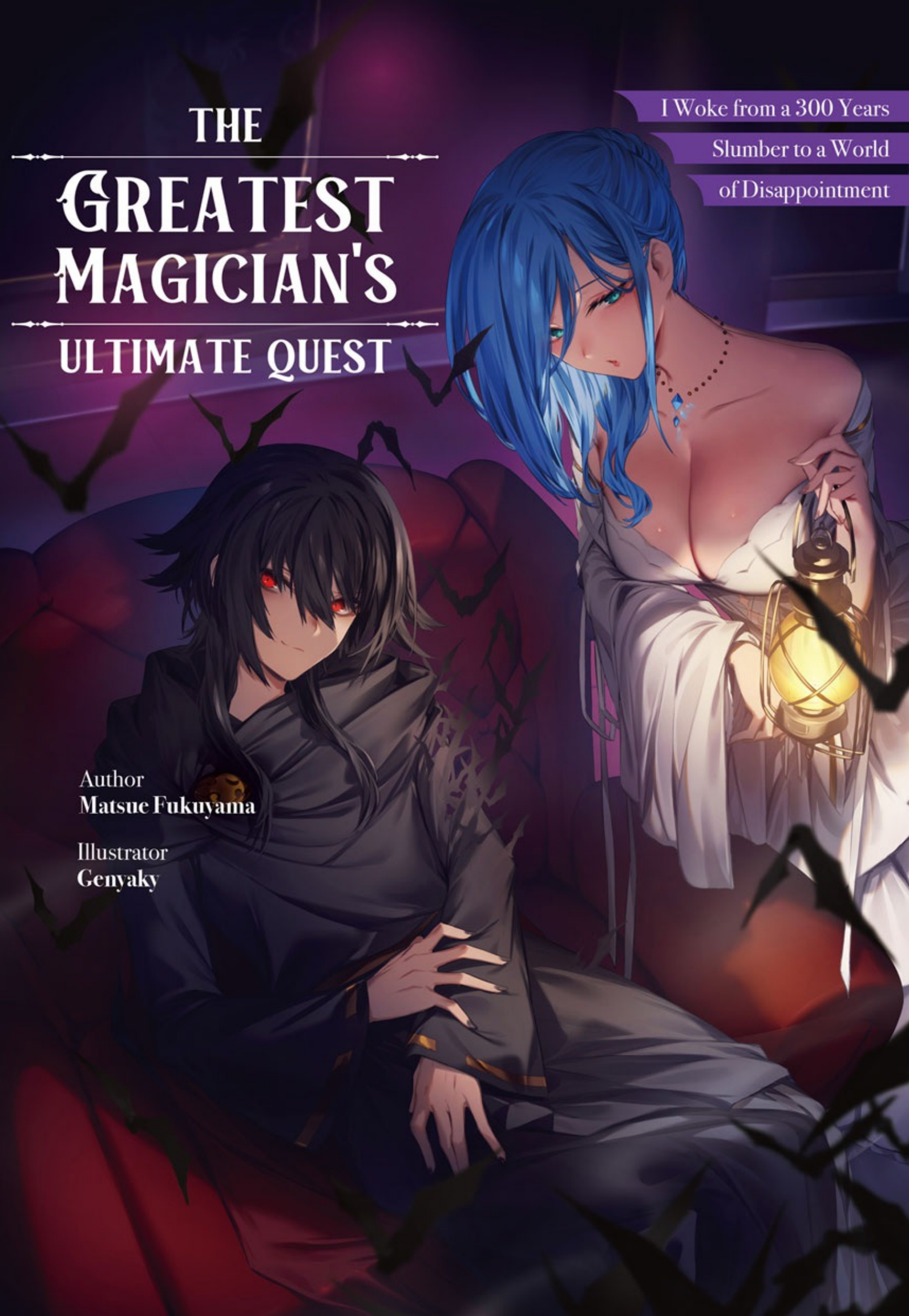
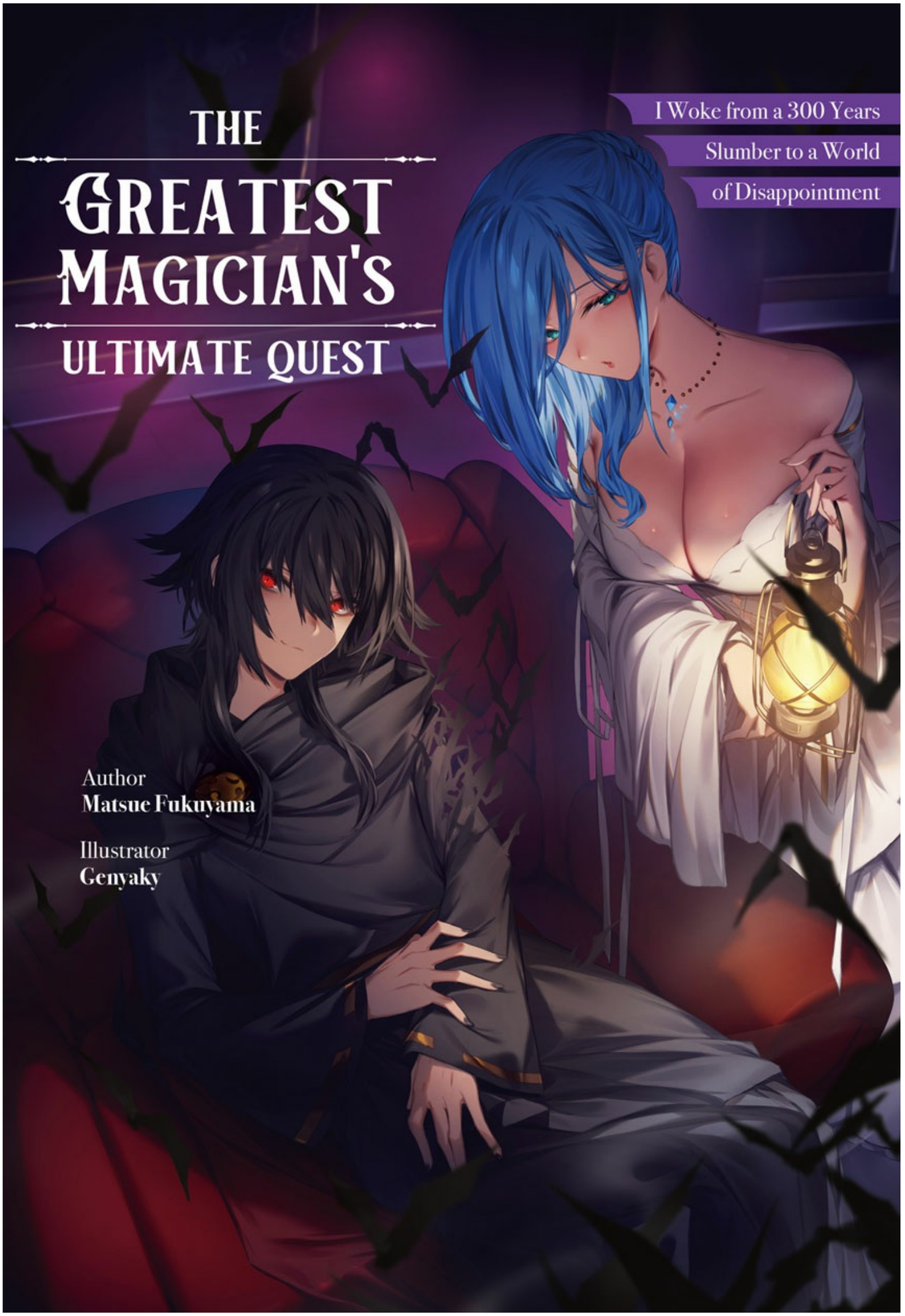
THE GREATEST MAGICIAN'S ULTIMATE QUEST

I Woke from a 300 Years Slumber to a World of Disappointment



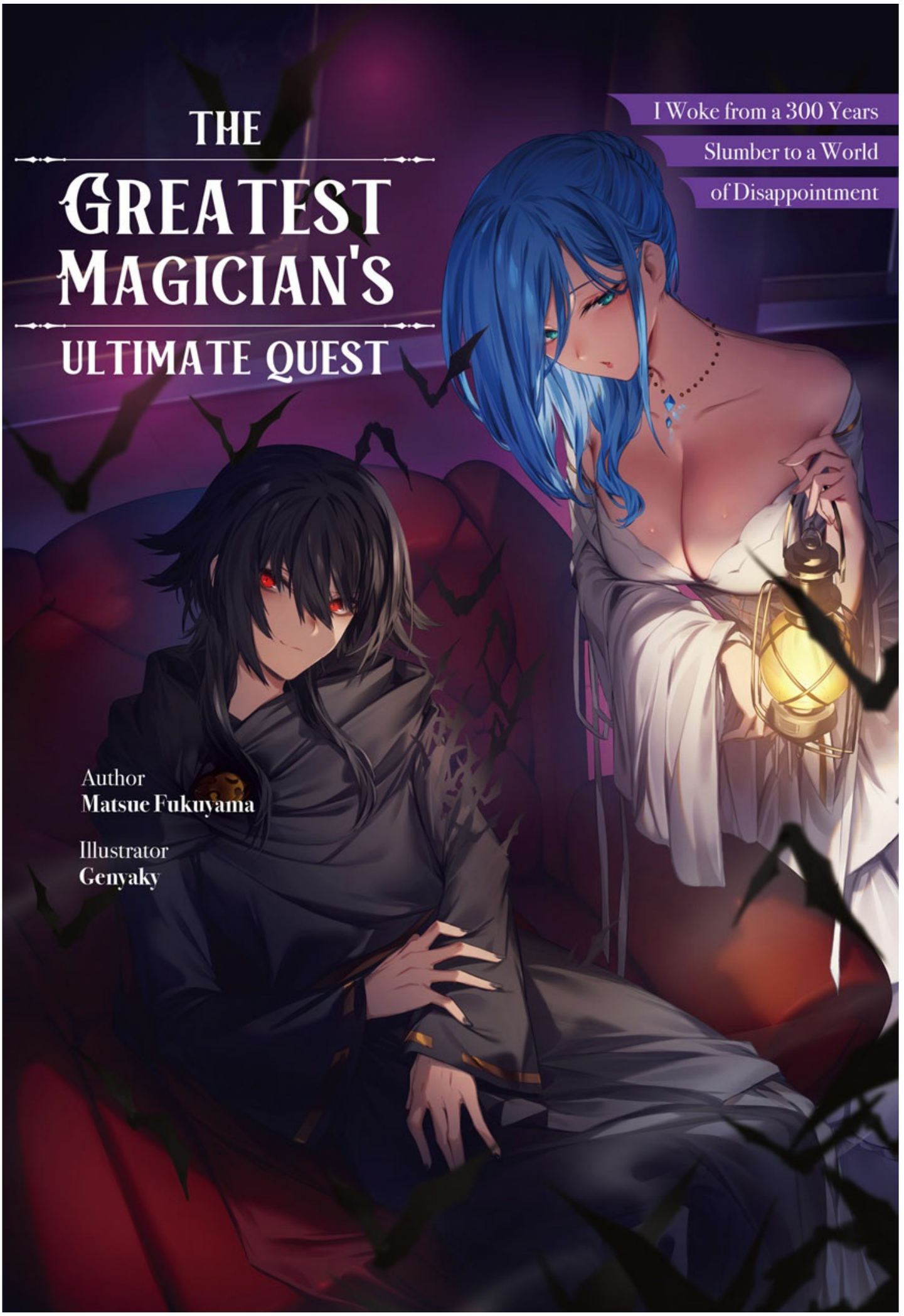
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The Greatest Magician's Ultimate Quest: I Woke from a 300 Year Slumber to a World of Disappointment Volume 1 [Complete]

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Prologue

There is nothing in existence so harmful as a king who's lost his self-restraint. That is exactly what I, Kai Lekius, could have been considered back then. I had tossed aside my duties and become engrossed in debauchery, engaging myself with women who cared only for my status as king.

Purple smoke floated whimsically about the vacuous cavern of my bed chambers. It was smoke from a narcotic I myself had prohibited in search of indulgences more depraved. The unrestrained squeals and laughter of the women echoed through the room. The women had the beauty and emptiness of glass, and I adored them all with equal disinterest.

Suddenly, bulky footsteps joined the squeals and laughter. They were from the royal guardsmen, about twenty of them, all in heavy armor. They barged into my bed chambers, led by a dashing young man: my half brother, Al Shion.

He was twenty six, only a year younger than I. We had come from different mothers but still bore the same face, and on his was a glare of unabated rage. Entirely nude, I sat with my legs folded and had the women move to the side. Al and the rest of the royal guard knelt on the ground, as though this were an official audience.

"Your Majesty, my elder brother the esteemed Kai Lekius. He who has mastered the arcane. Unifier of the myriad royal legions and their strongest magician. He who brought stability to the land in a single generation. Absolute sovereign of the nine circuits and two hundred and forty one provinces—"

"What's the matter, brother? You're being awfully ceremonial."

"May I ask why Lord Kai Lekius, for whom words such as 'magnificent' fail to describe, is engaging in such behavior?" Al implored, his voice and expression strained. Clearly, I had better have a good answer, or there would be consequences. His shoulders— His entire body was shaking minutely, causing the edges of his plate armor to scrape against each other. However, I responded in a jocular manner.

“I thought I told you. Once peace was brought to the land, I would devote myself to the study of magic.”

Al’s rage finally boiled over, causing him to shout. “And what part of this depravity constitutes magic research?! Please, brother, return to your senses! The people—no, even your retainers, are speaking ill of you, calling you heartless things such as the ‘Sanguinary King’ and the ‘Wicked King.’ People who respect you rather than fear you are now far in the minority. But I understand! I understand that the blood on your hands was a necessity to bring order to a world fraught with strife and conflict. It was not the intoxication of battle that drove you to kill so many.”

I cackled. “Forgive me, forgive me! That was all an act of mine. Truthfully, my conquests were nothing more than a means to gain the power to do what I want, which is to seek out greater pleasures.” My bare stomach shook with laughter. Immediately, all the women joined in, their own laughter less than sincere.

“You lie! How can I be expected to believe such a thing?!”

“I hear you, brother of mine. Pride prevents people who have been deceived from being able to immediately recognize it.”

“Brooother!” Al shouted, rising to his feet. It was a desperate shout, begging me to say it wasn’t true.

I went back to fooling around with the women, making my point.

“Is that your answer?” Al asked in a low, growling voice. Finally, his trembling hands went for the blade at his hip.

“You’re going to use that? On *me*?”

“We have only just unified the land. The foundation is still weak, and if our leaders should be corrupted, cracks are sure to form. And if we return to a world of disunity, then all the blood spilled up until now will have been for nothing!”

“Is this speech the extent of your resolve, Al?”

“I believe you’re the one whose resolve should be of concern, brother!”

Al's hands ceased their quivering, and in an instant, his blade was drawn. The light from the magic lanterns illuminating the room reflected off the naked blade. The women screamed and scattered like spiderlings. Only I remained on the bed, sitting still with my legs folded.

"AAAH!"

The cry had erupted from Al's throat. Maybe it was the vigorous cry of someone challenging the king of magicians. Or maybe it was the unconscious shout of someone committing fratricide. Whichever it was, Al attacked without hesitation, aiming a sharp thrust straight at my heart. He pierced all the way through in one impressive movement.

"Brother...why don't you dodge or resist with magic?"

"If I'm the greatest magician of our time, then you are the strongest warrior in the land. At this distance, I'm at your mercy." I answered with a smile while blood spilled from my mouth. It wasn't the malicious smile of a tyrant, but the genuine smile of a family member.

