“Olivia!” Ashton tried to run, but Claudia seized him by the neck. “Let me go!”

“Calm down!” she snapped. “Look over there!” Ashton followed her finger and saw, through the clouds of dust, a familiar figure. He strained his eyes desperately until at last, when his field of vision cleared, he was able to make out Olivia.

“Hmm. I really can’t beat him on the physical side, can I?” She patted herself over to get off the dust. At this, all the strength went out of Ashton, and he fell down in a heap on the ground. Olivia looked at him in surprise “Ashton? Are you tired?”

“I don’t believe you...” he muttered. “You’re all right then?”

Olivia laughed. “Of course I am.”

Ashton took a good look at her, and noticed blood trickling down her arms and legs. It was a terrible shock for him. He had never seen Olivia bleed before.

Seeing Ashton staring at her gobsmacked, Olivia smiled and said, “There’s no need for that face. I’m fine. When you’re alive, sometimes you bleed a bit.”

“But Olivia...”

“Ashton, stop bothering the General.”

“But Colonel...”

Olivia met Claudia’s eyes without a word, nodding. She started to assess herself to ensure there was nothing physically wrong, sending Odh running out through every corner of her body. *Bones... Internal organs... Muscles... Yep, nothing wrong!* she concluded. *But what to do now...*

It would be easy if she simply used magic, but Z had been emphatic that she was not to use it against human opponents. Of course, Z had also said that this did not apply when her life was in danger, but it wasn’t as if she faced an

imminent risk of death.

“Oh! I’ve kept you waiting!” She waved cheerfully at Felix, who scratched his cheek and smiled uncomfortably.

“I honestly thought that last attack had finished you. It’s hard not to feel dispirited seeing you smiling at me like nothing happened.”

“Oh, but it wasn’t nothing. I took a fair bit of damage.”

“Yes, well. I did use Third Order and Fifth Order attacks. If you hadn’t taken at least *some* damage, it’d be a sore blow to my confidence.”

“It’s because of Z’s training. I don’t go down easy,” she explained, puffing out her chest. After the drills Z had put her through, she couldn’t go giving up after this. If Z ever found out, she could imagine how it would sigh at her.

Felix’s brow furrowed. “You’ve mentioned that name a few times now, but now I understand...” he said. “So this ‘Z’ is the one who trained you.”

“Just so we’re clear though, Z wasn’t my master.”

“I don’t believe I suggested such a thing?”

“Well, whenever I have this conversation, they all ask if Z was my master,” Olivia said, pouting. She didn’t understand why. She simply hated the idea of people thinking of her and Z as master and student.

“Then... Setting aside the precise nature of your relationship for the moment,” Felix said at last, “I can see that Z is important to you.”

At his words, Olivia felt a wave of simple joy. It made her very happy that someone understood how she felt about Z, even if he was her enemy.

“In any case, shall we continue?”

“I guess so.”

Their blades flowed like running water to meet in a clash both beautiful and brilliant, that drew the soldiers who watched on into a garden of enchantment. When the battle, which seemed as though it might never end, did come to a close, it was not at the hands of Olivia or Felix, nor was it the soldiers. It ended when the sky suddenly turned dark, concurrent with a dry, echoing laugh.

“That voice...” Without thinking, Felix stopped in the middle of an attack, looking around him. “Chancellor Darmés?!” But he could not see the chancellor anywhere. He was, it seemed, not the only one who had heard Darmés’s voice. Olivia looked up at the sky, puzzled, as did the soldiers who were muttering among themselves.

“Hunt all you like, you will not find me, for I am speaking directly into all of your minds.”

“Into our minds!” Olivia exclaimed, for some reason sounding delighted.

“Now then. I have gone to the trouble of making this display for one reason only. Emperor Ramza has issued an official edict abdicating his throne and ceding it to me, Darmés Guski. Felix, I wanted to let you know as soon as possible, so I was waiting for you to finish...and yet, for all your bluster, you’re rather pathetic, aren’t you?”

“Emperor Ramza abdicated of his own volition?! That can’t be!”

“You don’t believe me? Well, that is rather awkward. We’ve already had the coronation...”

“Wha...?!” At a coronation, the new emperor accepted the crown from the old, then proclaimed their ascension before an assembly of the highest ranking nobles. Darmés would not tell a lie so easily exposed, so Felix could not immediately dismiss the claim as some game of the chancellor’s. He was struggling to find two words to string together when his ears caught a hushed conversation between some of the soldiers.

“...Truth is, there’s something I saw.”

“What’s what you’ve seen got to do with this?”

“It was in front of Marshal Gladden’s grave, he...Chancellor Darmés, that is, was there laughing, like he was happy. And there was this pale light coming off him. Still scares me stiff thinking about it.”

“Pale light? That sounds like the chancellor‘s some kind of mage.”

Felix felt as though he had been struck by lightning. In the same moment, it all came together: the changes in Ramza these past years, Gladden’s sudden

death, and now, like the final piece of the puzzle slotting into place, this phenomenon seemingly fueled by magecraft. At that moment, he had no hard proof. But Felix was convinced that all the inscrutable occurrences leading up to this were tied to Darmés.

"You blackguard!"

"Oh my. Hurling abuse at your new emperor? Such flagrant disrespect!"

"You will tell me whether Emperor Ramza is safe!"

"*Former* Emperor Ramza. I am showing him every courtesy, of course..." Darmés paused. "But it would seem he has little intention of following his new emperor."

When Felix stayed stonily silent, Darmés said, "But that matters not. I am already halfway to my goal, and it is only a matter of time until the Chalice of Darkness brims over. It is a little earlier than I planned for, but Felix, you may now consider your duties at an end." His high laugh echoed in the dark sky, then, without warning, the ground began to tremble. It subsided before too long, but then—

"Is this a nightmare?" whispered one of the soldiers, lips trembling. From all around them, *things* crawled up from out of the ground: armor, more rust than metal, bodies with the flesh hanging from the bones, ghastly wails that cut to the soul. One after another, the grotesque figures came squirming out of the earth—yet though they were grotesque, it was impossible to doubt from their appearances that they had once been human. Not only the soldiers of the Eighth Legion, but even the empire's most elite Azure Knights could only stand and stare as the dead rose before them, as though brought from hell by a hunger for fresh life. The scene was simply too utterly divorced from reality.

"Olivia," Felix said at length, "What do you say to a temporary truce?"

"That sounds good. It looks like those things are going after living humans."

Standing to cover the other's back, they each sent word of the truce to their allies. The soldiers of both armies were moving about this way and that in a state of utter confusion.

"You understand the situation. I propose that you and I take the front line and

fight.”

“No complaints from me.”

“But in that case, we’d need someone else to take command of the larger army...”

Under abnormal conditions, a commander became more necessary than ever. Swords swinging everywhere without order would only fuel the confusion. The Azure Knights were lucky to have excellent commanders going spare, but Felix had serious doubts about their ability to handle a crisis. What was required more than anything was clear-headed thinking. They would also need to take the helm of the Eighth Legion in order to avoid confusion in the chain of command. Unfortunately, there were few commanders Felix trusted to make good use of the Eighth Legion against whom they had just been fighting. He did not even have any guarantee that the Eighth Legion would follow orders. If humans were clever enough to always put their reason before their emotions, after all, there would be no war.

“Maybe I could choose a commander from my soldiers?” Olivia suggested.

Felix paused. “You have such a person?”

“I’m pretty sure they’ll be fine.” She turned and yelled, “Ashton! You were listening, right?”

The blonde youth she addressed looked up in open dismay. “Me?!”

“Well, there’s no one else I can count on.”

“You’re unbelievable... Pulling out a line like that when we might as well be wandering into the pits of hell...”

“Thanks, Ashton.” Olivia gave him a lovely smile, at which Ashton ran his fingers through his hair in agitation. As though to calm his nerves, he let out a long, deep breath.

“Understood.” He turned and called out, “Soldiers of the Azure Knights, you are to put your undivided attention into attacking! The Eighth Legion will concentrate on defending the Azure Knights. Then...” Ashton rattled off a precise list of commands. The Azure Knights were naturally nervous, but they

followed his orders, moving into a solid defensive formation. Felix felt a rush of pride in his soldiers that they had put their reason first.

“His commands were ideally suited to our circumstances and left no opportunity wasted. It’s obvious now that he was the one working behind the scenes in your shadow.”

“He is my prided tactician, after all,” Olivia said, throwing out her chest and nodding in a self-satisfied way. Felix turned to the horde of the dead that crept ever closer, raised Elhazard, and sank into a low stance.

“Let’s go!”

“Okay!” Felix and Olivia faced the oncoming undead and used Swift Step. Behind them, the Azure Knights set to work clearing out the dead to support them. Meanwhile, the Eighth Legion put Ashton’s commands into effect, putting their all into defending the Azure Knights. Three hours later, they had exterminated a thousand of the undead. At some point along the way, the sky had brightened again above the ground strewn with corpses as far as the eye could see.

“That took longer than I thought it would.” Felix let out a breath as he sheathed Elhazard.