"Was I right all along, brother?!"

While my consciousness faded, I told my younger brother what needed to be told. I proclaimed it clearly so that all the royal guards could hear.

"This land, the Vastalak United Monarchy, is all yours. Take care of it, Al Shion."

I had spilled the blood of far too many soldiers and civilians to rise to the top of our chaotic world. I had united many by ruling through fear, far too many to make any pretenses of benevolence. Who would still listen if I tried to say it was all in the name of world peace? If everyone were as wise and empathetic as Al was, then the world wouldn't have dissolved into conflict in the first place.

And so, I had decided that I, and by extension the Sanguinary King, should be slain. In doing so, I would leave Al this land to lead with true benevolence. The world's opinion of Al was the exact opposite of their opinion of me. As a general, he was known by everyone for his mercy; as a chancellor, he was known by all for his graciousness.

That was how I had wanted it. I would dirty my hands with all that was necessary for unifying the land. I had always kept an eye out, making sure my younger brother, who was kind by his very nature, had stayed as clean as possible. From the beginning up until this theatrical transfer of power, everything had been part of my plan.

Ha ha.

Don't cry, Al. I'm also sad that we have to say goodbye, but I hope you can still send me off with a smile. Sure, I may die here, but my soul will persist. Through rites and esoteric magic, I'm set to be reborn.

I'll become a vampire—unaging, undying, unbreaking—and then, with true freedom, I can climb the rungs of magic. How does that sound? Can you think of anything more fun for the person who loves magic more than anyone else does? So don't cry. Smile for me in these final moments.

Ah, damn. Damn it all. Now I'm crying. Pathetic, isn't it?

Ha ha ha...

Chapter One: Rebirth

The World Three Hundred Years Later

For a long time, I slumbered without a dream, thus confirming that I had indeed died. However, my rebirth succeeded. I cast aside my human body and reincarnated as a True Blood, and in doing so, I was able to awaken from my deathlike slumber.

While lying inside the coffin, I opened the lid with a heavy thud. Slowly, I sat up, clenching and unclenching my fists to confirm my condition. Now that I was a vampire, my physical capabilities should be incomparable to those I'd possessed in my previous life. They should exceed anything a normal human was capable of. That is why I'd imagined some change in my senses, but I felt nothing of the sort.

Actually...

My senses *had* developed in ways they never could have before my rebirth. For instance, my coffin was in a tomb without a single source of light, and yet I could see my surroundings. No degree of magic proficiency let someone see in the dark unaided, whereas I, reborn as a vampire, was endowed with perfect night vision.

I was in a dreadful-looking tomb with stone flooring and walls made of piled stone. There were no windows to let in sunlight; it was cold; it was damp. A human would probably be shivering, but for me, the conditions were quite pleasant. This must have been another sensory change caused by my transformation.

"Fascinating. Let's try something else."

I stood up and left the coffin. Then, just for the fun of it, I looked to the ceiling and jumped up.

"Ha!"

With ease I touched the ceiling, which must have been around five meters

high. In fact, if I hadn't put my hands out, my head would've crashed against the surface. I could do that with no running start, just by standing there and jumping upwards. This was definite proof of the superior capabilities of a vampire.

I decided to thoroughly explore the potential of this new body. The tomb, which should have felt spacious, began to feel cramped as I hopped and leaped around, practiced punching and kicking, and tested everything my body could do.

Ha ha ha! Who would think it could be so fun to move one's body? This is what it must mean to feel like a child again.

I took a playful swing at the stone wall. I hit it with enough force to blast a portion of the stone into rubble, and yet not a scratch was left on my fist. Then came a hefty crashing sound. That must have gotten her attention.

Even through the thick ebony door, I could easily pick up the light footfalls drawing closer. Shortly after came a gentle knocking.

"Enter," I commanded.

Hinges creaked as the large door was gently pushed open, and there appeared a beautiful woman with blue hair that had a jewellike luster. She wore a sleek white dress that boldly exposed her shoulders and the top of her chest, outlining her shapely breasts, and her perfectly arranged face bore a mature expression. One might think her beauty to be inhuman, but that was only natural; she was a magical doll I had built to be my servant.

"I sensed your awakening and came at once. My lord, please allow your humble servant Lelesha to offer her deepest congratulations on your reincarnation."

"My thanks," I said to Lelesha, who had knelt before me. "I truly appreciate you faithfully keeping watch over my coffin."

"You honor me, my lord. However"—the formal tone and attitude Lelesha had maintained began to crumble, and she let out a low giggle—"it was a pleasure to be able to gaze upon your darling sleeping countenance every day."

"Ha ha, you jest! I see you haven't developed a filter while I was asleep."

“No, my lord, I jest not. I’m sure you’ll understand if you cast your eyes on this mirror.”

Lelesha flashed me a meaningful smile and held out a hand mirror that she had conveniently brought for the occasion. However, the mirror she had prepared wasn’t just any old mirror, but a magic mirror capable of reflecting things as they truly were. Even vampires, who typically offered no reflection, could be seen on the surface of an item like this.

“I long ago grew tired of seeing my face,” I grumbled, unable to understand my loyal servant’s intentions. Still, I followed her lead.

During my previous life, back when I’d been twenty seven years of age, Al had frequently teased me. He had told me that, to put it kindly, I had a “face that was fearless and rugged” and to put it not-so-kindly, I was a “tragic waste of good looks.” Naturally, that was the face I expected to see staring back at me.

My current looks were what served as the source of my surprise. The reflection I saw in the truthful mirror was that of myself at only fifteen or sixteen years old. My stature was well developed, but my face still clung to traces of adolescence.

“What in the name of...”

I was momentarily lost for words, but it didn’t take long for me to discern the reason I looked so childish.

“Transforming into a True Blood would have resurrected me with my body as it was at my peak. That would explain this childish—no, youthful form.”

“Well, youth can be considered emblematic of vitality.”

Ultimately, I decided to accept the situation for what it was. My appearance may not have been what I’d expected, but I saw no real inconvenience from looking younger.

“Now do you see, my lord? I was entirely serious when I spoke of your ‘darling sleeping countenance.’”

I can’t say I was the most satisfied with Lelesha’s teasing.

“Fool. What sort of servant teases their master?”

“Forgive me, but it was you who made me like this, my lord and creator.”

“Hmph, you’ve got me there.”

I’d snorted at Lelesha’s riposte, but truth be told, I was actually quite enjoying our meaningless banter. It seemed I had developed a longing for these sorts of moments. I even found them painfully *nostalgic*, which was peculiar in a way. From the moment my life as a human had ended, I had slept without a single dream until waking again, as a vampire. Thus, being felled by Al felt as though it had happened both just a moment ago yet also in the distant past.

“How much time has passed since my death, Lelesha?”

“Exactly one hundred thousand days, my lord.”

“Is that an exact figure? I thought there might be a slight deviation even for me, but I’m not even a day off, you say?”

“Allow me to offer my congratulations on your successful reincarnation.” Lelesha was alight with joy, as though she were the one who’d come back to life.

Ten thousand days. That would mean about 274 years had passed—not that it at all felt like that to me.

There’s a reason my rebirth had required thorough ceremony and such an extraordinary amount of time. Reincarnating as a Lesser or Normal, even though they, too, were vampires, would have been out of the question. Even becoming a Noble or Lord wouldn’t have satisfied me. If I hoped to climb the rungs of magic to reach its greatest heights, I had to be a True Blood, a vampire of unlimited life span, impervious to all causes of death. Reincarnating as a True Blood required ample time, magical energy accumulated from the world over, and the construction of a whole new body.

“Still, one hundred thousand days... Lelesha, you’ve outdone yourself, watching over me all this time. Let me reward you. Tell me what it is you desire.”

“Oh? Will you grant me anything I wish?”

“Do you mean to make Kai Lekius repeat himself?”

“Forgive me, my lord. Then, if I may be so bold as to impose upon you...”

As she finished her sentence, Lelesha made a bold move. Suddenly, she sprang towards me and wrapped me in her embrace. With the same desperation as a child clinging on to a parent, she tightened her arms around me. Her voice trembled. It was the voice of someone holding back tears.

“Each day felt like an eternity as I waited and waited for you to awaken, my lord.”

Her embrace tightened so much, it began to hurt. I could feel her slender shoulders shaking uncontrollably.

“Forgive me for that.”

I returned her embrace, and soon enough, Lelesha’s shaking subsided. She leaned into me as if she were fading away. Her body, soft and warm in my arms, was nearly indistinguishable from a human’s. I found it deeply relieving and satisfying to know that even after becoming a vampire I could still enjoy the comfort of a hug.

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After a brief period of embracing Lelesha, I began to feel a most unpleasant sensation. It was hunger.

Holding her in my arms, I could closely look upon the nape of her neck, and from it, I picked up an indescribable scent. It was the scent of pure perfume. As a magical doll, Lelesha had no need to eat or excrete, nor did she deteriorate or require replacement parts as time passed. Therefore, she gave off almost no scent. But for myself, who had just achieved rebirth after nearly three hundred years, that citrus-like scent stimulated my appetite.

“My lord, would you like to slake yourself with my blood?” Lelesha asked teasingly, apparently having noticed my gaze. At the same time, she lifted her hair, exposing her snow-white nape, and tilted her neck so I could easily dig my fangs in.

Are these the instincts of a vampire? I wondered. I resisted the urge to bite down and laughed. “How foolish. Your blood can’t satisfy me.”

Lelesha smiled like a mischievous child. “My, what a shame.”

It was not blood that flowed through Lelesha’s veins, but a magically refined ether that resembled human blood. Just as a carnivore can’t digest vegetables, the blood of a magic doll wouldn’t satisfy a vampire’s hunger.

“Jests aside, I have prepared a meal for you, my lord.”

“Oh? How typical of you to be so thorough.”

“According to the schedule, your awakening was approaching. Now, if you’ll follow me.”

I followed Lelesha and left the tomb for the first time in almost three hundred years.

Being reborn as a True Blood took an extraordinary amount of time. Therefore, I had required a cradle in which I could slumber in safety. So, during my previous life as king, I had prepared a castle in secret. I had chosen a large cave that I had discovered at the western edge of the continent and dispatched an army of construction golems to build a small castle there. I had named it the Abyssal Palace.

At the time of construction, the castle’s interior had been quite desolate, but now it was glorified by a number of splendorous decorations. Rugs of dazzling colors that hurt one’s eyes. Statues with twisted forms that hurt one’s head. Sensual portraits of nude women that hurt one’s crotch. *This can’t be Lelesha’s taste, can it?*

“I made the effort to acquire extravagant furnishings that befit my lord’s new castle.”

“I...I see.”

It seemed Lelesha had been busy these past three hundred years. Her efforts made for an amusing mental image.

“Well then, if you would wait here a moment.”

Lelesha bowed courteously and briefly withdrew, leaving me in an extravagant parlor fit to host a king. I sat down on a sofa to leisurely wait—and

what a well-made and incredibly comfortable sofa it was. Three hundred years ago, even as a king, I had lacked something so splendid in my castle.

Struck by the possibility, I began to speculate whether this was normal in the current era. Such progress could be made over three hundred years, could it not? Or rather, the era I'd lived in as a human had been a hell-world of ceaseless conflict. Just about every spec of culture, technology, knowledge, and passion had been devoted to winning wars. Naturally, items meant for leisure, pleasure, or artistic purposes had been looked down upon. Nobody had possessed the excess resources to expend on such unprofitable matters. The very existence of such a comfy chair implied that the current era was one where people possessed the excess resources to craft one.

I wondered then if perhaps the twisted statues and perplexingly sensual portraits I saw around me were also indications of a more developed culture. *Ah, how wonderful*, I thought. That was exactly what gave meaning to the sacrifices Al and I had made to end an era of conflict.

"Come to think of it, I rather like this piece that looks to be a squid entangled with an octopus. It intrigues me."

Having just returned, Lelesha giggled at my mutterings. "That piece was chosen entirely based on my personal tastes, but nothing pleases me more than to find it to your liking as well, my lord. I hope you also find satisfaction with the meal I've prepared for you."

"Is it now? You've got some very fine taste. Very fine taste indeed," I replied, somewhat surprised.

I then looked towards Lelesha and noticed a young girl with short black hair, who was timidly hiding herself in Lelesha's shadow. The girl seemed about ten years old, and I could imagine her becoming quite beautiful in the future. Her tanned skin paired with her humble demeanor suggested she was probably a town girl. I could imagine that, given time and care, her skin would turn a translucent white. She wore a maid uniform and looked adorable doing her best to fit it. *And she would be this vampire's meal.*

"Tell me, what is your name?" I asked the girl, striving to sound as gentle as possible so she would feel at ease.

“M-My name is Mil,” she replied, sounding close to tears.

This wasn’t the first time I’d been feared for no reason. In fact, that was the very reason I’d had no choice but to become the Sanguinary King and rule through fear. Well, no matter.

“Do you understand what I’m about to do to you, Mil?”

“I do. Mistress Lelesha explained everything to me.”

In spite of her quivering, Mil answered properly. It was hard to believe such a proper response had come from a girl of her age. Her manners were a product of Lelesha’s teachings, I supposed.

“It appears you’re quite attached to Lelesha, are you not?”

“Y-Yes, I owe her my life.”

“Oh?” I shot Lelesha a questioning glance.

“Mil is a refugee and was traveling with a group when she became separated from her mother. She was in danger of being taken advantage of by some deplorable men.”

Apparently, Lelesha had been patrolling the outskirts of the Abyssal Palace just the other day, when she’d come upon them. She had used brute force to exterminate the men and taken Mil into her care.

“At first, I was planning on keeping her in preparation for my lord’s awakening, but then I tried putting her to work as a maid and found her to be a fast learner and, above all else, serious about her duties. I have grown quite fond of her.”

“Well, that’s how you might see it.” I looked over at Mil, curious to know how the girl felt about the matter.

“M-Miss Lelesha gave me plenty to eat when I was starving, a-and now I’ve been told that the master is starving. It’s my turn to repay the favor.”

“Hm, how very laudable.”

I could see why Lelesha had taken a liking to the girl.

“Don’t you worry. I shan’t suck the life out of you, or anything. As a True

Blood, I can get by just fine on a small amount of blood."

"Go on, Mil. Approach the master."

"A-As you wish."

With timid steps, Mil left Lelesha's shadow and cautiously came to my side. Her small body trembled slightly as she tilted her head to offer up her nape. It was entirely possible that Lelesha kept the girl's hair cut short not only to keep it out of the way during her chores, but also to make it easier for me to sink my fangs in.

"Are you afraid?" I asked.

"I am," Mil answered through tears.

She's a strong and resilient girl, I thought. *That's because the truly courageous aren't without fear, but rather those who do what they must even as they tremble.*

"Bear with me. I'll be as gentle as I can."

"Be at ease, Mil. I hear it only hurts at first."

"I'm fine. I'm prepared for this."

Mil closed her eyes tightly. I bit into her neck, not wanting to prolong her state of fear any longer than I already had. The two fangs I had developed during my reincarnation pierced her soft skin. Mil gasped as she endured the slight pain.

"Consider me envious, Mil. You've got the pleasure of being the first to receive my lord's grace," Lelesha said, sounding only half serious.

I ignored her, tasting Mil's blood, and found myself groaning, unable to help it. Truthfully, I was the one who'd had to prepare myself for this act. I had entirely assumed that her blood would taste like raw flesh or iron, but guess what? Her blood tasted like fresh milk, refreshing and satisfyingly sweet. It certainly didn't taste like raw flesh! Even as a sovereign of the land, I had never tasted anything so delicious.