“We can’t help that. I mean, it’s our first time fighting dead humans.” Despite the nightmarish nature of the battle, neither of their armies had sustained many casualties. This was not only thanks to Ashton’s well-timed commands, but also to the many excellent commanders who had reliably carried out their orders. However, that was not to say that there had been no problems. Those killed by the dead had risen again to join their ranks, and more than a few of the soldiers had hesitated to turn their blades against them. Dead or not, these were still the allies they had come with together through thick and thin. Setting aside such feelings was easier said than done. And Felix did not believe for a moment that this calamity would end here. Unless they stopped Darmés, the one behind all this, the same thing would happen again and again.

“Right. Felix, what are you going to do now?” Olivia asked, flicking the lumps of flesh clinging to her ebony blade to the ground.

“As much as I want to get to the bottom of the riddles Darmés spoke in, I am

more concerned about the safety of the emperor. Here, I have no way of finding out what's going on, so I mean to return to the imperial capital."

"But from what that Darmés person was saying, you'll be treated as a rebel, won't you? Will you just be able to walk back into the city?"

"I..." Felix trailed off. Olivia was entirely correct. The new emperor had condemned him as a traitor. He couldn't say he felt no unease about rescuing the "former" emperor.

As he stood there lost for words, Matthew and Teresa came over to him.

"I beg your pardon, but we took the liberty of listening to your conversation. We of your personal guard, along with all of the Azure Knights, will follow you wherever you command us, Lord Felix."

"If you were listening," Felix said at length, "then you know I am now a traitor planning on going against the new emperor."

"My lord, I think it was obvious after that exchange who is in the wrong here. I don't mean to boast, but ever since I was a boy, I have only ever fought on the side of justice. I have no interest in becoming the villain in this story," Matthew finished with a shrug.

Teresa added, "I agree with Major Matthew. Or do you intend to abandon us Azure Knights?"

"Lieutenant Teresa..." He found himself lost for words once more. Olivia clapped him on the shoulder.

"Sounds like it's decided. Is it all right if I come too? There's a little thing I want to make sure of."

"There is?"

"Yes. It's totally a personal matter though."

"Given the circumstances, it would make me feel better to have you with us..." Felix admitted. "But what of the Eighth Legion?" He could see the uneasy way the Eighth Legion soldiers gazed at Olivia. He could well imagine the upset it would cause for them to lose Olivia at such a time.

"For now, I'll send them back to Fernest."

“Yes... Strange as it feels to say myself, that may be for the best.”

“Olivia, no matter what you say, I’m going with you!” Ashton broke into their conversation, a desperate look in his eyes.

“And no matter what you say, that’s not happening,” Olivia replied.

“Why not?!”

“Because I have lots of other things I need you to do, of course.” Olivia instructed him to rendezvous with the main force of the Eighth Legion, then put his efforts into gathering information. Ashton opened his mouth to protest further, but a noble-looking female knight cut him off.

“Your duty here does not lie in following the general,” she said reprovingly. “I know all too well how hard it is, but here the correct path is to follow her orders.”

Ashton looked anguished, but at last, his voice flat, he consented. Ashton and the female knight each issued their commands, then set to work getting their forces ready to march.

“Just don’t do anything reckless. We’ve got no idea what might happen this time.”

“You be careful too, Ashton.”

“*I’ve* never been the reckless type.”

“I suppose so.”

Olivia saw plain on his face how much it hurt him, but with that, Ashton wheeled his horse around, then waved back over his shoulder at her.

In that moment, Olivia was suddenly overcome by a sense that he was disappearing forever.

Before she could stop herself, she cried out. “Ashton!”

He pulled up his horse, then turned back. “What?” More than ever before he seemed gentle, somehow helpless.

She hesitated. “It’s nothing,” she said at length.

“Even now, you’re still so weird.” He tugged on his reins, looking confused, then rode off. Olivia stared after him as though in a daze, until Claudia, astride Kaguya, called over to her.

“You made the right choice sending Ashton away, General. In all honesty, I have nothing but bad feelings about what we’ll find in the capital.”

“Yeah. Like Ashton said, we don’t know what might happen.”

This human named Darmés, who Olivia was now going after, had the ability to speak directly into people’s minds—the same ability as Z. This made him both highly interesting and deserving of caution. Claudia had the skills to look after herself, but not Ashton. Though Olivia had sent him with decent guards, including Riful of Fernest’s Ten Swords, in the end one could only rely on oneself. No matter how he begged to go with her, she couldn’t take him.

“I am ready, General.”

“I’m all good too.” Olivia mounted Comet, then drew up alongside Felix. They had decided that Claudia and another fifty soldiers would accompany her to the imperial capital. Without knowing the situation there, they wanted to avoid causing the citizens any undue distress.

“Isn’t life funny though?” Olivia said. “We were trying to kill each other just before, and now here we are riding side by side.” She smiled around at them all.

Felix gave a wry smile. “Very true. Allow me to say again that I can’t imagine a more reassuring ally than you, even if our alliance is only temporary. But we haven’t time to waste. Shall we be off?”

“All troops, move out to Olsted!” Teresa’s voice rang out like a bell. As if in opposition to the mounting chaos of the age, the sky was a vivid lapis lazuli blue.

Chapter Five: The Girl Defeated

I

After agreeing to their temporary armistice, Olivia and Felix rendezvoused with the forces pursuing the Eighth Legion under the command Balboa and Violet before pushing on toward the imperial capital. When the city at last came into view, Felix called a halt.

“It would seem that we have been exposed,” he remarked. Through his spyglass, he could see around twenty thousand soldiers all in the same black armor. They stood spread out in a line to deny entrance to the city. There was no mistaking them—this was Darmés’s personal army.

“What’s the plan?” Olivia returned her spyglass, engraved with the name “Sasuke” written in a flowing hand, to its holster, then looked inquiringly at Felix. Darmés’s army held a significant advantage in numbers, and the extent of their abilities yet remained unknown. Felix still struggled to believe the Azure Knights could lose, and yet...

“My lord, I ask you to leave them to us,” Violet interjected. “You should waste no time in rescuing his imperial majesty.”

Felix hesitated. “Can I really ask that of you?”

She ran a hand through her blonde hair. “Whether you can or cannot is beside the point. My lord, you are supposed to be our general. You cannot be indecisive. Not now. Oh, and please take that unbearable girl and her lackeys with you. They’ll only mess up our chain of command.”

“Huh?” Olivia stared at Violet, wide-eyed. “But that’s what I was going to do all along.”

Violet clicked her tongue softly. “Then hurry up! Off with you!”

Olivia leaned toward Felix’s ear and said in a bewildered whisper, “Hey, did I do something to annoy her?”

At this, Violet squared her shoulders, then forcibly interposed herself

between the pair of them.

“Very well,” Felix said with a nervous smile. “Lieutenant General Violet, I entrust you with supreme command over the Azure Knights. I would have liked to avoid friendly casualties, but at this stage, we have no choice. You will remain in this post until I rescue the emperor.”

“Consider it done, my lord. I have only heard rumors of the lord chancellor’s army, but they are still imperial soldiers, just like us. I will keep them busy until you return.”

She saluted. Meanwhile, behind her back, her other hand fidgeted restlessly as though she were trying to shoo away a fly. There was something so inexplicably hilarious about how Olivia perplexedly stared at that hand, that a snort of laughter escaped Felix. At once, Violet turned to him with ice in her eyes. Felix hurriedly assumed a serious expression.

“You have your orders, Lieutenant General. Now, Major General Balboa, you will serve as her second in command.”

“So after the Eighth Legion, our next opponent is to be this mysterious army of Darmés’s. I’d much rather fight them than the dead you faced, my lord, but even so, you put a lot on an old man without much time left to him.”

“Forgive a young man for always leaning on a brave old general,” Felix said, scratching his cheek apologetically. Balboa laughed heartily.

“Now that the bravest general in the empire’s said that to me, seems I’ve no choice but to whip these old bones into shape again,’ he said, then his face turned momentarily grave. There was nothing more Felix had to say to either of them. Both were officers he trusted. They would do what he asked of them.

He turned to face Olivia directly. “There is a secret passage known only to me. We will use that to infiltrate the city.”

The *Record of the Asvelt Empire* lists Felix, Olivia, Claudia, Teresa, and Matthew as the main players involved.

II

It was just as the battle was met between the Azure Knights and Darmés's forces that Felix and the others arrived before a cottage in a forest on the outskirts of Olsted. Nearby was a small lake where graceful water birds swam, drawing clean lines over its surface.

"Let us go." Taking the lead, Felix opened the door to the cottage. Inside stood an old man with a luxurious beard. For many long years, Chirac had been caretaker of this cottage. It was in fact five years since Felix had last seen him.

"It's been too long," he said to the old man. "I'm glad to see you well."

Tears filled Chirac's eyes. "If it isn't young master Felix," he said, voice thick with emotion. "The memories that brings back... But here now, haven't you turned out a fine lad..."

"'Young master Felix'?" Beside him, Olivia was staring in fascination. Felix ignored her, instead looking around at the inside of the cottage.