I momentarily lost myself in the taste of her blood. Meanwhile, Mil's breathing grew more ragged. To say she was enduring the pain would be

inaccurate; in fact, it was the opposite. Every breath that escaped her lips had become lustrous and sweet. Her groans sounded like those of someone much older. Her face was flushed, and her gaze was blank. Her thighs rubbed together softly.

This was the work of a vampire's legendary ability to charm. When engaged in with a member of the opposite sex, the act of bloodsucking was titillating and cause for arousal. Even an innocent girl such as Mil was no exception.

"My, my, Mil. What a *lovely* face you're making. I'm quite jealous," Lelesha said, making another of her jests as she watched from the side. However, Mil could no longer hear her.

"Master... Master, please... More... More..."

In a fervor, Mil clung to me, her body rubbing imploringly against me. I responded in kind and drained her blood with vigor. Soon after, Mil's back arched and convulsed. I continued to suck with an audible din. Then the girl let out an inarticulate cry and fainted, wearing an expression that spoke of otherworldly ecstacy.

After the meal, I sat on the sofa and steeped in mild self-loathing. Lelesha by contrast, wore a mean-spirited grin.

"Only my lord could turn such a young girl into a woman so quickly."

"How's Mil doing?"

"I put her to bed, where she's resting. She's the very picture of contentment."

"I can only hope so."

When I considered that I had... How would you put it? Made a thrall of a young girl? Taught her forbidden knowledge? It was no particular wonder that feelings of shame would well up within me.

"I was aware that pleasure accompanies the act of sucking blood, but I never would have imagined..."

Although all vampires held the power to charm, True Bloods must have been capable of exerting that ability on an entirely different level than typical

vampires were.

While I sat there in despondence, Lelesha spoke up, her tone half teasing, half consoling. “My lord has satisfied his hunger, and Mil is happy and well. Isn’t that wonderful?” she asked.

“Hmph, satisfied you say?”

I looked down at both my hands. Examining them carefully with the eyes of a magician, I could see a deluge of mana flickering like a flame. Increasing one’s mana by drinking blood was another specialty of a vampire.

“Fascinating. As for Mil, I’ll hold back on her.” *And since we’re on the subject*... “Next time, I’d like to find someone I don’t need to hold back on and suck their blood to my heart’s content.”

Mil’s blood was beyond delicious. *So what of someone else’s blood?* I wondered. *Can I expect it to taste as good, or will it vary per individual? If it’s the former, will there be differences in flavor? Ha ha, the thought alone leaves me somewhat parched.*

By no means was I a believer in abstinence. Good women, good food, leisure, and pleasure—without end, I delighted in it all. In my previous life, I had, with reasonable bounds, indulged myself as long as I fulfilled my duties as ruler. (In my later years, I had played the part of a fool with a crown and spent my days drowning in depraved pleasures so as to incite Al into killing me. I’d done this with full awareness that I may have been going further than necessary.) It was therefore only natural that I should seek out a novel sensation: the sensation of drinking of blood. What’s more, I was no longer constrained by the responsibilities of leadership!

“Now then, Lelesha, accompany me for a while.”

“As you wish. And what shall you be doing next, my lord? Will you be using a means beside bloodsucking to transform me into a woman? I’ll accompany you as long as you wish.”

“Spare me your jests. We’re going out.”

We would set out on a relaxing stroll to take a peek at the world three hundred years later and, with some luck, encounter another novel sensation of

two.

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With Lelesha at my side, I left the cave that housed the Abyssal Palace and felt sunlight for the first time in three hundred years. The month was August, it was early in the afternoon. The sunlight was at its brightest at this time of year, but I walked on without a care.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised to see a True Blood taking no harm from the sun.”

Lelesha, who had looked rather concerned up until this point, rested a hand on her chest in relief.

“I can’t say I find the sunshine pleasant, but it’s nothing I can’t bear.”

A vampire of the Lesser or Normal variety, however, would likely be covered in burns like they’d been set ablaze the moment they stepped into the sun.

“Vulnerability to weapons made of silver. An inability to cross running water. The loss of regenerative powers if a stake pierces the heart. The weaknesses that hinder other vampires are irrelevant to a True Blood.”

In my previous life, I had thoroughly made sure of that. I had sought out and succeeded in befriending a True Blood by the name of Dafalis.

Come to think of it, there’s a good chance he’s still alive and healthy even after all these years. Perhaps there’s fun to be had in a visit sometime.

“Now then, my lord, allow me to guide you to the town of Breah.”

The cave’s entrance rested deep within a mountainous region. It was a spot even local hunters wouldn’t get close to. That meant that the nearest town would be Breah, in the foothills.

Lelesha had swapped out her dress for something easier to move in. The noticeably shoddy clothes she’d picked out were a means of hiding her true status.

And so, the magic doll to whom I had given superhuman capabilities dashed with incredible speed down the almost non-existent mountain path. Previously, as a normal human being, I would have had no hope of keeping up with her, but I had been reborn with a body of capabilities that were truly monstrous, which surpassed those of Lelesha. The land that lay ahead was foreign to me, the

slope covered in trees, and the underbrush far too steep for a normal traversal, and yet none of these facts proved an issue. I hummed a tune along the way.

“Ah, how fun! All the more so after being constrained by the castle!”

“Your body’s sense of scale requires the freedom of an entire continent. It’s only natural that one small castle would feel claustrophobic.”

“Quit it with the flattery. What are you after?”

“Just that you would do me the honor of walking arm in arm with me once we arrive in town.”

“Ha ha! Very well.”

I was more than willing to agree to Lelesha’s adorable request.

And so I found myself walking down Breah’s main street, my arm linked with an upbeat Lelesha. Over and over, she was called out to from the jumble of stalls facing the road.

“Hey there, Lili. Looks like you’re not alone today, huh?”

“I’ve got some good eel here. Why not buy some to give to your boyfriend? That way, he sure won’t be letting you get any sleep tonight!”

“Now, Lili, just who might this dashing fellow be? Oooh, but now you’ll have no time for me! Dear me. Today’s twenty percent off, so take what you want, you thief!”

Keeping a firm lock on my arm, Lelesha handled them all with an impeccable smile and a giggle. “I’m on a date with this gentleman today, so I’m afraid we’ll have to save the transactions for another time.”

“I’m impressed,” I said after observing her interactions. “It seems you’ve developed a favorable relationship with the locals.”

“A necessity for a small town. If I were to gain a bad reputation, it would spread quickly and hinder my ability to make purchases.”

“I see, I see.”

The town of Breah sat on both sides of a river that flowed out from the mountains. The bounties associated with both the river and mountains made it

a favorable location. The population was at around one thousand or so by my estimate.

Arkus was a dull provincial prefecture at the western fringes of the land. Out there, even a place like Breah would likely have counted as a large town, though it was a spec compared to the vast royal capital that had once sat upon my lap. However, the smiles and liveliness of Breah's residents were in no way inferior to the smiles and liveliness I'd witnessed back in the royal capital.

How delightful. How very delightful.

Though I may have once been feared as the Sanguinary King, I'd always found the ongoings of towns and their residents pleasant to observe.

"There is one more reason I maintain a friendly relationship with the people of this town, my lord."

"Oh? What might that be?"

"This land originally belonged to you, my lord, which means the people of Arkus by right belong to you. No matter how worthless they may be, I can't very well show discourtesy to those of your possession."

"Is that so?"

Strange. I don't recall instilling Lelesha with such an off-putting personality. Perhaps three hundred years of solitude distorted her mind.

"So please be happy, my lord. The peace you brought about three hundred years ago can still be found even in this small corner of the land. The streets are abound with smiles and liveliness, and young men and women can joyfully stroll arm in arm like we are now, without a worry."

"Not that you or I can be considered young."

"Oh, how rude you are!"

Lelesha pursed her lips endearingly and pretended to pinch my arm.

Still, she had a point. The Arkus I'd once known had been a constant victim to the flames of war, had had streets overflowing with refugees, and had nearly sunk to anarchy. Compared to that land of death, the current world would be somewhat of an improvement.

Somewhat.

“But, Lelesha, this is only one cut of the world today, is it not?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“You said it yourself, didn’t you? You took Mil, a refugee, into your care, which I find strange. Why would there be refugees in a world at peace?”

“Apologies, my lord. I should have known better than to think you wouldn’t notice.”

“Save the flattery. I’d like an explanation.”

“Yes, my lord. However, I feel this isn’t something that can be explained by my words alone. With your permission, I would have you see with your own eyes.”

Of course, she would tell me if I demanded as much, but her pleading had me curious.

“Very well. Lead the way,” I said, gracefully abiding her request.

As Lelesha took her arm away from mine, the jovial mood she’d sported until that point faded away. She stepped in front of me, now wearing the expression of a retainer. “As you wish,” she said.

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Lelesha guided me to a corner of the town, where we came across what might be referred to as a slum. Of course, my outlook on life wasn’t so flowery that this shocked me or made me wonder how something like this could exist in such a peaceful and decadent time. Although I’d agree that it’s the duty of those in power to ensure that everyone can lead plentiful lives, the implementation of that is mere idealism. In reality, no matter how advanced a society becomes, it’s impossible to reduce poverty and economic disparities to naught. This was something I knew well—or rather, had long ago learned the hard way.

“Lelesha, may I assume this slum is not all you wished to show me?”

“Of course not, my lord.”

My loyal servant who knew me inside and out would never go out of her way to show me something so commonplace.

Lelesha led me further into the slum. We soon reached an open crossroads, but it wasn't so open that it would be appropriate to call it a town square. It was there that we witnessed something less than ordinary. Roughly twenty soldiers in cheap leather armor were waving their spears about menacingly.

"Right, once they're all here, line 'em up in five rows!"

"Are these really all the girls turning fourteen this month?"

"Once they're in line, strip 'em down! That includes their underwear!"

"Hurry it up! We can't stand around all day, you know?"

Coerced by the sharp spearheads, the girls removed their ragged clothing. It was in the middle of the district. The girls became red with humiliation. Some began to cry. The soldiers cast their lecherous eyes over the pitiful girls, taking note of their looks and figures. Others opened the girls' mouths and checked their teeth, making sure they were healthy. It was all as though they were appraising the value of goods.

While I spied from a distance, I suppressed my rage and questioned Lelesha. "Am I correct in recalling that I had once prohibited slavery?"

"Officially, slavery is still prohibited. However, the nobility buy and sell what they refer to as 'servants.' Many of these servants are, in effect, slaves."

"Am I also correct in recalling that I once prohibited nobility systems?"

"The nobility made a resurgence two hundred years ago."

"Whose doing was that?"

"He who came four generations after you, my lord. His name is Emperor Kalis."

"Emperor? That's an unusual title."

"I believe it means 'king of kings.'"

"Ha! So his title is aggrandizing too."

It's true that a king requires a degree of authority. However, more than that,

what they truly need is the ability to lead effectively. The more a king finds himself lacking in leadership, the more authority he strives for. Could that be what had led to the revival of the nobility? Why not just admit you have failed to garner the respect and obedience of your subjects?

How displeasing. How terribly displeasing. Anger coursed through my heart. To make matters worse, the soldiers' behavior grew more disgraceful.

"Captain, I can't take it anymore! No one'll mind if I have a taste, right?!"

"You're gonna kill me if I have to keep holding off with this many naked women in front of me!"

"Hey now, we're in the middle of the street!"

"All the better!" the soldiers exclaimed.

"You hopeless nuts. Just be quick about it so the vicar doesn't notice, all right?"

"Heh heh heh, you're too generous, Captain. That's why we love you so much."

"Yeah, I love you, Captain!"

While taking part in their empty-headed exchange, a few of the soldiers began to pick girls of their liking and force them down in the middle of the street. The girls let out piercing screams.

"My lord, please permit me to butcher these apes in human skin."

"Permission denied."

Taking such a step would create quite a disturbance, but that's not what concerned me. In fact, I was quite partial to a disturbance—one as big as possible!

"I'd like the pleasure of slaughtering these apes myself. Come, Lelesha."

I walked out into the intersection. Lelesha followed me a few steps behind.

"Hey there, soldiers!" I called, grinning from ear-to-ear. "I thought I might grant you all the honor of dying in the line of duty."

The soldiers simultaneously turned towards me and took their hands off the

girls.

“Who’s this?”

“D’ya think he’s got a screw loose?”

“Wait. Take a better look—his clothes are made of silk.”

“Let’s snag ’em for a quick profit!”

“And look at the woman behind him! I’ve never seen a treasure like her!”

“Heh heh heh, I’m sure she’ll be loads more fun than these twigs!”

As the soldiers ran their mouths, they readied their spears, the tips directed at me.

“Who gave you permission to speak? Or to show such disrespect? You stand before the Sanguinary King.” I gripped the head of one of the lead soldiers and, with the inhuman strength of a vampire, forced him downward, driving him face-first into the ground. Naturally, his death was instantaneous.

There’s no need to bother with magic to erase vermin like this.

The soldiers began to cry out in fright and some out of sheer terror.

“Rh-Rhug’s head! It’s like a crushed fruit!”

“What the hell is this guy? What is he?!”

“Y-You bastard! We’re imperial soldiers who serve Vicar Larken!”

“D-Do you have any idea what you’re doing by defying us?!”

I chuckled. “I care not. Nor do I know of this Lar-whoever-it-was.”

“The vicar is the ruler of this town!”

“And he’s one of the empire’s esteemed arcanists!”

“Don’t think you can get away by simply dying for your actions!”

If you can scream and shout like this, why can’t you just impale me on those spears? I thought. The soldiers, paralyzed with fear, were simply spewing empty threats.

“Kill an immortal? I like it. I invite any and all attempts. However, there is an

order in which these things are done. First comes your own demise.”

As though to demonstrate, I slaughtered any cowering soldiers. Some had their faces caved in, others, their chests cut open and their hearts crushed. Any more I noticed had their heads twisted off their necks. Without remorse, I put the enormous strength of a True Blood to use.

“AAAAAAGH!”

“A m-m-monster!”

“Stay away! Stay awaaay!”

After witnessing the horrific deaths of their companions, the remaining soldiers devolved into panic. Driven by pure survival instinct, they thrust their spears at me.

I made no effort to dodge their attacks. There was no need. The undying flesh of a vampire could be stabbed any number of times without pain or discomfort and would immediately heal.

“R-Run for you liiiiiives!”

“We can’t do anything about this guy!”

“We’ll just leave this to the vicar!”

The soldiers finally threw down their spears and scattered.

“Lelesha.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“I’ve had my fill.”

“Then leave the rest to me, my lord.”

Lelesha gave a courteous bow and then a light wave of her right hand. With that motion alone, the fleeing soldiers were eviscerated. Lelesha had been constructed with the ability to manipulate steel threads that extended from her fingers. With one precise swipe of her threads, Lelesha had cut down the soldiers who were weaving their way past the girls.

“An excellent display. Three hundred years haven’t dulled your skills, I see.”

“Nothing pleases me more than to hear you say that, my lord.” Lelesha again bowed diligently, and I gave a quick nod.

All that remained were the young girls, who were struggling to keep up with the turn of events, and a crossroads soaked in blood. It had taken me some time, but I finally noticed the scent.

“Disgusting. I would never want to drink blood like this.”

It was far removed from the exquisite sample Mil had given me.

So I was right, I suppose; the flavor does vary by person. Going off that, it looks as though I need to take care in choosing whose blood I suck. No part of me has any interest in tasting something unpleasant.

I had hoped I might come across new delicacies on this sight-seeing venture, but instead I had encountered the opposite. I could barely contain my disappointment.

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Only a moment had passed since we had exterminated the disgraceful soldiers, when Lelesha alerted me.

“My lord.”

“I know.” I nodded, already aware.