"Time is of the essence. Are preparations complete?"

"Everything is in order, m'lord..." Chirac said, then the genial sparkle in his eyes turned to a sharper gleam as he turned an appraising look on Olivia and her companions. "But who might these folk be?" Aside from Olivia and Claudia, they all wore armor emblazoned with the crest of Fernest. It was only natural Chirac would be on guard around soldiers from an enemy nation, even at Felix's side.

"You need not worry about them. I will vouch for them myself."

Chirac hesitated. "Very well," he said. "This way, if you please."

They followed him straight through the cottage to the opposite wall, then turned right to a door that Chirac pushed open to reveal a staircase leading down beneath the ground.

"You'll have need of these." The old man held out torches to each of them in turn. "With a new emperor taking the throne out of nowhere and reports that the Azure Knights have turned traitor, it's a state of unholy confusion among the city folk. And there's word going about that any nobles who went to Listelein Palace to express their discontent to the new emperor were executed. Now, I know there's no speaking of chance where you're concerned, young

master, but you'd best be taking care of yourself."

Felix thanked Chirac before setting off down the steps lit by torchlight. Teresa, Matthew, and the rest of his personal guard followed, with Olivia and her companions silently bringing up the rear. The path that led away under the ground had been well maintained.

They had barely gone a few steps along it when Olivia asked, "So where does this path let out, anyway?" She did not sound at all nervous.

"It connects to the inner courtyard of Listelein Palace."

"The palace, huh? That's nice and handy, isn't it? By the way, where's this 'Darmés' going to be?"

"Is it Darmés you're interested in?" Felix had been so concerned over Ramza's wellbeing that he had not asked Olivia about her reasons for accompanying him. Even so, he would never have dreamed that she had any interest in Darmés. Naturally the two of them could never have met. "What makes you so interested in him?" Olivia's soldiers seemed like they wanted to hear her answer too. Though he did not have eyes in the back of his head, he sensed their ears prick up. Claudia, who walked beside Olivia, was looking at her with a sort of agitation in her gaze.

If another commander acted with the deviance Olivia has, even if it's only in passing, it would have earned them at least a murmur of criticism. And yet... From all Felix had seen, none of her soldiers appeared unhappy with her. On the contrary, he got the impression they were eager to be of service. This girl, who could not be far in age from his own sister Luna, had already acquired that invaluable thing—trust.

"You heard Darmés's voice inside your head, didn't you?"

"I did."

"Well, the thing about that," Olivia said, "is that it's what Z used to do all the time with me." She said it so lightly, but this was not information Felix could take in without comment. At present, Felix suspected that Darmés was a mage, and potentially a unique type. That was the only way he could have made his voice heard inside their minds, like some divine message.

“Was this ‘Z’ a mage, then?”

“Huh? No, Z’s not a mage.” Again, her tone was so unconcerned that Felix could not immediately think of what to say next.

As if to fill the silence, Olivia asked what their next plan was.

“Let’s split into two groups when we reach the courtyard. Darmés worries me too, but my object here is to secure the safety of the emperor.”

“Okay, then we’ll head for Darmés and draw their attention as we go. That’ll make it easier for you to save the emperor, right?”

“Can I really ask that of you?”

Olivia grinned. “Of course you can.”

Felix was grateful, but from another point of view, he was putting his subordinates in harm’s way. While he agonized over how to proceed, Olivia’s soldiers’ eyes burned with determination.

They walked for a little longer, until at last Felix brought them to a halt in a blind passage. “Here,” he said. Olivia ran her eyes over the wall in front of them, then cocked her head.

“But it’s a dead end,” she said. In response, Felix laid a hand on a section of the wall, then pushed hard. The wall under his hand retracted out of sight as though sucked in, followed by a heavy grinding noise and a shaking as the whole wall began to slide up.

“Oh, I love this sort of thing!” Olivia cried in childlike delight.

“This will take us to the courtyard. Be on your guard.” Turning away from the beaming Olivia, Felix stepped cautiously through the open doorway.

III

The Elfiel Canyon

After meeting up with the main force of the Eighth Legion in the Elfiel Canyon, Ashton immediately went to Luke and the other principal commanders to tell them what had happened—Olivia and Felix’s duel, the words of the self-

proclaimed new Emperor Darmés, and the horde of the dead who had dragged themselves up out of the ground. He told them that they had a truce with the Azure Knights and were, for the time being, working together. When he had finished, everyone there looked as confused as he had ever seen them.

“Thank you for bringing us this news,” Luke said. “In truth, I didn’t follow most of it. It’s all too far beyond the realm of common sense...” His reaction was only natural. Thinking back now, Ashton knew he would have been skeptical if he had not seen that blood-curdling scene with his own eyes. In that sense, it was safe to say Luke was far more broad-minded than he was.

“After the Azure Knights who were keeping us penned in took off like that, I was sure General Olivia must have taken down their commander...”

“If only it were that simple. This whole situation is a convoluted mess.”

“We were just fighting the Azure Knights. No one could have seen it coming, joining forces with them—and that’s to say nothing of walking dead,” Luke said. “But, anyway. What do we do from here, ser?”

“First, we need to see to it that the First and Second Allied Legions hear what has happened. We’ll make our way back to Fis via the forts that the Eighth Legion captured.”

“Understood. But ser, I have to wonder if the higher ups will believe us.”

Ashton had tucked away a letter that bore both the details of the situation and the signatures of Felix and Olivia. For a blessing, the high-ranking commanders of the Royal Army were willing to listen to reason, but that didn’t make the tale he had to tell any less fantastical. If we were honest with himself, Ashton thought the odds of their believing him were split about down the middle.

“Take care of these.”

“Yes, ser!”

Though he still felt a little uneasy, Ashton handed the letter over to two runners, then, taking over command from Luke, he put them on the road to the royal capital. For two days they advanced, tracing the path by which they had come, until they arrived at the captured Fort Tezcapolis. Almost at once, they

were met by a runner from the Second Allied Legion who seemed to be in poor shape, for their face was pallid, and it seemed as though their eyes were out of focus.

“I bear a message from General Blood,” they said. “He understands the situation, and wishes Lieutenant Colonel Ashton to remain at the fort so that they may discuss what to do next, while the Eighth Legion returns to Fis as planned.”

Ashton breathed a sigh of relief. The letter had clearly arrived safely, and Blood had believed them. Now he only had to wait for word from the First Allied Legion.

“The Second Allied Legion will be here in a few days. In addition, with the situation being what it is, it is General Olivia’s wish that the Ten Swords all return to Fis as well.”

Riful, usually so expressionless, in that moment looked openly mutinous. “This is still...a battlefield. We have to be...on our guard. I will...stay as protection.”

“Come on, you can’t defy an order.”

The battle with the Azure Knights might be over, but Ashton felt in his bones that a threat unlike any they had faced before was near at hand. He was honestly loath to lose Riful’s protection at such a critical moment, but he could not turn a blind eye to a violation of orders.

“You don’t need to worry, Special Officer Riful. I will ensure that Ashton is protected.” With something of a swagger, Gile clapped a hand on Ashton’s shoulder. Riful’s eyes swept over him suspiciously, then she let out a massive sigh.

“Hey, that’s mean!”

The next morning, the Eighth Legion set off once more for Fis with Luke at the helm. Riful and the badly injured Gauss went with them, though the former remained reluctant to part with Ashton to the last. Remaining at Fort Tezcapolis were Ashton, Gile, Ellis, Evanson, and another five hundred soldiers.

“They’re gone...” Ashton murmured, lowering the hand he had been waving after them. Gile’s shoulders quivered as he burst out laughing. “What’s so funny?”

“Oh, nothing...” Gile replied. “Only, doesn’t the two of us being here like this bring back memories? It’s just a different fort.”

Gile had to be thinking of the time they had spent at Fort Lamburke. “I suppose,” Ashton replied shortly.

“Back then, a pack of bandits had us shaking in our boots. Now look at us. Not even two years later and we’ve really moved up in the world. If we could’ve seen us now back then, I bet our heads would’ve imploded.” Gile gave another hearty laugh, but there was a nostalgic note in his voice. Ashton, who thought of Gile a little like a rash he couldn’t get rid of, stared at other man’s profile.

“Probably,” he agreed. “You’ve really come into your own, Gile.”

Even now, Gile put himself through a grueling training regimen. It was extraordinary to Ashton that he had risen so far with only the desire to follow Olivia into battle as his original motivation—even if he had been blessed with a natural talent for battle.

“Whereas you, Ashton...” Gile said. “You might be an important man now, but on the inside, you’ve hardly changed at all.”

“Um, what? You’re supposed to say, ‘You’ve come into your own too’.”

Gile burst out laughing and Ashton, drawn in by him, laughed as well. They chuckled together for a while, then fell silent. It wasn’t an awkward silence, but rather comfortable, like a spring breeze.

“Gile,” Ashton said abruptly.

“Huh?”

“Do...do you love Olivia?”

Gile was quiet for moment. “To me, she has always been a person I revered. Love and hate are feelings from a different world. Nothing could make me happier than being at her side, than being of service to her. Now,” he went on, “what about you?”