Echoing from across the street was the loud clanking of armor. A unit of roughly ten steel-clad individuals bearing swords closed in with foreboding expressions. Even if they had heard all the commotion, they were awfully fast to arrive on the scene. Clearly, some of them were the vigilant type.

“Lelesha, do knights still exist in this era?”

“Yes, my lord. As this is an era of peace, their existence is largely superficial, and the greater portion of them are a distasteful lot. However, you may still find quality individuals in their ranks—individuals reminiscent of the knights you once knew.”

“Hmm, do you suppose such an individual is among this bunch?”

“Come now. Don’t jest. One can tell simply from a glance at their faces.”

From the start, neither I nor Lelesha had paid the armored knights much mind. Our attention was directed at the robed, middle-aged individual who followed behind at a leisurely gait. Upon arrival, he arrogantly remained silent and let the knights give the first word instead.

“What’s the meaning of this disturbance?!”

“Lay down right there, and clasp your hands behind your heads!”

“We’ll cut you down if you don’t!”

“You stand before His Excellency, Larken! Know your place!”

The shouting of the knights brought the girls back to their senses. They despairingly did as they were told and went prone amidst the dismembered corpses of the soldiers. Only Lelesha and I remained standing. The knights saw and put two and two together.

“Is this your doing?!”

“Do you understand what you’ve done?!”

“To harm a soldier is to make an enemy of the Holy Vastalask Empire!”

“You will pay with your life!”

The knights prattled on, but Lelesha and I continued to pay them no mind.

“I have nothing to say to you all. The vicar, was it? Bring him forward.”

Finally, Larken or whoever he was deigned to answer. “Hmph, what hole did you crawl out of? Perhaps you can enlighten me on whether ignorance truly is bliss.”

Oho, how nice.

He may have been being facetious in asking, but he was actually not far from the truth. Triggered by my mild amusement, a thin smile formed on my face. Larken, however, wasn’t pleased to see me so at ease.

“Let me guess: you’re young and proud of your benign strength. During your training, you decided you wanted to put your skills to the test, perhaps. Half-wits like you surface from time to time. Someone always has to deal with you when you bring disorder to the empire.”

“I’m afraid you’re far off the mark.”

“Well, I don’t really care. I’ve no interest in your creed or beliefs. After all, I’m a busy man. So go ahead. Die. Repent for defying the three hundred years of might that is Vastalask, and in your final moments tremble before an imperial arcanist.”

Larken withdrew a talisman from his pocket, clearly uninterested in any further discussion. As he did, mana began to emanate from his entire body. It was a considerable amount, enough to strike fear into most. And that mana would be channeled into the talisman and used to cast magic.

“Oh? So you’re employing a talisman right from the start. Very wise not to hold back against me.”

“Didn’t I tell you I was busy?” Larken, still unamused, threw the mana-infused talisman at me. A moment later, the talisman exploded, bursting into a wave of searing flames.

Huh?

He had mustered a considerable amount of mana and even employed a talisman, so I had assumed he would attack me with some advanced spell. However...

Ys? Really? I thought. He’d cast a spell from the second rung of the four greater schools of magic.

As I mulled his actions over, I gave a sharp whistle. This of course wasn’t a form of provocation but a form of incantation known as ascendant whistling. A wall appeared and stopped the flames with ease.

Considering my vampire body, those flames would have failed to cause considerable harm, but it was a magician’s nature to respond to magic with magic of one’s own. Larken, on the other hand...

“What...”

Larken was at a loss after seeing Ys so easily broken through. Even the knights around him had become uneasy.

“Wh-What have you done, you rat?!”

“Nothing to speak of. A fellow magician should be able to tell, no? It’s Gaol, from the first rung of the principal school of magic.”

“Magic, you say? And the principal school...” Larken made a face, like I had started speaking a foreign tongue. “Stop with this nonsense, boy! It’s a matter of course that I know Gaol. I’m an imperial arcanist, as you know, so I can tell that what you just cast wasn’t Gaol. Conjuration can’t be performed without a talisman!”

“*Young* sir, I’ll ask that you, too, keep the nonsense to a minimum. I’m not so decrepit that I need to go so far as to use a talisman to defend against second rung offensive magic.”

I hadn’t even brought any talismans with me. As a form of incantation, ascendant whistling was faster and more practical. But enough of the obvious.

“Conjuration, you say?”

Now it was my turn to act like someone hearing a foreign tongue. Did he mean *that* conjuration? The supernatural phenomena of extraordinary convenience that appeared in fairy tales? Ys and Gaol were forms of magic: technology built upon reason. Both spells—to some degree or another—could be used by anyone who learned how.

Larken and I found ourselves exchanging apprehensive stares. I must admit it was a fairly doltish scene.

“If I may, my lord.”

“What is it, Lelesha? Speak.”

“Yes, my lord. The grand technology of magic that you long ago refined, pried from esoteric sects, compiled, and developed has entirely fallen out of use in the current era.”

“What did you say?”

“Instead, arcanists appointed by the empire use talismans provided to them. Having no understanding of the principles behind the talismans, the arcanists simply direct their mana into the vessel.”

“That’s absurd. That way, even an ape could cast spells if born with a flow of

mana.”

“In this era, it is a treasured art referred to as ‘conjuration.’”

Words failed me.

Of course, it wasn’t beyond my understanding. Magic was omnipotent and therefore a mighty tool of war. In a time of peace, it was favorable for the authorities and in the interests of stability that magic did not proliferate and be monopolized by a central pillar of the state. As such, Al or one of his successors must have prohibited magic. I explained as much to Lelesha.

“Is that the jist of it?”

“Very astute, my lord.”

“I see.”

To someone who loved magic more than he loved anything, this was a saddening tale. And there I’d been looking forward to the developments and shifts in magic after three hundred years. *I suppose that was all a mere fantasy.*

“How dull. How terribly dull,” I couldn’t help but grumble. Yes, grumble, not lament. I could understand the reasoning behind the disuse of magic, so I kept my selfish lamentations to myself.

“You said you were Larken, the imperial arcanist, correct?”

“That’s His Excellency Larken to you!”

“It’s quite all right. Stand down.”

I made a hand motion I’d learned from mountain ascetics, then traced a complex seal in the air. This was another form of incantation. Although this variety required extra ceremony, it greatly enhanced a spell’s power. I cast Guilline, a spell from the third rung of the principal school of magic. An invisible blade severed the heads of Larken and the knights around him. For me, doing all this was practically a party trick, but it still too much for that bunch to handle.

“How dull. How terribly dull,” I continued to grumble as I watched with disinterest.

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“Thank you for rescuing us!”

“I don’t know how I can thank you enough!”

The still teary faces of the girls who’d been assailed were now full of smiles as the girls showed their gratitude.

“There’s no need. Now run along home to your families. They’ll be worried about you.”

“But...”

“We haven’t had the chance to thank you...”

These earnest girls felt they couldn’t leave until they’d somehow repaid the favor.

“Don’t worry yourselves,” Lelesha replied. “There’s not one thing the likes of you could offer my lord.”

That’s a vicious way to put it, Lelesha. *Well, no matter.*

“Just don’t worry about it, all right? I’d advise you to leave this place soon, or you’ll end up smelling foul.”

I began to put distance between myself and the girls so that they might overcome their reluctance. And just as I was done with them— “What have you done?!”

Someone began to scream at me.

I cast my gaze towards the source of the noise and found the people of the slums had begun to crowd around the intersection.

“Do you understand what you’ve done by raising a fist to the empire?!”

“You’re free to get yourself killed, but do you want to drag us along too?!”

“Who knows what’ll happen to a small town like this after facing retribution from the prefect?”

“Our homes will be burned to the ground overnight!”

“Aaah! Look what you’ve gone and done!”

The residents continued yelling as they slowly formed a circle around us. Even so, I showed no fear and simply snorted. These men and women were cowards who had looked the other way and covered their ears even as their daughters were stripped and about to be defiled. Why would their words resonate with me? Why would I tolerate them?

“You spoke of raising a fist to the empire,” I said arrogantly. “Do enlighten me as to what that might bring about.”

“Are you saying you killed a vicar without knowing the consequences?!”

“Unbelievable!”

I chuckled. “I’m a provincial who just arrived here from the mountains. I don’t know much of the world.”

The more I spoke, the angrier they became.

“This is Arkus Prefecture, territory of the Nastalia Earldom!”

“Arkus is divided into four parts—north, south, east, and west—with military troops and a prefect stationed in each one.”

“Breah’s in the western section, which is ruled by Prefect Scallard, a fearsome arcanist!”

“He’s an elite from the empire’s arcane academy! Larken’s nothing next to him!”

“There are rumors that a renowned knight transferred from the capital is under his command!”

“Scallard won’t just sit back once he finds out one of his vicars has been killed! Breah will certainly be punished for this!”

“An elite arcanist and a renowned knight with an army at their command!”

“How are you going to take responsibility for this?!”

The residents continued to wail about the severity of what I’d done.

“Ha ha ha, now I understand. Thank you all for the explanation.”

I continued to listen to the crowd while parting it down the middle. A young man with a sharp gaze stood beyond the congregation. Well, maybe “young”

wasn't entirely accurate. He made an effort to look young, like someone wise yet not out of their twenties, but really, he couldn't have been any younger than thirty-five.

"Are you the boss of this slum?" I asked.

It's not rare for slums to become roosts of undesirables. I supposed this man used force and intimidation to keep them under his thumb. However, the man responded in a polite tone and manner unbefitting of the lord of a slum.

"What makes you say that?" he asked.

"I can tell by looking. It's in your eyes," I declared without hesitation.

I was more or less a man who had unified a continent. Who could even guess how many people I had laid eyes on? I had some confidence in my ability to evaluate people. How could I have reigned as a monarch otherwise?

"Are these people speaking per your orders?"

The man understood the position he was in and capitulated. "I'm afraid you've gotten the best of me."

This explained why the earlier cries and shouts had been so strangely expository and well informed for citizens of a slum. I had no doubt that he was reluctant to directly face someone who had slaughtered Larken and ten knights with ease.

What a cautious man. Oho, I'm sure he'll live a long life.

"What's your name?"

"The name's Forte."

"Well then, Forte, here are your orders: gather every influential person in the town of Breah and bring them before me," I said, brooking no argument.

Even if this was a slum, holding the reins of an entire district would give him some standing among the socialites, the thugs, the wealthy, the intelligentsia, and whoever else.

"It seems I'm in no position to refuse. Where shall I gather everyone?"

"Over there."

I pointed to the center of the town, where a large palace rested atop a hill. For it to stand in such an ostentatious position, overlooking the whole town... I had no doubts it belonged to Larken.

“I’ll be taking that. I shall see you there in roughly one hour.”

Larken’s soldiers and subordinates would still be inside the palace. All I had to do was kill the ones who opposed me.

Roughly one hour later...

I met with Forte in a great hall, where a layer of fresh blood was drying on the floor. I could imagine Larken using that hall. With Lelesha at my side, I rested in what was almost a throne. It was hardly something befitting a mere vicar.

The people Forte had gathered recoiled at the sight of the corpses still lying about. As they weren’t my subjects, I permitted them to stand rather than kneel (much to Lelesha’s disapproval).

“Good see you all here. First, an introduction: I am Kai Lekius. It’s a pleasure to meet you all.”

The guests began to murmur among each other.

“Kai Lekius? Where have I heard that name?”

“Ah, the Sanguinary King. As I recall, his name was Kai Lekius.”

“Isn’t that a fairy tail? I heard that name here and there as a kid.”

“It’s a name from our empire’s founding mythos, a bad omen at best.”

“Are you saying it’s not his real name?”

So went their hushed exchanges.

“I feel a slight responsibility for this incident playing out the way it did,” I said, cutting them all off. “Therefore, should this prefect or whoever launch an attack, Lelesha and I will deal with them. You needn’t worry yourselves.”

“You say it like it’s nothing.”

“How are just the two of you going to fight off the military?!”

“Oooh, our town is doomed!”

With the exception of Forte, all the guests voiced their strong dissatisfaction. I held up three fingers and cut them off again.

“You have three options,” I said. “The first: you can gather up all your belongings, flee, and petition Prefect Scallard for protection. The second: you can remain idle and await the outcome. I understand that these circumstances are entirely unexpected for you all, so I promise I won’t brand you cowards for choosing this option.” Lowering one finger at a time, I moved to the final option. “Alternatively, you can swear loyalty to me and hand over your assets. You’ll see a tenfold return on your investment.”

“What?”

My guests were at a loss for words. I, however, maintained my composure and elaborated.

“When Scallard attacks, I will kill him. This will incite larger and stronger forces to attack me. I will kill them too. This will lead to a decisive battle with this Nastalia Earldom, except I will kill them too. And what will that mean? That Arkus Prefecture will then belong to me. Returning your investment tenfold won’t sound so farfetched then, will it?”

I was met with silence.

“Heh heh, I’ll admit I was waiting for one of you to interject that I could never hope to win against the Nastalia Earldom.”

“Oh, goodness, my lord. You even have a great sense of humor.”

Lelesha and I stifled chuckles and giggles, respectively. Our guests meanwhile stared at us as though to question our sanity.

Shortly after, our guests marched off. Only Forte stayed behind.

“And what will you do?” I asked.

“Before I make my decision, there’s one thing I’d like to ask.”

“Very well. Ask me anything you like.”

Forte gave a short bow. “Then, if I may, for what purpose do you stand against the empire? It seems you would create such a disturbance that all of Arkus would become involved. I can’t bring myself to believe that this is due to the plight of some impoverished girls.”

“Correct you are,” I replied in a low voice. I could not maintain a leisurely tone when speaking of my reasoning. “I refuse to recognize systems of nobility. I cannot permit them.”

This was my ultimate reason for making an enemy of the empire.

Before I could ascertain whether Forte had accepted my answer, he donned a neutral expression. “If you will allow me another question, what is it about nobility that bothers you so?”

My answer was immediate. “A country must not be the possession of its rulers or authorities.”

I’d said this not as an attempt at poetics, but as something I understood by thinking it through. In nature, living as a herd is a necessity to many animals. It only makes sense to help one another survive in a world where the strong prey on the weak. The larger the herd, the more it finds itself in safer and more advantageous situations. Humans are no exception. Chance of survival increases by the individual belonging to a family, the family to a group, the group to a village, the village to a town, the town to a city. Eventually, a state is formed.

“Do you see? A state is nothing more than an extension of a herd, and if the majority of the herd is impoverished, then there is no purpose in its existence.”

That is where leaders become necessary. In order to efficiently manage a herd, sacrifices become necessary at times. However, for a leader to view their herd as a possession and even abuse, exploit, and bring nothing but grief to its members was unforgivable. That’s because it defeats the purpose of an organization of mutual cooperation.

“A state must strive for the happiness of its people and to keep sacrifices to a minimum. But that certainly will not happen in a land ruled by nobility, where it is a given that the people are exploited by their rulers. Nobility forget the grounds on which their state was built.”.

There was also the issue of states run by nobility making for inferior herds that couldn't compete with the herd of centralized power that I'd once built. But all that could be set aside for now, because Forte broke out into an accepting smile at my answer.

"I'm quite convinced."

Now he spoke with certainty.

"To answer your first question, I, Forte, offer up the entirety of my assets to you, my lord Kai Lekius."

"Oh? The entirety?"

Those were some rather bold words.

"Indeed. So rather than speak of tenfold returns, allow me to support you as long as I live. Allow me to assist you in driving the nobility from Arkus and leading its people to happiness."

"And you're prepared to live with the consequences of that decision?"

How interesting, I thought from the bottom of my heart. Now it was my turn to ask Forte about himself. He answered while red in the face.

"I was a lowly tradesman who rose from destitution to the scraps of wealth. But I couldn't go any further than that. To expand my trade any further required permission from Larken. That permission required an enormous bribe—so enormous that paying it would put me so far back that expanding my trade would no longer be worth it."

"So, in other words, Larken never had any intention of giving you permission. I imagine he was already cozied up to other merchants and planned to nip you in the bud."

"You are correct. Since Larken's authority was supported by the Nastalia Earldom, overturning his decision was impossible for a common man like myself. I considered leaving Breah but stopped myself. It occurred to me that the tyranny of nobles and the corruption of their servants is prevalent throughout the empire. I would encounter the same no matter where I went, so, for as long as the empire ruled the continent, I had nowhere to go."

“It’s a cruel world,” I spat.

Forte was indeed a victim of the very system I despised.

“That’s why, my lord, when you decapitated Larken, I honestly felt some catharsis.” Forte’s smile twisted with a dark pleasure at the memory. Then he gave another bow. “My deepest apologies for setting the residents of the slums after you to test your authenticity and resolve. Please forgive me, for it is my wish to serve you to my utmost capacity.”

“I accept your apology. Earnesty has its beauty; schemers like you have their uses.”

A monarch must be open-minded enough to accept both. I allowed Forte to raise his head.

“Well then, Lelesha,” I said, “I believe it’s time we gave our declaration of war.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Following a courteous bow, Lelesha brought out a knight from a connecting room. I’d made sure to keep one alive. Laid in the knight’s trembling arms was the decapitated head of Vicar Larken.

And then the head spoke.

“Am I alive? Am I dead? What... What’s happening?!”

“You are indeed dead. But by means of necromancy, I brought you back as an undead. I even did you the favor of making you a sturdy undead that will persist for one hundred years or so.”

“Necromancy? An undead? That’s absurd! I’ve never heard such nonsense.”

“Well then, it looks like you’re behind the times. No, perhaps you’re entirely caught up.”

“Oh, goodness, my lord. You even have a great sense of humor.”

Lelesha and I stifled chuckles and giggles, respectively. The decapitated head of Larken, meanwhile, stared at us as though to question our sanity.

“Take this head and bring it to the prefect or earl or whoever. Then tell them

this: my gates are open, so unless they fear Kai Lekius, they can come straight for me.”

Chapter Two: Imperial Knight Rosa

It was by the heavens that Rosa had been bestowed with not one but many blessings. For instance, her somewhat stern but exceptionally handsome features; her beautiful, rose-colored hair; and her family, both rich and esteemed, that had produced imperial knights over many generations. On top of that, Rosa was blessed with overwhelming martial talents, which had allowed her to obtain imperial knighthood while still in her teens, and her straightforward heart and spirit, which were unbreaking and carried a love for justice. On and on the list could go.

However, it was also by the heavens that Rosa has been afflicted with a wicked case of bad luck. For instance, bugs would repeatedly eat away at her favorite baldric, and every time she paid a visit to famous warriors to request their teachings, they would be out of town. At her examinations for her entry into knighthood, the favorable score she'd earned had almost been recorded under someone else's name by mistake. Thus, "Just my luck," had at some point become a regular phrase of her's.

Worst of all was her luck with her superiors. She had officially become a knight, which was nice, but had then found herself under the direct command of a misogynist. Rosa, not being the type to keep quiet and go along, had soon ended up on his bad side and been transferred to the remotest land that was Arkus Province.

"I can't pretend I wasn't bitter about that."

When visited by misfortunes big or small, Rosa would tear up and glare at the heavens. However, she would also grit her teeth and endure. She got by on the belief that, with perseverance, her luck would one day turn around.

"But the time has come," the seventeen-year-old Rosa declared. "I've finally met a leader of true benevolence! Woman or not, Lady Nastalia rivals the likes of Emperor Kalis! There's no greater joy for me now than to serve her."

Countess Nastalia had entrusted Rosa with keeping an eye on Prefect Scallard in the west. The four prefects appointed by the countess were all powerful

individuals. While they could be useful, they were also capable of scheming or acting on personal interest. To prevent that, Rosa had been tasked with observation and keeping the western prefect in check, but as long as Scallard remained loyal to the countess, it fell on Rosa to assist the prefect in his duties.

That night, Rosa received an urgent summons. Since she hadn't yet gone to bed, she was able to quickly grab her sword and present herself at the western prefect's official residence. From there, she was directed to what appeared to be a war room.

Could a conflict have broken out? In these peaceful times? Rosa wondered while staring at a war table that must have been covered in dust until earlier that day. Aside from Rosa, who was the most excited person in the room, the room was crowded by knights and arcanists under Scallard's command. Scallard himself was the last to arrive. He took a seat while everyone else stood at attention.

Scallard was an old man built entirely of skin and bones. With his bald head, he resembled a walking skeleton. In fact, the man didn't just *look* like an aberration; he was a graduate of the arcane academy. Hidden within him were powers notable even in the imperial capital. Having been raised in the capital herself, Rosa knew just how terrifying the arcanists were. There were rumors that Scallard was just over one hundred years old, and it didn't sound like a joke. Neither did the words that followed.

"Larken's dead."

Scallard's ill tidings sent the whole room into an uproar.

"By Larken, do you mean that Breahan vicar who served the countess?"

"I do."

"The man wasn't old, and I hadn't heard of anything wrong with his health."

"He was killed."

"What? Is this true?"

"It was my understanding that Sir Larken was a gifted man in terms of mana. Just who could have—"

“Ask him yourself if you want the specifics.”

The crowd became all the more restless, including Rosa herself, who couldn’t help feeling perplexed. If Sir Larken was dead, then how were they supposed to ask him? The answer immediately became apparent. Not one person present expected what came next.

A knight brought out the severed head of Vicar Larken, who was talking like he had when it was still attached to his body. The unease in the room grew so heavy, it was almost palpable.

“Larken, tell us again everything that happened, and spare no detail,” Scallard ordered gravely.

“Y-Yes, Your Excellency.”

Larken, whose head had been placed on the table, began to recount his story. Though Rosa found it unnerving, there was nothing she could do but stand and listen. The same could be said of everyone else gathered around. Even the arcanists, who should have been used to mystical phenomena, were growing pale before the talking head. But worse than the head were the string of surprises that spewed from its mouth.

“Are you saying that...that scoundrels raised a fist to you while knowing you were a vicar of the empire?” someone asked.

“And that there were only two of them?”

“Perhaps they’re being backed by an organization of some sort. Either way, we can’t ignore them.”

The knights and arcanists began to curse the mysterious pair that had killed Larken.

“How dare they act so brazen?! A declaration of war? They’ll learn their place!”

“To spit on the glory of the sacred and inviolable Vastalask is punishable by death!”

Blood rushed to their heads as they demanded the sinners be punished, but Rosa’s next words were like a bucket of ice water on the crowd.

“To disrupt the order maintained by Lady Nastalia is indeed a serious crime, but let me ask you something: did this not all begin with Larken’s soldiers harassing innocent girls? Based on the circumstances, I’d assert that the duo executed the soldiers after being unable to bear what was happening to the girls.”

She knew it was harsh, but Rosa felt that those soldiers had gotten what they deserved. Larken was just as guilty as the rest of them. Of course, from a legal and a public safety perspective, the two assailants couldn’t just be allowed to walk free, but emotionally, Rosa found herself more on their side than the soldiers’.

“Lady Nastalia is a benevolent leader who loves peace and her subjects alike. Not a day goes by when she doesn’t encourage us to refrain from improprieties against her people, am I wrong?”

“It is as you say,” Scallard replied. “The lack of supervision of even the lowest-ranking troops is entirely due to my own negligence. I shall make a formal apology to Her Excellency Countess Nastalia at a later date.” Scallard was of a far higher rank than Rosa, but he spoke in courteous terms towards her as she was one of his lady’s direct retainers. “However, there is a matter at hand that takes precedence. This incident is of far greater significance than I believe anyone here realizes.”

Rosa frowned. “What are you saying?”

“Answer carefully, Larken,” Scallard continued. “Of the two scoundrels who killed you, one referred to themself as a ‘magician,’ did they not?”

“Th-They did. I’m sure of it.”

“And they cast a spell you had never seen or heard of, and did so without using a talisman, am I right?”

“Yes! That’s correct.”

The words of the severed head caused Scallard to sink into a deep silence. Rosa, however, had never heard the term “magician,” as seemed to be the same for everyone else present. Even the arcanists were baffled over what Scallard was so careful about confirming.

“We must move immediately to eliminate these two assailants,” Scallard declared with a heavy voice and a grimace on his face. He turned to the knights under his direct command. “How many soldiers can move without delay?”

“Would a week of preparation be acceptable, Your Excellency?”

“That’s too long. We strike Breah tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?!”

“We must prevent them from making an escape.”

“U-Understood. If we’re to attack Breah tomorrow, we can muster roughly one thousand troops.”

“One thousand...” Scallard trailed off, uncertain if that would even be enough.

“Aren’t we only dealing with two people?”

“Or is Your Excellency concerned about a larger organization being behind this?”

The confused knights asked more and more questions, but Scallard gave no response. Soon, he made up his mind. “We shall attack the Breah vicar’s palace tomorrow, in the dead of night,” he proclaimed, as much to himself as to anyone else. His tone was strong, making it clear that he wasn’t interested in any objections from his subordinates. “May I request your cooperation in this matter?” he asked Rosa.

“Of course. I shall not tolerate the creation of such a disturbance at the feet of Her Excellency Countess Nastalia.”

“You have my thanks, Madam Rosa. I hope to bear witness to feats similar to those that earned you your renown in the capital.”

“I’ll do everything in my power.”

Rosa placed a hand on her chest and bowed. Her heart was pounding loudly. She didn’t know if she truly was renowned, but she had come to believe in herself somewhat. Still, for Rosa, this would be her first deployment. It would have been strange for her not to be nervous. *You can’t botch this, Rosa. This is for Lady Nastalia’s sake!*

Meanwhile, Scallard gave orders to his subordinates. “Now, all of you, make sure you’re prepared.”

“Do you mean to say everyone here will be going?”

“Of course I do. That includes me.”

“You too, Your Excellency?”

“Allow me to make something clear ahead of time.” Scallard cast a threatening glare over his men. “I will have no tolerance for anyone who doesn’t take this threat seriously—like this imbecile!”

Scallard interlocked his fingers in a complex arrangement. Then, after channeling some mana, he performed a conjuration *without a talisman*. Larken’s head was set ablaze in an instant.

“GYAAAAH!” The severed head screamed in agony as it was wrapped in otherworldly black flames. “Please stop, Your Excellency! I can’t die for another hundred yeaaars!”

“Is that so? That spell, Graft, is from the fourth rung of the hexen school of magic. It won’t extinguish until its subject has been reduced to ashes.”

“No, make it stoooop!” cried Larken.

Scallard watched coldly. Everyone else grew pale at the sight of such indescribable horror.

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One thousand soldiers had been divided evenly into ten troops. Rosa and eight other knights had each been put in charge of one of those troops. The last unit would be Scallard’s escort. This accounted for everyone who would attack Breah.

“Your Excellency, our scouts have returned. They reported that the whole town was asleep and that they encountered no soldiers standing guard or on patrol, much less any sort of ambush. They wandered the town freely.”

“And what of the vicar’s palace?”

“The drawbridge has not been raised, and both the front and back gates of

the outer walls are open.”

Hearing this, all the knights except Rosa became restless.

“It’s just like he declared, but to think he really left the gates open...”

“Is he just inviting us in?”

“Who does he think he is?”

All of them wore expressions of vexation, whereas Rosa simply looked puzzled. If the duo they were after truly was as dangerous as Scallard had warned, such a brazen act should warrant caution. There was no time to sit around griping.

Scallard finished listening to the scout’s report, then, with a grave tone, gave his orders. “We’ll make a single concerted advance on the palace. Keep quiet—there will be no unnecessary chatter. Make sure your men know this: our enemy’s conceit will be the key to our success. Once we’ve arrived at the palace, we’ll split into two battalions. Five troops will take the front, and five will take the back, in one decisive strike.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

Rosa and the other knights bowed.

After that, the plan was swiftly set in motion. Without even a cough, the soldiers darted through the sleeping city. As one may have expected from a prefect’s elite troops, they showed striking professionalism. Unlike knights, who valued honor and loyalty, most soldiers—such as Larken’s—were nothing but walking leeches. But Scallard’s troops were different. Even the knights who commanded them were particularly skilled.

Rosa was the only imperial knight, but the other eight knights in command were heroes who had each made a name for themself in the capital and been handpicked by Scallard himself. In contrast, no matter how powerful they were, their opponents were just two individuals.

If Sir Scallard’s gone to such lengths, then it should be impossible for us to lose, Rosa thought. *Should I consider it good fortune that this is my first battle? I hear that even the greatest knights screw up the first time around, and frankly,*

this is preferable to being tossed into a battle I have no hope of winning. I knew meeting Lady Nastalia turned my luck around. Right then! Let's calm down and strive to make the most of our abilities.

That's what she thought, anyway, until she reached the palace.

Rosa was part of the battalion that would be assaulting the palace from the front. As the scouts had reported, the drawbridge was lowered. They passed over without incident. It wasn't just the drawbridge, though. Even the front gate was open. However, they couldn't advance inside.

The vanguard stopped without thinking, causing a jam in the front courtyard. Neither Rosa nor anyone else had ordered them to stop. They may have been violating orders, but she couldn't blame them. After all, she felt it too.

In the pitch-dark interior of the palace devoid of even a sliver of light, beyond the door left open, deep in the darkness...

Something was lurking.

Something was waiting.

Something unknown.

But it was certainly there. She could feel it. A palpable, terrifying, and foreboding presence.

Rosa groaned. Her nervousness had already dissipated—or rather, it had been overtaken by a far more ambiguous sense of fear.

"What's the matter, boys? It's too late to be quaking in your boots."

One of the knights, a man of many years who prided in his strength and brawn, urged the soldiers on. When they remained unmoving, he took the lead himself and entered the palace. The term "bold" may have had a nice ring to it, but typically this man was merely dense and insensitive. He hadn't noticed the foreboding aura that even the lowest-ranked soldiers had picked up on.

"Honestly, I'm glad he's here. Even stupidity has its uses," said one of the knights behind his back. No sooner had the knight said that—

"GYAAAAAAH!"

—than the guttural scream of the large knight echoed from the palace's entrance hall.

"What was that?"

"What just happened?"

"I don't know..."

The soldiers and knights whispered among each other with astonishment. Not one of them moved; their feet were firmly planted on the ground. And then...

"Mua ha ha... Bwa ha ha ha ha ha!"

A loud and scornful cackle rang out from the darkness.

"Come now, try not to confuse cowardice for prudence," came a mocking voice. "Will not one of you come to help your screaming comrade? Is that what can be expected of the military of this age? Oh, how disheartening.".

Suddenly, the entrance hall was illuminated, most likely by the spell Kur. Now the interior of the palace was clearly visible. The body of the large knight lay on the ground, separated from the head that glared resentfully at the battalion.

Beside the head, with his foot resting upon it, stood a young man who looked to be in his late teens. The man was dressed head to toe in black clothes made of fine silk and had a handsome face that possessed both a fearlessness and ruggedness uncommon among those his age.

When she caught sight of that face, Rosa felt a strange sense of having seen it somewhere before. She couldn't seem to recall where, but perhaps a trip to the imperial capital would have stirred her memories. The statues of the empire's founder, Emperor Kalis, which could be found throughout the streets, would have proved particularly helpful, for the face of the young man before them looked quite like those of the statues (which had been built to look considerably more handsome than the real man, but this had been forgotten with time). However, this young man had a dignity, strength, and grace that even the glorifying statues lacked.