Ashton looked distantly up at the sky. “I... Yes, I think I do love her.”

“You *think?* Vague as ever, aren’t you?”

“Well, I can’t help it. This is the first time I’ve ever felt this way.”

Gile gaped at him in disbelief. “No! First love? At your age?!”

“Sorry.”

“It’s nothing to apologize for,” Gile said. “But there is that thing everyone says, you know. That first love never bears fruit.”

“What?! Do they really say that?!”

“I mean, I wouldn’t worry about it. It’s major progress that you were able to honestly say how you feel just now, seriously.”

Ashton groaned. “Condescending as ever about this sort of thing, aren’t you?”

“Look, when you find yourself talking to a twenty-one year old man in love for the first time, you can’t help feeling a bit superior. Unlike you, I’ve had my share of experience.”

“Uh huh, do tell me more.”

“I mean, where these matters are concerned, you’re so beyond clueless you’re practically a menace. It’s all well and good if you scrounge up a bit of courage to tell her how you feel, but with all that I know, I can’t help but have mixed feelings, myself.”

“So you *do* love Olivia?”

“Where did you get that out of this conversation? Only...” Gile trailed off.

“Only what?” Ashton prompted him.

Gile’s eyes moved this way and that as he ran his fingers through is hair as though in irritation. “No, you figure it out yourself,” he said at last.

“Excuse me? After all that hinting, that’s all you give me? Actually, now you mention it, Ellis said something similar to me before.” He paused, then added, “Time to pull rank, is it?”

He cleared his throat loudly, at which Gile clicked his heels together and

saluted. “I would ask that you refrain from doing so, ser! My soldiers will be waiting for me. Allow me to excuse myself!” And with that, he fled into the fort.

Ashton scratched his cheek. Gile, it seemed, had not gotten his joke. *Oh, well. I’m not going to tell her how I feel right now. That’ll come when everything’s over.*

IV

After confirming there was not another soul nearby, Felix emerged into the inner courtyard of Listelein Palace. The sun had set while they were in the underground passage, and the cloak of night wrapped them in its embrace.

“We’ll split into two groups here, as we discussed.”

“Right,” Olivia said. “Thanks for this.” She waved the piece of paper in her hand, a floorplan of Listelein Palace that Felix had drawn up.

“I know I’m putting a lot of pressure on you.”

Felix, if he were to let his true feelings be known, did not want Olivia and her soldiers to kill his comrades, even in service of rescuing Ramza. They now all wore hooded cloaks, meaning it would not be immediately obvious that they were from Fernest, but any guards who spotted suspicious figures sneaking about under cover of darkness would not hesitate to try and eliminate them. Then, Olivia and the others would of course draw their blades in self-defense. Felix wished for them to stop at incapacitating any attackers, but stopping oneself from killing an attacker who themselves fully intended to kill required no small amount of skill. Olivia was more than capable, but it was not fair to her soldiers to demand the same of them. There was nothing more Felix could say.

Olivia, however, saw through his concerns. “Don’t worry,” she said. “We’ll do our best not to kill anyone in the palace. My goal here is meeting Darmés, not conquering the castle.”

Felix thanked her, though the implication that if conquering the castle *were* her goal, she could have done it gave him pause. He deliberately refrained from bringing it up.

“And then we each get out on our own...”

Felix parted ways with Olivia, then, along with Matthew and his personal guard, made his way inside the palace walls.

That smell... The stench of blood reached Felix’s nose the moment they stepped inside. Looking for the source, he worked out that it was coming up from an underground room.

Chirac wasn’t mistaken, then. He hesitated for only a moment before making up his mind. He commanded Matthew and the others to liberate the people who had to be held captive underground.

“But then you’ll be alone, my lord!” cried a younger guard, stepping toward Felix before Matthew laid a restraining hand on their shoulder.

“Look after yourself, my lord,” he said.

“Captain Matthew?! How can you let him do this? It is our sworn duty as Lord Felix’s personal guard to protect him.”

Another young guard chimed in to agree, at which Matthew’s expression grew stern. The contrast with his usual cheerful temperament lent him an intensity that brooked no argument.

“His lordship has given you an order. Our job is to carry out that order without complaint.” He turned to Felix. “I apologize for them, ser.”

“Flee the palace once you have them out. Do not worry about me.”

“Understood,” Matthew said, then, to the guards: “Let’s go.”

Felix saw them off, then walked on, keeping close to the walls. He was headed for the highest floor of the palace, guessing that Ramza had been confined in his own chambers to distance him from the eyes of others.

Carefully looking over his surroundings as he went, Felix made it to the third floor, then stopped.

It’s unnatural how deserted the palace has been so far... Not only was there no sign of the bureaucrats who staffed the palace, even the guards who should have stood watch were nowhere to be seen. It practically felt as though he was being *told* to be high alert.

Could it be a trap? Even if it is, I can't stop now. Felix started walking again. Every staircase he climbed led to another complex web of corridors, until before long, he arrived at the highest floor.

There really isn't anyone here... The corridor was deathly pale in the moonlight. Felix went on, step by deliberate step, until at last he stood before the blue doors adorned with the crossed swords. He pressed himself to the wall, honing his Odh to enhance his senses...

One person, off to the right from the center of the room. As for an ambush... I can't sense anything. Reaching slowly for the handle, Felix opened the door, then slid silently into the room. There, as though one with the darkness, sat Ramza.

"Your imperial majesty." Felix ran to the emperor's side, saying in a low voice, "It's Felix."

Ramza's head turned fitfully toward him, like an old wheel consumed by rust. Their eyes met. And yet Ramza showed no sign of moving. His mouth stayed tightly shut.

"Your majesty," Felix tried again, but to no avail. Ramza's colorless eyes were like bottomless voids. It was as though he was entirely without emotion.

As though nothing had happened, Ramza turned back to where he had originally been staring. There was nothing in him of the Ramza Felix had once known. He clenched his fists as tight as he could.

Why didn't I see it sooner?! There were so many chances! He cursed himself, staring at Ramza, when he suddenly felt a wave of dread coming from his left. In the same instant, a knife came flying silently at him. He knocked it aside with his hand.

"You dodged my blade, did you?" came a hoarse voice. "You aren't one of the Three Generals for nothing I suppose. Or should I say you *weren't*." Slithering forth from the darkness, a smile on his face, came Darmés.

"You! What have you done to the emperor?!"

"I do wish you wouldn't make me repeat myself. That is the *former* emperor. And I see you persist in speaking discourteously to your new emperor."

“I will never recognize the likes of you as my emperor!”

“You may rant and rave all you like, Felix, but this is the way of things now.” Darmés took the imperial crown that none but Ramza were permitted to wear and slowly lowered it onto his own head. Then he tossed it unceremoniously to the floor. “Of course, I never really cared for such trivialities,” he said. “But my dear Felix, you must really and truly be out of your mind to have put yourself in such danger for the sake of *this*.” He gave Ramza a look of utmost contempt.

“You know nothing of his imperial majesty!”

“What could I hope to know of a man who has forgotten how to be human?” Darmés replied.

“From what I sensed before I came in,” Felix said slowly, “there is only one human presence in this room. How you concealed yourself I do not know, but it seems *you* knew that I would come here.”

“You were always so zealously devoted to the man. I was sure you would come to his aid. From the outset, I never believed a little scuffle like that would be enough to kill *you,* Felix.”

“By the sounds of that, you do not mean to simply let me go.”

“Of course not. I have not been waiting all this time for you to arrive, simply so that we might have a pleasant chat.” Darmés’s dark purple lips stretched out in a smile.

Slowly, Felix drew Elhazard from the scabbard at his belt. *I’m sorry Olivia, but at this point I have no choice. If I let Darmés go now, we will pay dearly for it later.*

Using Swift Step, Felix shot forward, Elhazard a blur as he swung it toward Darmés—

“How marvelous. Your abilities really are superhuman, aren’t they?” With an exaggerated gesture, Darmés clapped his hands together. A sort of shimmering, transparent shield comprised of six faces materialized in front of Felix, easily repelling his blow. Felix tensed his back, driving Elhazard into the shield.

“Are you a mage, then?” he gritted out.

“I suppose you would be forgiven for thinking so. But no,” Darmés said with a sneering laugh, “I am not.”

If he were not a mage, that meant he had to be corporealizing his Odh. But the amount Odh that Felix sensed within Darmés was not markedly different from that of any ordinary person. In other words, corporealization should have been impossible for him. Even setting that aside, it was a technique that required considerable skill.

“Just what *are* you?”

“Well...” Darmés said slowly, as though considering the question. “I suppose I’m the emperor of another worthless nation.” His lips parted, revealing dully yellowed teeth as he raised his right hand toward Felix. At once, Felix found himself thrown across the room by an invisible force, slamming him into the wall behind him.

“Goodness, you are made of sturdy stuff, aren’t you? I suppose what worked for Marshal Gladden won’t work on you.”

“I knew it...” Felix stood up, wiping the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. “*You* murdered Marshal Gladden.”