"Charge! It's just one man!" one of the knights cried after returning to his senses.

“Go, go, go!” another knight ordered. “Don’t give him a chance to cast anything!”

And so the soldiers commenced their assault. They may have flinched out of fear of the unknown, but their daily training allowed them the courage to handle a visible threat.

One after another, they drew their swords and swung at the young man in black. He was entirely unarmed, but with flicks of his hands, the soldiers found their swords bent, their flesh pummeled, bones snapped, limbs torn, organs strewn about, and blood splattered. The remaining knights stared in disbelief.

“What horrifying power!”

“He’s gotta be some kind of a trained warrior!”

“Wasn’t he an arcanist?”

Rosa shared their sentiments, but standing around would only whittle away their forces.

“Ready your bows! There’s one opponent, and we’ll turn him into a hedgehog!”

At Rosa’s order, the soldiers still outside the castle readied their bows at once. A barrage of arrows flew from the courtyard into the entrance hall. The young man in black was unable to evade so many projectiles and was showered by a rain of arrows. With countless shafts protruding from every inch of his body, he looked as Rosa had said: like a hedgehog. Not that that made any difference.

“Forgive me,” he said with an unnerving chuckle while still skewered by arrows, “but this kind of thing won’t work on me in my current state.”

A closer look at the man would reveal he wasn’t even bleeding. It wasn’t that he couldn’t have evaded the barrage; he simply hadn’t tried to.

“Now then, I’ll be taking my turn.”

As the young man spoke, his body dissolved, and the arrows once stuck in him clattered to the ground. From where his neck and head had been, a swarm of bats appeared. His four limbs became a pack of wolves, and his torso also

dispersed into bats and wolves.

“He’s a vampire! He’s no arcanist and not even human! Heck, he’s something worse than a Noble!” screamed one of the knights, who was known for his extensive knowledge. However, it was too late for that knowledge to save them. A deluge of innumerous bats and wolves spilled into the courtyard and descended on the soldiers.

Close observation of the bats and wolves would reveal something uncanny about them. They were pitch black, more like shadows than true bodies, and lacked any depth. The writhing swarm closing in looked like a nightmare far removed from something real.

But this was no dream.

It was a nightmarish reality, one that brought death to the knights and soldiers. Some were swarmed by bats and had their blood drained from over one hundred points over. Others were knocked to the ground by wolves and had their throats ripped out. Even the most capable knights were helpless against the horde, and one after another, they were swallowed up by the umbral wave.

“AAAAAAH!”

“Stay back! STAY BACK!”

“No... Save me... Mother!”

“I beg you, don’t eat my hands!”

A portrait of hell painted in shrieks took form. Rosa alone was able to maintain her courage.

“Calm yourselves! There may be many, but alone, they’re weak!”

As though to prove her point, she slashed apart a group of approaching bats and wolves. No matter how many times the shadows were sliced apart, they would regain shape and reanimate as though they had never been cut in the first place, but Rosa was at least succeeding in keeping their claws and fangs at bay. That, however, was only possible due to Rosa’s mental fortitude and talents with a sword. It wasn’t something that just anyone was capable of. One

by one, the soldiers and knights were butchered.

“Ha ha ha, this must be a dream. I’m only dreaming!”

The last of eight knights finally gave into fear and stopped resisting. Laughing uncontrollably, he was torn limb from limb and devoured by the wolves.

Even Rosa had reached her limit defending herself and was unable to help those around her. Then suddenly, she realized—she was the only one left in the courtyard. The bats and wolves all receded at once, gathering together in the entrance hall, and converged to form the young man.

“You’re all that’s left,” he said. “Tell me, valiant girl, what’s your name?”

“Isn’t it polite to offer your name first, vampire?”

“Bwa ha ha! I see you still have some fight in you! How marvelous!”

The young man—or rather, *vampire* laughed with grandeur and gave his name.

“Kai Lekius. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Imperial Knight Rosa of House Rindelf,” Rosa replied while preparing her blade. But it was an act; her shoulders were heaving, and her knees were shaking with fear. She wanted to flee so much, it was unbearable.

I should’ve known better than to think my luck had improved, she thought, cursing the heavens for making this her first taste of battle. But still she chose not to flee. Instead, Rosa shouted from the bottom of her lungs with every bit of courage still left in her.

“I swear on my loyalty to my savior, Lady Nastalia, that I will strike you down!” She readied her blade and charged towards the vampire waiting in the entrance hall.

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“Hm, very good. Your skills and your unbreakable spirit are far removed from what I’d expect of a young girl. Stand proud, Rosa. You’ve been offered my praise.”

I, the vampire Kai Lekius, was at that moment giving the charging girl my

honest appraisal. Rosa was her name. Her body was quivering, her face tense, and her whole being gripped by fear, and yet she had the courage to charge so boldly into battle. She was truly something special.

While hundreds of men, having given in to absolute fear, had stood frozen and died wretched deaths, this girl alone had maintained her spirit. What else could I have called her but valiant? There was something strangely beautiful about the fire in her eyes as she stared at me. Those eyes were both proud and vigorous.

Oho, it seems this world still has women to my liking.

It wasn't just Rosa that had caught my eye. The sword she held was just as special.

"Hyaaah!"

Finally, Rosa advanced at full speed into the palace. Reacting to her mustered strength, crimson flames burst forth from the blade of her sword. If I had to guess, it was a sword imbued by some sort of fire enchantment, and not too shabby a sword at that.

Three hundred years ago, when everyone had been at war, weapons imbued with magic had been strewn all over. But in a world where magic had been discarded, such swords must be valuable antiques. I could hardly contain my eagerness at the thought of the feats such a unique girl with such an extraordinary blade could show me.

"Hyaaah!"

With another sharp cry, Rosa lunged. She coiled like a spring and closed the distance between us so quickly, she looked like a blur. This was Hagan, a very basic technique, and a very nostalgic one at that.

My half-brother, Al, had been highly skilled with this technique and had refined it to an art. As far as I knew, only ten people had been able to dodge his Hagan on the first try, and those were individuals who had never once been bested by anyone else's Hagan. As a child, I had given up on martial arts when I'd witnessed the natural talents of my younger brother. I had decided to instead pursue magic and left the traditional fighting to him.

It was thanks to the superhuman acuity of a vampire that I was now so leisurely strolling down memory lane. In my past life, even though I would have understood that I was being targeted with Hagan, there would have been nothing for me to do but get stabbed. But now, as a vampire, I had enough leeway to dodge to the right while reminiscing of days long gone.

Hagan could only trace a straight line. As long as one could react in time, it was an easy technique to handle—or so I thought.

"I'm not done yet!" Rosa shouted.

"Oh?"

My eyes widened. After I'd stepped clear of Rosa's attack, she'd forced herself around and was now coming at me again with almost no decrease in her speed.

"Fascinating!"

This time, I didn't dodge but instead kicked out my foot and tripped her. Rosa sailed spectacularly through the air before crashing and sliding across the floor. It looked like a theatrical stunt, but she was entirely serious about the affair.

"Are you playing me for a fool?!" she yelled, red in the face, before immediately getting back up.

My, how tenacious.

Unphased, I asked Rosa a question. "What do you call that variation of Hagan that you just performed?"

"Variation? That was just Hagan."

Apparently confused by my inquiry, Rosa had replied in a guarded manner, as though my questioning may be some form of trap. Still, I suppose the fact that she had answered at all was proof of her diligence. I pressed her further, my

curiosity not yet satisfied.

“It was to my understanding that Hagan could only function in a straight line.”

“Are you still mocking me? I’d have more trouble finding someone capable of such a shoddy attack. What would they do if someone dodged it?”

“Interesting. Being able to change one’s course is more sensible, isn’t it?”

It sounded simple enough, but I couldn’t imagine how much development would have been necessary to go from the Hagan I had once known to one that let the user change course without losing speed.

“Tell me, what would you have done if I’d dodged your subsequent charge?”

“I’d have changed direction again, of course. Though how many times you can change direction is a matter of skill.”

“Oh? And how many changes are you capable of?”

“I would say... Why would I tell you, you moron?!”

Rosa glared at me angrily. It was the same diligence that had driven her to almost answer me that made her so fun to tease. How charming she was.

“Besides, where the hell have you been to be lacking such basic knowledge?”

“I’m lacking in basic knowledge, am I? Or rather, my knowledge is dated. I see. Fascinating. How very fascinating.” I chuckled to myself.

“There’s nothing fascinating about it! Whoa, so you really don’t know anything about martial arts. Then there’s that strength of yours. Vampires sure are absurd creatures.” A sigh of both exasperation and desperation escaped Rosa’s fair lips.

“Do you know any other interesting techniques?” I asked while still holding back laughter.

“Don’t treat martial arts like some party trick! It’s disgraceful!”

The indignant Rosa once again readied her fiery blade. I noticed she was now brimming with vigor, her fear and anxiety having faded away during our light banter.

Oho, I wonder if that could be considered a chivalrous deed.

“Prepare yourself, vampire!”

Rosa showed good nature and brought to bear a new technique. Well, it was that, or she must have accepted that Hagan wouldn’t work on me. This time, she didn’t lunge but swung her blade down from overhead. However, compared to Hagan, this move was so slow it bored me. Was *this* technique really meant to test me? I playfully grabbed Rosa’s wrist and meant to pull her into my arms.

But I couldn’t.

My timing had been impeccable, but the Rosa that was swinging at me had the substance of a shadow. My fingers closed around her wrist, but there was nothing to grip. This could only be one thing—Rigr!

Rosa had attacked with her shadow first. Then, after a brief delay, the real Rosa swung at me. The feint left me all the more impressed. I leaned back slightly, dodging her swing by a hair’s breadth so I could enjoy an intimate view of the spectacle.

“Ugh, you’re one quick bastard,” Rosa snarled.

“No need to be upset, Rosa. You came quite close that time. Just give it a bit more oomph.”

“Would you stop fooling around?!”

A hearty chortle rose from my stomach. “Forgive me, forgive me!” I was rather enjoying Rosa’s martial display.

You see, the Rigr I knew was a very different technique. To me, the move was reserved for counterattacks. One would let the shadow be struck and use the opponent’s confusion to take the upper hand. But what Rosa had shown me was a feint technique in which one pretended to strike. This was a far more versatile strategy than had been applied three hundred years ago.

Hmm, how extraordinarily fascinating. In the three hundred years necessary to my resurrection, magic degraded to a painful degree, but it seems martial arts were ever evolving. Hmm. I see, I see.

Magic is omnipotent. Therefore, someone skilled at magic is an army in of

themself, and the empire or whoever had seen it as a threat and prohibited common practice of the art.

Martial arts, on the other hand, are ultimately a means to defeat individuals. No matter the degree of perfection one obtains, physical ability won't allow a practitioner to defeat legions all by themself. This was true even of Al, one of the strongest of warriors. Therefore, the big shots of the empire had seen no need to prohibit martial arts, and over three hundred years, it spread freely and was studied and refined by scores of people.

"Well then, how about this?!"

Having grown frustrated, Rosa made a bold move. With a technique known as Flash, she unleashed a series of slashes at a fearsome speed. As far as I was aware, someone familiar with the technique could strike four times, an expert could strike eight times, and Al, a true master, had been capable of twelve strikes.

Now then, Rosa, how many strikes are you capable of?

"Hyaaaaaah!"

With enough force to pierce the heavens, Rosa's sword swept about at an awe-inspiring speed. *One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve— Thirteen!* A large smirk formed on my face as Rosa sliced through my right arm.

"You surpassed him!"

Unbelievable. Truly remarkable!

"You surpassed Al!"

I burst into laughter, unable to contain the emotions that had welled up inside me. It wasn't as though Flash had been a specialty of Al's, but to see someone surpass his skill in even one technique had been enough to move me. So, as a way of reward, I had let her cut one of my arms in two.

"Thirteen strikes with Flash," I said with a chuckle. "Is this, too, the norm for the martial arts of this era?"

"Hardly. According to the captain of the imperial knights, I'm the first person

in history capable of that.”

“Oh, Rosa, that’s such a relief!”

There’s no way Al could rest easy if his accomplishments had been devalued.

“Not only that, but you’ve been hiding the true potential of that sword,” I said, looking over the blade in her hands.

The enchanted sword in Rosa’s grip was no longer emitting a crimson flame but rather a deep-blue one. Shortly before Rosa had initiated her Flash, the hue had changed, accompanying a dramatic increase in power. Looking to my right, I found I had been scorched where the blade had cut through my arm. Similar marks adorned the severed portion. I, blessed with a True Blood’s immortality, had escaped with this little damage, but anyone else would no doubt find their arm burning like a torch.

“I hadn’t noticed because of the change in ornamentation, but that’s Brihne, the Iridescent Blade, isn’t it? Ah, now that takes me back. This means you must be one of Albert’s descendants!”

Rosa let out a bewildered cry. “What?! How do you know that?”

I must have guessed correctly.

“With the application of refinement magic, I forged that blade myself. I then gifted it to Albert, one of my closest aides.”

Among the many enchanted swords I had struck, Brihne was one of my finest works. I had imbued it with the ability to absorb the wielder’s mana (their very life force, if you will) and convert it into magical flames. The blade only drained as much mana as the wielder allowed. The more mana they offered, the stronger the flames became, and their color would change accordingly from red to blue and from blue to white. For someone young and healthy, like Rosa, crimson flames could be maintained for an hour and would do nothing more than leave them fatigued the following day. However, the azure flames were a different matter. A mere ten minutes of the flames burning blue was enough to put the user’s life in danger. This was why Rosa had switched to the blue flames for only the brief moment she performed Flash, and then switched them back to red.

“Albert treasured that blade more than he treasured any other, but I imagine it would please him to know it was passed down to a natural swordsman like yourself.”

“Cut the crap! Don’t pretend to know the feelings of my ancestors!”

“I knew him better than anyone, though I suppose I can’t blame you for not believing me.”

From Rosa’s perspective, we were talking of the distant past, but it seemed she wasn’t entirely ignorant of the occurrences of that time.

“Listen here, vampire! House Rindelf may be a branch of the original family, and that main line may have died out long ago, and I know for a fact that this sword is an heirloom passed down from my ancestor Albert. However, there’s no way for the likes of you to know that, and I won’t stand the indignity of you blindly assuming the feelings of my forefathers!”

“A laudable conviction. I, too, have no tolerance for anyone who would sully Albert’s honor.”

“Th-Then...”

“As thanks for the display of modern martial arts and as a reward for your determination to protect Albert’s honor, I shall show you the most basic magic.”

I channeled my mana and shook my right arm to put out the smoldering flame. The severed portion of my arm, which had fallen to the floor, dissolved into a swarm of bats that flew to me, crowding over the stump below my shoulder and solidifying into my arm as it once was.

When that was finished, I interlinked my fingers in a complex arrangement. This was a mudra, another form of incantation. My mana flowed into the quickly formed shape, and the spell was complete.

Rosa cried out in shock. “Ah! Wh-What is this?!”

It was a reasonable reaction, even for a courageous girl like her. From her toes all the way up to her waist, Rosa’s flesh had been turned to stone. This was Zarzi, a spell from the fourth rung of the hexen school of magic. Typically, this spell would be used to petrify a target’s entire body, but I was capable of such

fine adjustments so as to only convert as much or little flesh as I wanted.

“Now, perhaps you’ll do me the favor of surrendering,” I said, flashing Rosa a mean grin. But she wasn’t the type to give in easily.

“Spare me the wisecracks! I haven’t lost yet.”

I chuckled. “Come now, don’t be so stubborn. How do you plan to keep on fighting with your lower half turned to stone?”

“Just you watch!” Rosa clenched her teeth.

I watched her, deeply curious as to what she intended to do. It seemed she was gathering all her remaining strength in order to move her legs.

“I appreciate your determination, but don’t you think this is a futile waste of effort?”

“Be...quiet, you...pestilent...”

Rosa ignored my suggestion and continued to muster every bit of her strength. Her teeth were not only clenched, but grinding against each other, while her blood rushed to her face.

And then I heard it—a slow scraping sound.

If I wasn’t mistaken, it was the sharp sound of stone being dragged over floorboards. Needless to say, it was the sound of Rosa’s footsteps—or rather, it was the sound of her legs being desperately dragged across the floor. Her pace was slower than a snail’s; she would never be able to turn the situation around like this. But Rosa continued forward steadily. She was after my head, driven solely by spirit and determination.

“Bwa ha ha ha!”

This would be the second time that day that I’d laughed from the pit of my stomach. To think that this young girl would be able to surprise me of all people, not once but twice! Not only had she surpassed Al’s Flash, but she had resisted my Zarzi!

“Splendid! What else can I say but well done, Dame Rosa?”

I was truly impressed by the spirited girl with the unbending will to fight.

Thus, I couldn't resist the temptation to ask her something.

"Would you like to join my household?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Rosa seemed caught off guard, as her feet came to a halt. She must not have known what I meant, given that she wasn't too familiar with the workings of vampires, so I extended her the courtesy of an explanation.

"You see, vampires of the Noble variety and above are capable of turning others into their thralls. You simply need to drink my blood and then you, too, will become a vampire."

"Do you mean to make me your slave?!"

"No at all. 'Thrall' is something of a misnomer; you'll retain your free will. Truthfully, there have been countless examples of vampires committing parricide, or so to speak."

In fact, Rosa stood to gain far more from such an exchange than I did.

"The strength of the heart is the strength of the soul. Should a woman of your capabilities drink my blood, you'd be reborn as a Noble or Lord variety. You would be a superior being—one of immense strength and immortality. You could live a thousand years or more and maintain your darling features and your youth. It's an attractive proposition, don't you think?"

In other words, I was scouting her as a potential ally.

"Frankly, I wasn't too interested in having any thralls unless I came across a truly superb candidate."

I wouldn't call myself stingy, but neither was I going to go around gleefully handing out immortality to the undeserving like some nouveau riche handing out free money. It is only fitting that rewards be given out only in appropriate measure and circumstance, and this young girl was the perfect example of who I would consider a superb candidate.

For the first time in three hundred years, my urge to recruit allies was itching again.

"What do you say, Rosa?"

“Don’t patronize me. Of course I refuse.”

“Well, I figured you would.”

I pursued the matter no further. I was, of course, sad to let her go, but as long as she bore that unbreakable will, there would be no hope for changing her loyalty.

“I know you have no need for my blood.”

I didn’t try to complicate the situation. No, that wouldn’t work on Rosa. Instead, my response was much more direct as she stood fettered by stone. “On the contrary,” I said, “I have a great interest in your blood.”

The color drained from her face in an instant as she realized what was about to happen. “Are you serious? You’re truly going to drink my blood.”

“Now, now, surely you don’t mean to tell me you weren’t prepared for this possibility when you raised your blade to a vampire.”

A mean-spirited smile returned to my face as I approached Rosa. She began to move her legs of stone, but with that snail’s pace of hers, she had no hope of getting away. Still not knowing when to quit, she swung her sword at me, but there was only so much she could do without the use of her legs. Armed with a vampire’s strength, I took hold of her right wrist, preventing any further attacks. Rosa braced herself and gritted her teeth.

“Do as you please. My blood won’t taste any good anyway.”

While keeping hold of Rosa’s right wrist, I circled around her, positioning myself behind her for easier access to her neck. “That’s something we won’t know without a sample, will we?”

She snorted. “A sample, you say! Will you taunt me till the bitter end?” Her words were tough, but she was no longer resisting.

“Heh. I see you’ve lost your mettle.”

“I don’t see what else I can do but surrender.”

“So you say, but you’re buying time while you wait for reinforcements, are you not? You have another unit attacking from the rear, don’t you?”

Rosa’s upper half stiffened. She was diligent, resilient, and incapable of lying. The latter was another charming characteristic of her’s. I suppressed my urge to sink my fangs into her neck and instead enjoyed our conversation.

“You can hold out for them, but they won’t be taking a single step into this palace.”

“Th-That’s impossible.”

I savored her look of shock. However, this wasn’t a bluff to pressure her and force her to reveal more darling expressions. The attack from the rear would not succeed, for that entry was being protected by Lelesha.

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Five troops in total attacked the palace from the rear. The hundred men led by Sir Delmund served as the vanguard.

Delmund was a powerful knight of thirty-four years of age. However, his tendency for impropriety had forced him to withdraw from the elite courses in the capital and given him a bad reputation. If Scallard hadn’t taken him in, Delmund’s only other option would have been to live the life of a wild dog.

But Delmund wasn’t the type to think in terms of debts and repayment owed towards Scallard. That night, Delmund chose to lead the vanguard simply because he was confident in himself and wanted glory and esteem.

With his men close behind, he stomped across the drawbridge, which had been left lowered over the moat. The troop had just reached the front of the back gate when everyone came to a halt.

On the other side of the gate, in the rear courtyard, a beautiful woman was waiting.

She was clad in a simple white dress—like something a bride would wear but with fewer frills—and she looked all too out of place. Between the time of night and the circumstances of the palace, some felt like they had encountered a ghost. But Delmund wasn’t put off in the slightest.

“Well, would you look at that beauty? I’ll have to have myself a taste.”

Immediately, the other soldiers began to cheer, whistle, and babble like

lechers.

“Pass her over when you’re done, Delmund.”

“Heh heh, I’ve never seen such a fine woman out here in the countryside.”

“I bet she’s real soft.”

“Rosa’s got a nice figure too, but she’s still just a runt.”

“Lucky for this one, she’s in for a real surprise.”

“Hold on, won’t taking on all one hundred of us break her?”

“What’s the matter with that? Not much different than killing her.”

“You’ve got that right.”

The apparently well-trained soldiers couldn’t maintain their composure. The blue-haired beauty on the other side of the gate had such a bewitching allure, just one look at her had the men excited and struggling to maintain any form of sanity.

Delmund and his men didn’t know this, of course, but the beauty standing before them was Kai Lekius’s loyal magic doll, Lelesha.

Bathed in the unfiltered moonlight, Lelesha curled her lips in a breathtaking smile. “If you can parse human tongue, then listen well, foolish apes. First, I am no dog. Cease your whistling.”

The moment she said that, Delmund felt a change in his surroundings. Without any signs or warning, the heads of the whistling soldiers dropped to the ground. The remaining soldiers began to scream.

“Wh-What was that?!”

“What just happened?”

“Aaaaaaaaah, Ted?!”

Delmund was just as confused as the rest of them. He had no clue as to why or how the men had been decapitated. Lelesha paid their cries no more attention than she did the breeze.

“Second, every inch of my body down to the last hair belongs to my lord. I

shall not permit the likes of you to lay your eyes, much less your fingers, on me."

More soldiers fell as their heads were sliced off. True to form, only Delmund discerned how they were being attacked.

Are those threads? he thought. *We're being hacked apart by threads so thin, we can barely see them!*

Countless threads danced through the air, slicing through the soldiers' necks so quickly that no blood stuck to them. Only by the moonlight reflecting off the steel had Delmund managed to spot the threads, which were skillfully being manipulated by the faint movements of Lelesha's hands.

"Third, when I'm beyond the scrutiny of my lord, there are no limits to my cruelty."

Knowing this only informed Delmund of how hopeless his situation was. There was no way he could dodge innumerable high-speed threads that could barely be seen. Like the hundred soldiers under his command, Delmund had his head chopped off, and his lifeless corpse collapsed before the rear gate. On the other side of the gate stood Lelesha.

"Oh my, how dissatisfying."

Slaughtering one hundred soldiers had brought an even more alluring smile to Lelesha's face, but roughly four hundred soldiers were still yet to cross the drawbridge.

"And who would care to be next? Come now, no need to hesitate."

Lelesha wasn't going to recommend that they surrender or flee if they value their lives. *I have no inventions of letting a single one of you leave this place alive*, she thought. These were scoundrels who had dared to make an attempt at killing her lord. It was absolutely unforgivable. They deserved death. This was what love and fealty meant to her.

"Won't you come in? Or are you men so scared of a single frail woman that not a single one of you will take a step towards me?"

"Quiet, witch."

One knight—who seemed to be in charge of one of the rear troops—had tried to respond fiercely, but his tone had entirely betrayed his fear. Who could blame him after one hundred of his comrades had been annihilated in front of him in the blink of an eye?

Well then, I'll do them one small favor.

A malicious grin adorned Lelesha's lustrous face as she addressed the soldiers halted on the other side of the bridge. "As per my lord's orders, I'm not to let anyone enter the palace grounds alive."

"A-And what of it?"

"Can't you tell? I consider the mandates of my lord to be absolute. I would take my own life should I fail to live out his demands."

"S-So, in other words, if even one of us reaches the other side of that gate, you'll kill yourself?"

"Quite so. I swear it on the name of my lord," Lelesha declared with a hand on her shapely bosom.

The faces of the knights and soldiers changed when the men heard this. They now wore looks of determination.

"Let's go."

"If just one of us passes through that gate, we win."

"We'll make a direct charge. Stop for nothing!"

At the knights' orders, the soldiers formed columns and charged. Over the drawbridge and through the gate guarded by Lelesha they went. In that one small space, one neck after another was sliced. By Lelesha's threads, heads departed from torsos, and torsos departed from heads.

"Don't falter!"

"Climb over the corpses!"

"Absolutely no turning back!"

"Don't let their deaths be in vain!"

"Forward! Forward! Forward!"

Determined, the men continued on without stopping. Still bleeding their manpower away, the troops in front at last managed to cross the bridge. With the force of a surging wave, they pressed on towards the gate until, at last, one of them finally passed through—as a spray of viscera.

He hadn't noticed until it was too late. The gate, which appeared to be open, was actually a death trap of taut steel threads. Passing through it would slice one to pieces. What lay open for them was nothing more than the jaws of a reaper.

"Wait!"

"Stop!"

The soldiers in the lead screamed out for those in the rear to stop, but it was too late for that. The momentum of a charging crowd wasn't something easily halted. More and more men from the back pushed forward while more and more in the front were shoved into the reaper's jaws. Masses of body parts piled up.

"Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha! What did I say about the mandates of my lord?! Would I let you pass in any manner, any at all? Ha ha ha!"

Lelesha found the stupidity of the soldiers unbearably amusing. She cherished those who obeyed her beloved lord, but for those who would harm him, death awaited. Death of the most horrendous form! Death! Death!

By the time the crowd noticed something was amiss and at last came to a halt, roughly a third of their numbers had already been ripped to shreds. Add that to the number of those on the bridge who had been decapitated by Lelesha, who was actually showing some restraint, and roughly two hundred soldiers remained.

"A fine effort. You charged with all your might even though the goal was unreachable. A trifle of a reward though this may be, I'll grant you all the privilege of deaths somewhat more befitting of humans."

Lelesha manipulated her ten fingers and the threads that extended from them. This time, her motions offered great complexity and finesse. The remaining soldiers noticed a change in their own bodies.

“Wh-What’s this?”

“My hands are moving...on their own!”

The knights and soldiers struck out with their own swords at the throats and stomachs of their allies.

“AAAAAAH!”

“A-Are you a traitor?!”

“You stabbed my leg!”

“Stop it! Don’t! Don’t cut me!”

“I’m on your side!”

A vortex of infighting broke out among the knights and soldiers by the rear gate. They were moving not of their own accord but by the pulling of Lelesha’s threads.

“How does it feel for those supposed to be humans to be the puppets to a magic doll? I do hope you appreciate this. Conflict and killing your own kind are things humans love, are they not?”

In the rear courtyard of the palace, the screams of men rang through the air, accompanied by the cackle of a witch.

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I, Kai Lekius, tried to imagine the taste. Mil's blood had been rich and refreshing like fresh milk, so how might Rosa's blood taste?

While closing in on the female knight, I thought the matter over. I already knew that the flavor of blood differed from person to person. The blood of scum lower than livestock had a rotten taste to it, but I could live with that. My hope was that the blood of the delightful girl before me was as delicious as Mil's. If so, my new life as a vampire would surely be an enjoyable one.

I stood directly behind her and stole a glance at her expression while still holding down her right hand. Accepting that she would receive no reinforcements, she gazed upwards and muttered a curse.

"Just my luck..."

Tears had begun to form in the tenacious girl's eyes. Not a man alive could witness this and not feel an instinctive, sadistic urge. With my free hand, I brushed aside Rosa's hair and exposed her pure-white nape, only to be struck by a fine scent of roses. With my vampiric sense of smell, I could tell that this was the particular scent of her blood.

I could no longer resist the urge and sank my fangs into her slender neck. Rosa let out a small moan of what I assumed was pain. I savored her innocence and sucked her blood.

Just like with Mil, it was a sensation that words couldn't hope to capture. But the flavor itself was wholly unlike that of Mil's blood. Rosa's blood bore a refined taste that I'd liken to the taste of roses in liquid form. I relished in the flavor as though in a trance, and, overcome by a vampire's inherent charm, Rosa, too, found herself taken with pleasure.

"Unbelievable... Just what is..."

Her voice trembled with shock. I could understand all too well how she was feeling. She was bewildered after bracing for pain only to be assailed by a sudden wave of pleasure. Pain can be endured, but pleasure is not easily resisted. That's what makes it so scary.

"There's no need to force yourself. Lose yourself in ecstasy."

“P-Piss off. Who would want to do that?”

I chuckled. “Well then, let’s see just how much you can resist.”

I brought my fangs to her neck once again and drank with renewed vigor. Immediately, Rosa’s back arched, and she began to writhe. Overwhelmed, she let her prized Brihne slip from her grasp.

“Stop it... Just stop...”

In spite of her verbal attacks, the acidity in her tone was beginning to fade. Her nape was flushed, and even her ears bore a tinge of red. Her body shook and shivered pitifully. Finally, she began to plead with tears in her eyes.

“Please... I beg you, forgive me already.”

Her fighting spirit had abandoned her. If the bottom half of her body hadn’t been turned to stone, her legs would likely have given out by now. Her skills with a blade and her mental fortitude were both exemplary, but in the end, she was still just a girl. Unable to win out against new pleasures, she had fallen quiet. She probably didn’t even realize acting like that would only further excite a man.

I drank with passion, enticing Rosa into what was unmistakably a cry of pleasure. Any moment now, the walls around her heart would crumble completely. Then the fun would begin. But...

“Well, so much for that.”

I removed my mouth from Rosa’s neck and clicked my tongue. This was another form of ascendant whistling. I cast Gaol and created an invisible barrier. This was less to protect myself than it was to protect Rosa.

Immediately after, an intense wave of flames rushed forth and collided with the invisible wall. If I hadn’t been fast enough, Rosa could have been killed, although I would have been fine all the same.

I cast a disdainful glance towards the new arrivals at the front gate. “Don’t you find it at all despicable that you would let your fellow knight be incinerated with me?”

“Quiet, vampire!”

The new arrivals, the arcanists who had sent a volley of Lam at us, had a few choice words for me. “If a vampire drinks your blood, you become one too! Cremating her before she turned would be an act of mercy!”