“My, my. You noticed, did you? Of course, he could have lived a little longer if only he hadn’t been so curious.” Darmés shook his head sadly.

After seeing Darmés wielding his mysterious power, Felix knew with a certainty that he could not leave the man to his own devices. At the same time, however, if he unleashed the full force of his own power, he was sure to harm Ramza, and above all else, he had to free Ramza from this place.

I suppose my only choice is to flee, he thought, then raised Elhazard up above his head.

“Do what you will. You are still going to die,” Darmés said with a lazy smile.

Felix slashed twice with Elhazard, drawing a cross centered on a point above Darmés head. The shockwave released by the blade shattered the ceiling, sending heavy chunks of stone raining down on Darmés.

“Forgive me, but this is an emergency!” Felix rushed to scoop up Ramza in his

arms, but the man moved not an inch. Then Felix used Swift Step again, this time heading for the exit.

“Oh, well,” he heard Darmés say. “Best to prune any sprouts that will get in the way later...” He braced himself for some obstruction, but nothing came, only a deep rumble over which Darmés’s eerie laughter echoed endlessly in his ears.

V

Olivia and the others set off in the opposite direction from Felix, heading for the eastern wing of the palace. There was a servant’s entrance on the floorplan that appeared to be unguarded. They were about to try and use it to infiltrate the palace.

“Just a moment, General.” Claudia, at the head of the group, attempted to sense through the door if there was anyone inside, when Olivia’s hand snaked out toward the handle. She knew at once what Olivia was doing, but before she could prevent it, the doorhandle gave a hard *clunk.* Claudia hurriedly cast her eyes around them, making sure there was nothing amiss. Olivia tossed the wrenched-off handle to the ground. Claudia gave her a reproachful look.

“What if someone had noticed us?” she demanded.

“It’s fine. I don’t sense anyone here but us,” Olivia replied lightly. She threw the door open, then strode inside without hesitation, leaving Claudia to hurry after her. Just as Olivia had said, there was no one inside, only a spotlessly clean kitchen. As Olivia went to open yet another door in the back of the room, Claudia grabbed her by the shoulder.

“General, I am begging you to show a little more caution!” she hissed.

Olivia turned back, the puzzlement on her face plain even in the darkness. “I mean, we’re supposed to cause a distraction, aren’t we? I’m pretty sure it doesn’t matter if they find us now that we’re inside.”

“Yes, but *your* goal is to meet Darmés, isn’t it? If they find us too quickly, that will make getting to him all the more difficult.”

According to the floorplan, it was a significant distance from their current location to Darmés's workroom. In addition, the layout of this palace was far more complex than Letitia Castle. Claudia argued that they would have plenty of time to create a distraction *after* they made it to their destination and organized everything properly.

Temporary truce or no, at the end of the day, Felix was still their enemy. Of course Claudia didn't say it out loud, but privately, she saw no need for such loyalty.

"Hmm, right..." Olivia said slowly. "Yeah, I guess so." Despite the noncommittal answer, she seemed to have accepted it. Claudia let out a sigh of relief. They resumed their search, but almost immediately ran into another problem. When she glanced at the soldiers, she saw a mix of nerves and uncertainty on their faces. It seemed that they were thinking the same thing she was.

"Doesn't this seem off to you?"

"Yeah," Olivia replied, keeping her eyes fixed ahead of them. "At Letitia Castle, there were lots of humans working day and night, but here there's no one at all. Maybe in the empire they don't work at night?"

"That's absurd," Claudia said, exasperated.

"It was a joke," Olivia replied. Then to add insult to injury, she grinned and added, "I'm getting pretty good at them now, don't you think?"

Claudia's exasperation deepened as the other soldiers all tried not to laugh.

"At any rate, we have reached our ultimate destination," Claudia said, lowering her voice warningly. "I trust you will not forget that."

Olivia's smile gradually hardened until at last, she gave a few small nods. After that, they continued on to their destination without meeting another soul.

"I think that's it..." Claudia said, looking around the corner with one eye at a towering set of doors. Olivia peeked out after her, obscuring her view.

"Even without any guards around, it took a really long time getting here, huh?"

Without the floorplans Felix had given them, they might still have been wandering lost in the castle's maze-like corridors. If they had had to face imperial soldiers on top that, it would undoubtedly have taken longer, which made the current state of things all the more unsettling.

"Right. From here, I'm going on alone," Olivia said.

"Why, ser?"

They had not encountered anyone thus far, let alone guards, which led Claudia to the conclusion that the same must have been true for Felix. In which case, a diversion was unnecessary, making staying together the obvious choice. The other soldiers all started making their wishes to go with Olivia known.

But Olivia only said, "No questions. You are to carry out your orders right now." Her expression had suddenly become frighteningly harsh. Claudia found herself speechless. Despite being always at Olivia's side, this was the first time she had seen her act in such a way.

The soldiers too looked deeply shocked at this sudden change in Olivia.

"Claudia and the rest of you are to go back and meet up with the others."

"But—"

"No arguments. Go!"

"Yes, ser," Claudia said at length. "Good luck to you." Cowed by Olivia's unyielding aura, Claudia and the others, still reeling, left back the way the way they had come. Claudia looked back reluctantly several times, but Olivia did not turn around once.

VI

I'm sorry I had to be so harsh. But what comes next is my business. I can't expose you all in danger like this.

Clouds passed over the face of the silver moon, sealing the corridor in darkness as Olivia walked along with even steps. Reaching a great door adorned with elaborate engravings, she traced a semicircle before it, then swung a leg up to kick it in its center. With an echoing *bang*, the door swung open.

It's empty... Darmés was nowhere to be seen, and nor was anyone else. The only movement was the curtain fluttering in the chilly wind blowing through the open window.

Is this the wrong place? But this was definitely where the floorplan showed... Olivia walked over to the back of the room. A moment later, her eyes found the staircase next to a towering bookcase in the wall that led down underground. *Maybe he's down there?*

She peered down the stairs, then decided she might as well go down them. There was no light, but for Olivia, who saw well in the dark, this was no obstacle. She took the steps at a rhythmic pace, then proceeded down the passage until, without thinking, she stopped as she felt a familiar presence.

Could it be?! In her mind, she slipped into the language she had always used with Z. Before she knew what she was doing, she was running as fast as she could. A faint light grew until she emerged into a chamber hewn cleanly from the rock. As she did so, she cried out as loud as she could.

Z!!!

Olivia's voice echoed in the chamber as a shadow that shimmered like the air above a flame turned slowly toward her.

A human who knows that name? it said. *Ah*, it said with an air of realization. *You are Z's plaything.*

Z?

Of course, you mistake me for Z. I suppose it is to be expected that we would look the same to inferior human eyes.

Huh? You're not Z...? Olivia was bewildered.

Seeing as you know that name, I shall make an exception, the shadow said. *My name is Zenia. I see that which is true.*

For all its similarities, this was not Z. As this became clear to Olivia, she felt the emotions that had threatened to burst out her wither away. Looking again with a clear head, she saw it was true—though it looked the same, its small mannerisms and aura were entirely different. More than anything, Z would

never have spoken to her in such an unfeeling way.

Zenia's gaze fixed on Olivia's hip. That *is the ebony blade Darmés spoke of...?! You fool! Why would you go so far for the sake of a mere human?!* The black mist that hung over its form suddenly roared up like a conflagration. Olivia looked down at the ebony blade.

"Z gave me this sword. What's it to you?"

There is no need for a plaything like you to know.

"Would you stop it with that? I'm not Z's plaything!" Olivia said, contradicting Zenia outright. She still wasn't sure exactly what she had been to Z, but she knew for fact it had not seen her as a toy.

How pitiful. To think that you do not know. Humans have never been anything more than sustenance for us. Your very existence is pitiful. Like Z, Zenia's face was blank, making it impossible to read its expression. Still, Olivia felt sure that Zenia was laughing at her. *But enough of such trivialities. Tell me, why have you come here?*

Olivia replied that she had come for clues relating to Z.

It is true that I imparted some of my power to Darmés... Zenia said. *So you came here thinking he might know something of my kin. But I am afraid I must disappoint you. Even I have not seen it for many a moon. I have no idea where it might be.*

"Oh..." Olivia said. "Then I suppose those walking corpses must have been your power too."

Walking corpses...? Zenia repeated. *Is that the kind of foolishness Darmés has been entertaining himself with? I swear, I shall never understand humans.*

"If you gave him the power, then tell him to knock it off. It's a nuisance for everyone." Olivia didn't believe for a second it would just be the once. Darmés would definitely do it again.

Why? Zenia asked. *What Darmés does has nothing to do with me.*

"You're not going to tell him then?"

Zenia kept silent. What if Olivia's dearest friends and allies were in danger

while she was wasting time here?

"If I defeat you, that means no more walking corpses, right?"

Defeat...me...? There was a pause, then, with a violent surge of black mist, Zenia burst out laughing. Olivia observed that unlike Z, this God of Death was very open with its emotions.

Good, good. You mean to defeat me, do you? What a fascinating human you are. You weren't that fool's plaything all this time for nothing, I suppose. I don't think I've been so entertained in, what, a millennium? Zenia went on. *Very well. I do not fight lesser beings as a rule, but I shall make an exception. Come, then, hold nothing back.* A great scythe materialized in its hands. That, too, was exactly like Z.

But it's not Z. It's not Z, except...I feel that same crushing intensity from it, Olivia thought. *I can't wait and see how it reacts. This time I'm going all out from the start.*

She drew the ebony blade from its scabbard, then let out a deep breath to calm her mind. Sharpening her focus to razor's edge, she sent Odh streaming through her entire body.

She began to shine with a flickering, silvery light.

Ah! Zenia exclaimed. *The glow of extraordinarily pure Odh. You are of the Deep Folk, then. I'm surprised to see you survived into this age. This only grows more fascinating.* Zenia paused, looking about them. *Hmm. In that case, this will be a little cramped.* It snapped its fingers. Just like that, Olivia found herself in the middle of a desolate plain she had never seen before. She wasn't surprised —Z had often used the same instantaneous transport.

What do you think? This should give you ample space to show off your Deep Folk skills.

Olivia didn't bother to acknowledge Zenia's words. Instead, she sank deep into her stance, holding the ebony blade to her side.

Swift Step of Shadows! she thought. There was a shriek of wind around and in the blink of an eye, she was behind Zenia, blade flashing out. But Zenia, without even looking back, casually raised its scythe to block her attack. Olivia was not

deterred. She unleashed a whirlwind of slashes from every angle, and yet Zenia deflected them all without taking a single step.

Then try this! She crouched, then shot high up into the air. Concentrating magical essence in the edge of her blade to form a ball of light the size of her fist, Olivia somersaulted forward at high speed to slam blade and light into Zenia's scythe. There was a blinding flash of light, along with a bang and a blast of wind that swept across the wilds. Olivia quickly moved back to see the effects of her attack. Her eyes found Zenia, standing there with its scythe over its shoulder as though nothing had happened.

I guess I'll have to do better... As Olivia raised the ebony blade once more, Zenia clapped its hands together.

Deep Folk girl. Z's little toy. You really are quite something, aren't you? I didn't expect to see you using magic. I suppose Z taught you that?

"That's not all. There's loads and loads and loads of other stuff Z taught me too!" Olivia replied, chest swelling with pride. She treasured everything she had learned from Z.

The only magic that survives in this world is that poor imitation they call magecraft. No humans can cast real magic. With the exception of you, that is... Z, you really are a fool. Don't you think you've taken this game of yours a little far? Of course, I never fully knew what you were thinking...

Zenia went on muttering as though it had forgotten Olivia was there. She didn't care. She used Swift Step of Shadow again, readying a Mantra on her lips as she did so while simultaneously sliding the densely concentrated magical essence at her fingertips down her blade. Cryptic runes appeared along its length as it began to blaze with light. Olivia launched into another barrage of strikes from all angles, but even then, she could not make Zenia move even a single step. The scythe obstructed her every attack. But after her final blow from above, Olivia saw the lower to the ground. In the same instant, she spun around, concentrating magical essence in her foot as she threw a kick as hard as she could at the back of Zenia's head. There was a roar of thunder as a bolt of lightning shot down, straight through Zenia.

Olivia hit the ground, then immediately leapt back, breathing hard. The cloud

of dust around her slowly faded, carried on the wind.

Zenia laughed. *Sword of the Sun with Thunderbolt Palm? I am impressed that a mere third-order being such as yourself learned to wield such magic. So is it Fangs of Water next? Or perhaps Windbringer Dragon? I am offering you up an opportunity here. By all means, don't hold back.* It taunted Olivia, showing no sign of being intimidated.

From what Olivia had seen, Zenia's movements were far from polished. Its defenses were sloppy and full of holes. All of this was a far cry from Z. And yet, Olivia thought, gripping the ebony blade tight, against Zenia, she could not win.

VII

The clouds that had obscured the sky moved off into the distance, allowing the enchanting glow of the moon to illuminate the wild plains. Olivia was at a loss for how to attack next.

What is wrong, Deep Folk girl? Will you not strike? When Olivia was silent, Zenia said, *Very well. Then allow me.* At last, Zenia took a step forward, swinging its great scythe a few times as though to test the feel of it. Seeing that the God of Death meant to attack for the first time, Olivia cast the defensive magic spell Lofty Citadel over herself. Her whole body was ensconced in rainbow light.

My, my! Is that high level magic I see you using on yourself? Then I shall humor you a little. "Observation", as our friend might say.

Observation... Olivia repeated slowly.

Do not concern yourself so. We Interdimensional Knights are bound by an oath preventing us from doing anything to cause the death of the humans upon whom we feed. Though of course, there are exceptions to any rule. Zenia had scarcely finished speaking when Olivia felt a nauseating chill. She used Swift Step of Shadows to put distance between herself and Zenia, only to find it waiting for her as though it had been there all along, its scythe flashing out from one side with a sound like doom. Olivia quickly shielded herself with the ebony blade, but she was unable to fully absorb the impact of the blow, which sent her

flying. Her back slammed into one of the great boulders that loomed behind her.

She choked, pain lancing through her entire body. Lofty Citadel had been all but meaningless. Before she could so much as wipe the blood that trickled from the corner of her mouth, Zenia appeared in front of her. Olivia raised a hand and released a rapid burst of flaming spheres, but they all passed straight through Zenia.

A mirage?! she thought, just before a carelessly thrown kick came at her from the left. She dodged it by a hair. Instead, the boulder took the hit for her, shattering apart with an ear-splitting crash.

As Olivia struggled to catch her breath, Zenia commented, *You may be a lesser being, but I see the Deep Folk in you. The way you fight is quite something. Perhaps I can excuse extending my observation a little.*

Zenia began slowly to rise straight up. Olivia slipped the ebony blade back into its scabbard, then clapped her hands together. She stretched out her Odh into a shining bow from which she loosed a continuous stream of arrows made from magical light. Soon, Zenia was enclosed in a ring of more than a hundred shining arrows. But it gave no sign of moving. Olivia swung her hand out to one side, then snapped her fingers. All the arrows flew straight at Zenia. There was a thunderous roar overhead that went on and on as lightning sparked wildly in all directions around the God of Death. Then, the world disappeared in a blinding flash.

Surely that did a bit of damage, Olivia thought, breathing hard. As the earth beneath her shook violently with the shockwaves, Olivia looked up at the sky now clear from smoke, never letting down her guard.

The Arrow of the Pole Star... Zenia stood there, unharmed, raising its scythe. *Now it is my turn.*

A ring of countless scythes appeared around Olivia.

“Wh—?!” As though taking revenge for her own attack, the scythes all descended upon her. Olivia used Swift Step of Shadows to dart through, deflecting them back with the ebony blade. But more scythes kept appearing as though to mock her. The onslaught continued, unending, until Olivia could

finally no longer maintain Swift Step any longer. Another scythe appeared behind her, swinging down without mercy. It sliced straight through Lofty Citadel and into her, forcing her to her knees.

Zenia alighted soundlessly before her. *You were better entertainment that I expected. But here even you have reached your limit, Deep Folk or—hm?* Zenia suddenly looked up. Seeing an opening, Olivia rose shakily to her feet, ready to try some sort of attack, when—

For now, it is time to withdraw.

Olivia froze in shock.

Can you not hear me?

Forgetting the pain from her wound, she cried out, *Z!* It was the voice she had longed for all this time, that voice that, if you listened past the unfeeling flatness, brimmed with comfort and warmth. How could she fail to hear it?

You surely understand in your bones that you cannot win as you are now.

But... Olivia pleaded.

There is a lake to the south of here. I am waiting there.

Okay, Olivia said at length. *I will.*

Zenia cut in. *That feels like Z. What are you playing at, anyway? There are many questions I need to ask you. Now show yourself!* It spoke as though it had already forgotten Olivia was there. But Z did not reply.

Screwing up the last of her strength, Olivia used Swift Step. Zenia did not bother to give chase as she sped away from the plains, and she made for the lake where Z had said it would be waiting, scarcely able to contain her excitement.

Her breathing came in ragged gasps by the time she caught sight of the lake surrounded by rocky cliffs. Even so, she called out Z's name over and over. The scene in front of her splintered into a web of cracks, then there was a noise like glass shattering as a dark figure appeared.

Z! Olivia threw herself into the arms of the shadow. The black mist that hung

around it coiled around her almost tenderly, and a familiar scent reached her nose.

You have become very human since I saw you last. Z gently wiped away the tears that poured unchecked down her cheeks. Olivia grinned up at it.



“I’ve always been human.”

Z was quiet a moment. *I suppose you have.*

Just then, Olivia, feeling something amiss, looked down to her right. “Huh? Z, what happened to your arm?”

Z’s left arm was gone. But Z went on talking without answering her question.

You have been cruelly wounded. Of course, such a thing is only to be expected...

“I know. I was helpless against Zenia. I don’t feel like I have any chance of beating it. Z, was that one of your allies?”

Not...anymore. Olivia felt somehow relieved to hear Z say that.

As you are now, you will never defeat Zenia, no matter how hard you try. Do you still wish to fight, even knowing that?

“As I am now...” Olivia looked up at Z. “Come to think of it, you said that before. What do you mean?”

Even if she challenged Zenia again after recovering her full strength, try as she might, Olivia couldn’t picture herself winning. Z was right. Olivia had held nothing back, and Zenia had fought her off as though it were nothing. The difference in their powers was too great to be bridged.

Yes, it seems you are not broken yet, Z said.

“Huh? I mean, I got really beat up, but my bones and my sword are all in one piece.”

Z paused for a moment. *And yet that area still needs some work.* It gave what was unmistakably a wry smile, ruffling Olivia’s hair. She closed her eyes, enjoying the feeling for the first time in however long. Z stroked her hair a little longer, then summoned its scythe.

Now it is time for us to train, it said.

“What? We’re training?” Olivia was surprised. She had not expected Z to bring up training under the current circumstances. Still, the word had a nostalgic ring to it.

“I can’t train right now,” she went on. “Honestly, I can barely stand up.” She laughed. Without a word, Z raised a hand over her and at once, her body was enveloped in soft light.

“What’s this?” she asked.

Your wounds and strength should be restored now.

“Huh? Wait, huh? My body...?!” Not only was the horrible pain gone as though it had never been, but she felt physically refreshed. She tentatively touched her back to find that the wound from the scythe was gone too. Even her battered armor gleamed like new. Olivia had seen magic to repair broken things before, so the armor she could understand. But she had never seen magic that could not only heal wounds instantaneously but even restore one’s strength. The thought filled her with breathless excitement.

“I didn’t know you can do all that so easily!”

You seem to have misunderstood, so allow me to correct you. I cannot heal wounds, nor restore strength.

“Huh? But my wound healed up, and I mean, look.” Olivia flexed her biceps.

I wound back time to before your fight with Zenia.

“You wound back time... Z, you can do that with magic?!”

Only a few scant moments. Z said it as if this were unremarkable. Olivia bounced up and down like a gray rabbit, feeling as proud as if Z’s incredibleness were her own.

Now it is time to train.

“We’re really going to train?”

I don’t believe I ever said your training was over?

“R-Right. That’s true.” Z had disappeared without a word, but now she thought about it, it was true that it had never told her that her education and training were over.

Draw your sword now. Olivia did as she was told, hurrying to unsheathe the ebony blade. *If you are able to master the swordcraft I am about to teach you, it*

will open a pathway for you to triumph over Zenia.

"Really?" Zenia had been so overwhelmingly powerful that Olivia struggled to simply take Z at its word.

Have I ever lied to you?

Olivia shook her head. "Not once."

This technique consumes Odh at a prodigious rate. If you can hold it for three minutes, even with your vast reserves, you will have done well. On top of that, it demands extremely precise Odh manipulation. If you make even the slightest mistake in its execution, it will cost you your life. Thus, on this once occasion, I will allow you to refuse.

Olivia knew very well that Z was not exaggerating. If she slipped up, she really would die.

Quietly, she closed her eyes. In the two years since she had left the Gateway to the Land of the Dead, she had met so many people she held dear. Her heart warned her that Zenia, who spoke of humans as though they were vermin, would destroy all of that. So it was without any doubts that she smiled and gave Z her answer.

"Z, teach me the technique."

Humans are strange creatures. When you have something to protect, you show powers beyond your abilities. It is part of what makes you so worthy of observation. Now, Z went on, *the final stage of your training begins. Ready your sword.*

Olivia felt goosebumps break out all over her body as Z twirled its scythe, giving off an even more powerful crushing intensity and eeriness than Zenia.

Complete this training. Master the way of the blade by which you shall devour death itself.

Olivia settled into a mid-stance, then held her sword flat, the pommel pressing into the palm of her hand. Z's scythe thrust toward her as Olivia launched into Swift Step of Shadow...

Epilogue: Cradled by the Sky in the Blue Hour

It's so noisy outside... Ashton sat up in bed, his mind blurry from sleep, just as his attendant Lochie came crashing in, his face pale. Ashton squinted at the clock on the wall, the hands of which indicated that it was the dead of night.

Still before dawn... he thought, scratching his head.

"Ser, the imperial army is attacking under cover of darkness!" Lochie cried. He took Ashton, who was still not fully awake, and shook him hard, Ashton's neck flopping back and forth. "Now isn't the time to doze, ser! Please wake up!"

"Okay, *okay*. The imperial army attacking...the imperial army attacking?!" The weight of the situation jerked Ashton awake, yet he still couldn't fully make sense of what Lochie was saying. The first thing that flashed through his mind was that Felix and the Azure Knights were at the gates, but then he remembered that, temporary or not, Felix and Olivia had agreed to an armistice. Ashton did not know Felix well, but from listening to him speak with Olivia, he had not seemed like a person who would casually break an oath. What was more, given the current chaos, it was hard to believe that he had the capacity to mount such an attack,

It's a fair bet that this is a different part of the imperial army, then... Ashton turned to Lochie, who stared back at him with the intensity of a starving beast. "But why would the imperial army attack now?"

"I'd quite like to know that myself! But please, you must get what you need and flee! It's you they're after, ser! Lieutenant Colonel Ashton!"

"*Me*? What for?" Even he could tell how stupid he sounded. But he was confused. Olivia, the thorn in the side of the imperial army, he would have understood. Why would they come after him?

With a look of desperation, Lochie exclaimed, "Obviously, they think your cleverness is getting to be a nuisance for them! Ser, there are imperial soldiers inside the fort *right now* hunting you down! Please, you have to hurry!"

“We let them get inside?!”

Lochie kept glancing over his shoulder as he replied. “Even at a rough estimate, there are over twenty thousand of them!”

“Twenty thousand?!” Ashton laughed weakly. “You’ve got to be joking.”

After the fort had been partially destroyed in the last battle here, its ability to withstand an attack was, put bluntly, all but non-existent. Ashton had all the same given strict orders that his soldiers were not to relax their guard, but there were still only some five hundred of them. Five hundred against twenty thousand was not even a fight.

“Lieutenant Colonel Ashton!” At Lochie’s urgent tone, Ashton slid hurriedly out of bed and into his uniform. He picked up the sword, entirely for show, that rested against the wall beside the bed, then Lochie, who was surveying the situation out in the corridor, beckoned to him. When they stepped out into the corridor, he heard angry shouts in the distance. Here at last, the scene took on the feeling of reality, and Ashton thought of Gile, Ellis, and Evanson.

“Where are the others?” he asked.

“They are fighting to buy you as much time as possible to escape. Please try not to make any sound as you run.”

Though this seemed unreasonable, Ashton followed after Lochie without another word. At last, his eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he realized that Lochie was not carrying a sword.

“Where’s your sword?” he asked.

“A sword? It would only get in the way,” Lochie replied dismissively. This was, in its own way, convincing. Lochie, after all, was even more hopeless with a blade than Ashton himself. All the same, it was definitely worse to go without.

“Use mine,” he said.

“I don’t need it. And what are *you* going to do after handing over your means of defense to your attendant, ser?”

Though Lochie had a point, Ashton still couldn’t justify letting him go on unarmed. He patted the knife at his belt to show Lochie. “If it comes to that,

this will see me through."

"A thing like that isn't going to be any use."

"Don't be so sure. I once almost fought a Norfess with this knife," Ashton replied, thinking as he said it that that had been insanely reckless. Of course Stacia had been horrified.

"A Norfess? The legendary beast? Please, ser, this isn't the time for jokes. Just make sure you stay close to me, no matter what." Though he kept his voice low, Lochie gave off the air of one who would brook no argument. As Ashton didn't have much energy to spare himself, he gave up on trying to persuade Lochie then and there.

As they ran on down the dim corridor, he saw through the window his allies under attack by large numbers of imperial soldiers, forcing upon him the dire state of things.

"Damn!" Lochie hissed suddenly from in front of him. Ashton looked ahead and saw a woman in ebony black armor with a sword her hand step out from around a corner.

Olivia's the only one in the Royal Army who wears armor like that. Which means...

Noticing them, the woman's lips curved like the sickle moon. She seemed eerie, like a ghost, and Ashton felt a dread that made all the hairs on his body stand on end.

"Wait here a moment," Lochie said, then he ran straight at the woman. She raised her sword imposingly, an ecstatic expression on her face, but Lochie didn't flinch. In fact, he ran faster. The woman's blade swung down with unbelievable speed, but Lochie slipped out of the way with ease.

"He *dodged*?!" cried Ashton and the woman at the same time. Lochie moved nimbly around behind her, took hold of the back of her collar, then kicked her in the back of the knees, dragging her to the floor.

"Wh—?!" Before the woman could cry out, Lochie put a hand over her mouth. Jumping on top of her, he put his other hand on the back of her head then, as though releasing a spinning top, he pulled hard with both arms. The darkness

felt heavy as lead as the woman's head twisted at an unnatural angle. Seeing her tongue lolling from her mouth, Ashton understood that she would not be crying out again.

"You aren't even armed..." he stammered. "Lochie, since when have you been that strong?" Ashton had thought that Lochie's only talent was brewing excellent tea. He could imagine the shock on the faces of the others who knew him if they were here now. Ashton was no expert in martial arts, but even he could tell that the grace with which Lochie moved was not something one could develop overnight.

Right. So that's why Special Officer Riful acted that way... At last, Ashton understood what she had been talking about. She must have picked up on the fact that Lochie was no ordinary attendant. She had asked about him in such detail because she had suspected he might be a spy.

And of course Olivia picked up on it. It made sense if she had said nothing precisely because she had decided he wasn't in any danger.

Lochie, meanwhile, cast a quick look around them, then said, "My older sister sent me to the Eighth Legion. Compared to her, I'm nothing special."

"You *sister* sent you to the Eighth Legion?"

"Yes, she knows you very well, Lieutenant Colonel Ashton."

"Wait, me? Who is she?"

"Right now, let's focus on getting out of here. The enemy seems to have made it further into the fort than I thought."

"Oh, um, right." The woman's body would be a giveaway if discovered, so they hid it in the shadows before setting off down the corridor once more. As the fourth turn came into view, Lochie made him stop. Ashton stifled his own heavy breathing, then peered out from behind the wall. He saw a soldier in black armor, perhaps a commander, giving an order to another group of soldiers in the same gear.

"I guess they really do want me dead," he said, trying to lighten the mood. Lochie gave him the most venomous look he had ever seen. Having seen what Lochie had done to the soldier with his bare hands, Ashton cowered despite

himself.

“This is no time for jokes.”

“Sorry. But there are five of them. Do we *have* to go down that corridor?”

Usually, Ashton would have checked the plans of the fort as a matter of course. This time, however, he had neglected it, thinking he would only be here for a few days. That had now come back to bite him.

“Unfortunately, all the main ways in and out are under enemy control. I thought they were yet to get this far, but apparently, I was overly optimistic.

“Lochie, have you memorized the floorplans?”

“Of course. Handling unforeseen circumstances is my duty.”

“Your duty...? Do I *really* know your sister?”

Any older sister of Lochie’s couldn’t be far from his own age. If Lochie was telling the truth, she had to have some connection with the military, but as far as he was aware, he had no such acquaintances.

“I’ll tell you once we get through this. I’ll act as a decoy to draw their attention, so you slip by when you see an opening. Once you’re through that corridor, it isn’t far to the exit.”

“But then I’ll be putting you in danger.”

“Don’t worry about me. Just focus on getting out of here alive. You’ll forgive my saying so, but alone, I can handle myself.” There was a bold glint in Lochie’s eyes. This was no longer the Lochie that Ashton knew. He nodded, overawed.

“All right. Hide here behind this pillar until I’ve lured them away.”

“O-Okay.” Ashton stood close to the pillar. Lochie cracked his knuckles, one finger at a time, as though checking they were all in order. After that, everything happened in an instant. Lochie was like a hungry wolf, closing in on the imperial soldiers before seizing the one in front by the hand and twisting it to the ground. The soldier’s body followed, knees buckling. No sooner than their head was down than Lochie’s knee slammed into their face, and the soldier, their face in ruined, went flying along with a few of their teeth. As the other soldiers gaped, Lochie didn’t stop. He spun around to deliver a precisely

aimed kick that smashed into the second soldier's temple. They were thrown into the wall, skull cracking, then crumpled. Next, Lochie turned and began to run down the opposite side of the corridor. A few seconds later, the remaining imperial soldiers bellowed with rage and set off after him.

Ashton quietly stepped out from behind his pillar, then hesitantly approached the fallen soldiers. They were still breathing weakly, but he imagined that would not last long.

He just pulled that off in seconds. Who is *that guy?* He had so many questions. But for Lochie, who had put his life at risk to draw the imperial soldiers away, Ashton made himself hurry on.

Ashton's attention was so entirely occupied by the sight of a door that looked like it might be the way out that he put himself in full view of another group of imperial soldiers.

I really am an incurable idiot! With the soldiers chasing after him, bloody murder in their eyes, he had no other option. He could only put everything he had into escaping.

And after Lochie helped me get this far! He had never set much store in his physical abilities. The sound of the imperial soldiers' well-trained foot falls grew steadily closer.

Is this...it, then...? He could no longer tell if he was breathing in or out. His feet tripped over each other, and he was about to fall—and in that moment, a hand came out of nowhere to seize his arm, before dragging him into a dimly lit room.

Thrown onto the floor with no idea what was happening, Ashton turned around.

"Gile?!"

"Don't just stand there! Get out the back door and run!" Gile swiftly raised his bow, loosing arrow after arrow at the imperial soldiers who came thundering into the room. All three who had pursued Ashton went down with shafts piercing their hearts.

“Then you come with—”

“Now’s not the time for you to be a bonehead! Hurry up and go!”

“But, Gile...”

Gile sighed. “Look,” he snapped, quickly retrieving his arrows, “I’m not so delicate that I need you worrying over me.”

“I know that.”

“Then get out of here.”

“I can’t!” Ashton insisted, obstinate. Gile let out a short, scornful laugh.

“I promised I would at least keep you safe, didn’t I?” He kicked down the door that led on, then shoved Ashton toward it.

“Gile!”

“I said go!” Gile’s commanding bellow shook the room.

After a moment, Ashton said, “All right. But you’d better come after me, or else.” Gile made a shooing gesture at him over his shoulder and Ashton, with painful reluctance, ran off down the corridor.

“He goes at last...” Listening to Ashton’s receding footsteps, Gile shut the door, then let out a breath that expelled all the stagnant air from his lungs. “Just when it looks like we’ll need his brains more than ever, it’s like he doesn’t even realize it. I just don’t want to have to see her tears...”

Ignoring the blood oozing from his side, Gile looked up at the new batch of imperial soldiers with a fearsome grin. The soldiers took one look at the bodies of their fallen comrades and pulled up short.

“Did he go that way?” one asked cautiously.

“Do you really think I’m just going to tell you?”

“Then we’ll just have to encourage you.”

“You’re welcome to try!” Eyes full of malice bored clean through him.

You’d damn well better survive, he thought. Spitting out a mouthful of blood

onto the floor, Gile nocked another arrow to his bow.

Ashton opened the rattling wooden door, stepping outside to be enveloped in a rush of cool winter wind. The sky was a deep blue. Before long, dawn would be breaking.

Gile, Lochie... Did they all make it out, I wonder...? He cast another look around him, seeing a row of small buildings, half in ruins. He had emerged near long-abandoned stables, it seemed. HIs legs were like lead, but he forced them forward.

As he pushed his way through the overgrown grass, he felt a soft impact, just as his body tilted to the left. Not long after, heat and pain flared in his right side. Looking to the source of the pain, his eyes found a woman with an ugly smile stretched across her face, standing as though to lean on him. There was a knife clutched conspicuously in each of her hands.

“Oh...” Without thinking, Ashton drew the knife from his own belt, then plunged it into the woman’s neck. She fell where she stood, her smile still in place and knives still held tight.

Ashton’s legs felt even heavier than before. *I have to go...* he thought, forcing himself forward, but his legs no longer listened to his commands. He pressed himself against a nearby tree trunk, then slumped to the ground.

He tried to apply pressure to the stab wound in his side, but still the blood spilled from between his fingers, dripping down to form a dark red stain on the ground. Ashton watched it dispassionately, as though it were happening to someone else, thinking, *People really do bleed a lot...* and then, *I’ll never live this down, after all the others helped me get this close to escaping.*

As if in reverse proportion to the lightening sky, darkness crept in around Ashton’s field of vision. Within his heart, his parents, Claudia, and Olivia, with her innocent smile, were a fragile light against the oblivion near at hand.

The little white flowers that bloomed around his feet turned a deep crimson.

That’s right... You wouldn’t have thought it, but...I always loved how...Olivia liked flowers...

Reality and fantasy blurred together, his thoughts growing indistinct. Drawing up the last of his strength, Ashton picked one of the crimson flowers.

“Oli...via...”

A single ray of light spilled over the horizon, announcing the coming morning. The flower slipped from Ashton’s grasp, and slowly, his eyes closed.



Afterword

Ayamine here. It's been a while. The tale of the girl raised by a Death God has entered its climax, and should safely come to a conclusion at last with the next volume. This is entirely thanks to all of you who have supported the series. Thank you so much!

Right now, it is sometime in April, and I am working my way through trial and error toward the conclusion. It will be a while yet before I bring you volume 7, but I hope you will stay with me to the end.

Now for the customary acknowledgments.

To Higuchi-sama, my editor. I would like to apologize again for my very late manuscript submission. I intend to schedule properly to ensure that volume 7 is in on time!

To Ciera-sama. Thank you once again for the lovely illustrations! I can only take my hat off to you for making Olivia's beauty even more dazzling!

A month ahead of the novel, the latest comic adaptation, Death's Daughter and the Ebony Blade Volume 3, is on sale to rave reviews. It's really good, so please do pick it up!

Until we meet again with the next volume.

Maito Ayamine.