As the arcanist had stated, those who had their blood sucked by a vampire would, upon dying, be reborn as Lesser vampires, pitiful beings wholly unlike the other varieties. Unlike cases in which one received blood from a higher variety and was reborn as kin, these vampires were slaves entirely devoid of their own free will.

However, I’d taken a liking to the oh-so tenacious Rosa—how could I do something that would infringe upon the sanctity of her soul? And yet... Well, perhaps there’s no point in explaining.

Rosa was still adrift on a sea of pleasure, so I held her tightly as I faced the arcanists. This prevented me from using any mudras or seals, but I could deal with the handicap. There were roughly twenty arcanists standing ready with new talismans drawn. Without them, those pitiful modern-day arcanists had no means of casting spells.

“Give up, vampire!”

“Let’s see how long you can last on just your mana alone.”

“We’ll even applaud you if you can stand more than three attacks.”

“Here comes wave number two!”

All together, the arcanists threw their talismans at Rosa and I. This time, it wasn’t Lam they were casting, but Hult. If the system I had organized three hundred years ago still stood, this spell was from the first rung of the four greater schools of magic. The air around us grew cold and began to freeze in an attempt to envelope us in ice.

With Rosa still in my arms, I tapped my toes in a precise rhythm. This was also a form of incantation, referred to as hallowed tread. With it, I cast Nar Aske, a spell from the fourth rung of the four greater schools of magic, and with strength far surpassing what even twenty modern-day arcanists could muster, the spell scorched the enclosing ice and set the arcanists ablaze.

“Aaaack!”

“Eeeek! It burns!”

“Aaaah!”

Unable to fight the all-consuming flames, the arcanists screamed in agony and fell into the moat. After having lived through a world at war, I considered Nar Aske to be mere child’s play, but those raised in the tepidness of peace just couldn’t stand the heat. I had hoped that with so many opponents lined up, we could have some sort of back-and-forth, but instead I had been left wanting. That was when I heard his voice.

“I would expect nothing less from a vampire with a mana flow that far surpasses a humans’. Who knew Nar Aske could be so powerful?”

From the drawbridge, which had also been set alight, an old man appeared. All skin and bones, and lacking even hair, the man looked like some aberrant skeleton. It was time for my special guest to make his appearance. This must be the one they called Scallard.

“But know this, vampire: mana abundance alone is no match for true magic. I’ll teach you that one who relies on innate mana is nothing more than third-rate.”

“Oh?”

Had someone with a backbone finally arrived?

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Prefect Scallard continued his lecture. “The mana we humans are born with is nothing more than a speck compared with the mana that permeates our world. It is similarly dwarfed by the mana of the gods, spirits, phantasms, and devils of other worlds. But even if a vampire’s mana is ten times that of a human’s, it still pales compared to what’s out there. When considered from this perspective, the difference between us is akin to a difference in size between ants.”

“Indeed. You’re quite right.”

I gave a hearty nod. This man had the right way of thinking. My agreement surprised Scallard into a guarded silence, but he was quick to resume his lecture.

“What the current age knows as ‘conjuration’ is ultimately dependent on one’s innate mana and is nothing more than schoolyard buffoonery. However, three hundred years ago, in an age of strife, a single genius brought about an art of incomparable value—an art that came to be known as magic. Drawing upon the immense mana that permeates our world and others, magic is a divine act that can create near miracles far beyond the normal reaches of man.”

“Hmm, it’s as you say. *That* is magic.”

I let go of Rosa, stepped forward, and gave the man my sincere applause. *Would you look at that? A proper magician! Even in this day and age, some knowledge of the art remains*. I had traversed the entire continent and pried esoteric knowledge and rites from every cult and sect I could find. Then I had compiled, edited, and classified that mass of information into a single art. Of course I was relieved to find that all my efforts had not all gone to waste.

“Hear me, vampire.”

“Oh, I hear you, Scallard. Speak as much as you please. You have my permission.”

“No matter how great the mana flow, no matter how powerful the conjuration, you are no match for the magic I wield.”

That was exactly it. The rungs of magic could not be mastered with high innate mana alone. Effort was necessary. Pure, unadulterated effort. One must seek knowledge, refine one’s skills, train, struggle, work oneself to the bone. Imagine climbing ten thousand steps, and when you think there can’t be any more, you take a joyful look at the scenery around you. But you also notice you’re at just another stop on the way to the summit, and there’s nothing you can do about it but pull yourself together, aim for greater heights, and keep moving forward. Those stops were what I had termed “rungs.”

Allow me to elaborate. Let’s say there was a magician more gifted with mana than anyone else in the world, but they were prone to laziness. Set them beside a magician who lacked that gift but was persistent in their efforts to improve. If the two were to compete in a duel of magic, then the former was sure to win. Such were the principles I, Kai Lekius, had devised.

“However, Scallard, there is but one inaccuracy in your interpretation.”

“And what would that be?”

“You said ‘a single genius’ brought magic to be, did you not? That’s where you’re mistaken. The person you speak of was no genius but simply a hard worker. You said yourself that magic does not rely on natural talent. Do you not see the contradiction?”

“Hmm...”

In my previous life, I had by no means been a genius. “Genius” would be a more fitting word for Al, given his aptitude with a sword. I had simply put in exponentially more effort than anyone else. Should there be a god of magic awaiting me at the highest rung, they certainly wouldn’t be one who cared for talent or tolerated indulgence.

“Are you finished?” I asked. “If so, I’d like to propose that we enjoy a bout.”

“Tell me, vampire, are you truly a magician?”

“If I’m a fraud or merely delusional, you can use your magic to prove it, can’t you?”

“This is true.” Scallard gave a faint nod and then arranged his fingers in a complex manner, forming a mudra. Thus began his invocation. “I plead and plead for forgiveness, you who surpasses human understanding, you who surpasses good and evil. It is that you are beyond our comprehension that we know you as a demon. For our ignorance, I plead—”

“Oh? This bodes well. It’s as though I’m suddenly back in a war-torn age.”

I was getting excited. That’s right—*excited*. Invocation was the most advanced, closely guarded, and powerful form of incantation. Without invocation, the highest rung of magic you could draw from would be the sixth, which was still in the realm of child’s play. Or should I say “still in the realms of conjuration”?

By channeling his mana, employing a combination of an invocation and a mudra, and borrowing the mana of transcendent otherworldly beings, Scallard opened a gate to another realm. From naught, a rift as dark as night appeared, and from it crawled *something*.

Its outline resembled that of a human, but it had four arms and stood four meters tall. The thing from the rift was a demon from Nedalos, a tribe that resided in the fringes of the underworld. Scallard had called upon the seventh rung of the summoning school of magic.

“Champion of Nedalos, consider this impudent vampire a sacrificial offering!”

“*I accept your offering, vermin of this realm.*”

Having spoken our language with ease, it charged at me, flailing all four of its arms. Its actions were very fitting of a demon, but I had finished my own invocation by this point.

“Come forth, Carmine King, from your infernal realm and swiftly dispose of those before me.”

As this was an arcane bout, I had followed my opponent’s lead but also gone one step further and cast a spell of the eighth rung of the same school. A crimson rift opened before me and from it emerged a faceless giant of flame. I sent Ifrit, the Carmine King, to attack the summoned demon.

“*You hope to fight the champion of Nedalos with a mere sprite?*”

Scallard’s demon smiled broadly and reached its four arms towards Ifrit. Then, with a smile still on its face, it seized the sprite and was instantly burned to oblivion. It had been an act of pure suicide—Ifrit’s mana was on an entirely different level than the likes of a Nedalos.

As for why the demon had worn such an audacious smile while dying, I couldn’t say. Their minds functioned in ways far different than our own, which made them a complete enigma.

“What? Ifrit?!”

Scallard was visibly bewildered by the great sprite of fire I had summoned. Such a response was indeed natural and understandable of a fellow human being.

“Show me your next spell, Scallard. But know that you cannot win against me by placing your hopes on the likes of the Nedalos.”

I ordered Ifrit to stand by and gave Scallard time to cast another spell.

Exchanges like these were carried out with elegance. Leave the vicious dueling to the warriors.

“Well? Is something the matter?”

“No, not at all. Just wait!”

Scallard raised his right and middle index fingers and began chanting another invocation. During the course of the incantation, his blood vessels began to burst, and blood spurted from all over his body. He was offering up his own blood in order to summon a transcendent being of greater strength, but such a sacrifice could only make up for a lack of technical prowess.

“Rise from the underworld, king of the Nedalos!”

With a look of desperation, Scallard conjured a new black gate from which a demon appeared. This one was of a sturdier build, of greater mana flow, and had two more arms than the previous demon, but it was still a Nedalos.

You could call it a drab choice; you could call it a shallow choice.

“*Mwa ha ha! Vermin of this realm, for calling upon me—*”

“Oh, forget it. Begone.”

I sicced Ifrit on the demon before he could finish his spiel. Ifrit promptly detonated, and both sprite and demon were obliterated without a trace.

There was a long pause. Scallard’s eyes were wide and his mouth agape with shock. However, it did stand to reason that someone like him would be caught off guard. Summoning Ifrit required eighth-rung summoning magic; however, forcing Ifrit to self-destruct required spiritual magic of the tenth rung.

“I’ve grown tired of seeing Nedalos. Show me something else, Scallard. Three hundred years have passed. Is there nothing more...*novel* that you can show me?”

My urging brought Scallard back to his senses. He knelt on the spot and hung his head. *Oh? Could this be some new form of incantation?* I wondered.

“I, Scallard, have been bested by you, esteemed magician of distant heights.”

Oh, he’s surrendering.

“I was foolish and did not know my place when I challenged you. For that, I expect no forgiveness. Be that as it may, I would request that you grant me one favor before I depart this world.”

I paused. “Very well, what is it?” I then said with a sigh.

“Please, show me the heights of magic.”

While Scallard begged me, his eyes glimmered with a level of curiosity that approached madness. He was asking for the best death a magician could hope for.

Well, fair enough, I thought. As the forefather of magic, I had an obligation to indulge that wish.

“Does the fifteenth rung suit you?”

“Oh, thank you, thank you.”

Scallard shook with joy as I showed him just what sort of magic I was capable of improvising.

“Vile Lord of the Flies, ■■■■■■, beckon to my call and appear at once!”

Obeying my incantation, a black rift appeared from nothing. Its size was incomparable to that of the underworld gate that Scallard had previously opened. At the sight of the rift, Scallard cried with profuse joy, as though he were in the presence of a god.

“Oh! Ooh! Oooh!”

From the rift stretched a gargantuan arm that grabbed the prefect tightly. The arm was covered in dense hair and couldn’t have belonged to a being less than thirty meters tall. The fifteenth rung wouldn’t let me summon a gate large enough to let anything more than its arm pass through.

With Scallard in its grip, the arm disappeared through the rift, and then the rift itself vanished. Scallard was now a resident of the underworld. What happened to him there was none of my concern.

“How dull. How dreadfully dull.”

Had I been obtuse for getting excited over my first competition in three

hundred years? Oh, for goodness sake.

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After having rid myself of Scallard, I heard Rosa's voice from behind me. It was a pitifully fearful voice for a sturdy girl like her.

"You... You said your name was Kai Lekius, didn't you?"

Rosa had been raised in a world that knew only peace and nothing of the depths of magic. To her, a display of the techniques born by an age of conflict must have been both strange and overwhelming. It certainly would have been bad for her heart.

"Correct. I am Kai Lekius, the magician—or Kai Lekius, the vampire. Use whichever title you care for."

Hearing my name again, Rosa shrunk back. "I was sure you were giving me an alias or teasing me, but...could you really be related to the wicked god?"

"Wicked god?"

Now it was my turn to be uncomprehending.

"Kai Lekius is a name dreaded by people all over..."

Rosa was still petrified from the waist down, but she wrapped her arms about herself and leaned her torso backwards, away from me.

I'd never heard of Kai Lekius the wicked god, but from the way Rosa spoke, it sounded as though it should only be natural to be familiar with him. That meant that while I'd been asleep... Well, it wasn't hard to imagine. I decided that I would have Lelesha confirm this for me later, figuring that she would give a more accurate picture. But never mind that for now.

"Scallard is defeated, and it seems your ranks have been exhausted."

Rosa let out a pained groan.

"It appears there's nobody left to come to your aid. That puts you in quite a difficult spot, wouldn't you say?"

"Quit it with the jokes already."

Rosa, as if remembering she was supposed to be tenacious, had reassumed

her brave face. However, her quivering and her pallor undid her efforts. In fact, her futile efforts only made me want to have more fun at her expense. It was then that I was suddenly struck with thirst and reminded of what I'd been in the middle of.

"Well, fear not. I won't take your life or anything of the sort. I only intend to delight in the taste of your blood a little while longer."

A fine trade for someone who had attempted to kill me, was it not?

"Why don't you just give in and enjoy it?"

I once again circled Rosa and brushed her red hair aside, exposing the nape of her neck. Close to her ear, I gently whispered that she should cede her heart to the captivating sensualities a vampire can bring about.

"Talk all you want. No matter how monstrous your power is, you can't break my spirit, and no matter how nice it feels, I won't let myself give in to pleasure."

"Now, now, don't be so obstinate," I whispered, tracing a finger along the fang marks on her neck while savoring her floral scent. "I'll offer again—why don't you stay here? I imagine things won't be easy for someone who shamefully returns alone. You could live for what would feel like an eternity compared to a normal life span. Doesn't that sound inviting? Don't you think you're passing up a good opportunity? I'd very much like to have you serve as one of my knights."

At this point, Rosa knew the pleasure of having her blood drunk and couldn't hide her fear after glimpsing my strength. I figured this would be a golden opportunity to try to talk her into joining me. My breath caressed her ears as I gently whispered words of seduction.

Truthfully, due to Rosa's looks, talents, and conviction, I found it hard to let go of her. I was so drawn to her, in fact, that I had felt the need to twice attempt talking her into joining me. But Rosa wasn't one to give in easily.

"F-Forget it. I'm Dame Rosa, vassal of Countess Nastalia! You can take my blood; you can take my life; but you can't take my soul."

Even while trembling with fear, Rosa had managed to raise her voice and reject my whispers. Without suffering any losses to my mood, I continued to

enjoy speaking with her.

“Oh? This countess, or whoever—is she someone you find worthy of remaining loyal to till the end?”

“It’s thanks to Her Excellency Countess Nastalia that Arkus is so peaceful and prosperous!”

“But, Rosa, I’ve seen it with my own eyes. I’ve witnessed soldiers attempt to strip impoverished girls down and carry them off like slaves.”

“That was simply due Larken’s failure to keep his men in line. It’s true that other provinces are rife with nobles who treat poor girls like slaves, but Arkus is different! Countess Nastalia herself finds such treatment greatly distressing. That’s why she gathers up starving girls and gives them a proper education and looks after them so they can one day survive on their own! I have the utmost respect for Her Excellency.”

“Oh? How gracious of her.”

Provided that this countess of hers had no ulterior motives and was truly of a charitable spirit, that is. *Well then, I’ve made my decision*.

“I’ve decided to send you home, Rosa.”

“Wh-What are you playing at?!”

“Return home and tell your countess this: Kai Lekius does not permit the existence of nobility. He does not recognize the existence of nobility. So I will destroy her.”

“That’s beyond absurd! How arrogant are you?!”

“If you ask me, it’s the nobles who are the exemplars of absurdity and arrogance, but enough of that. If the thought of her destruction bothers the countess, then she can oppose me with every bit of her power.”

It’s when people are cornered that they do away with appearances and show their true colors. Could this countess truly be so splendid that someone like Rosa would remain loyal, even when placed on the chopping block? Oh, I sure do look forward to finding out.

“You’ll regret this, you know? Next time, I’ll strike you down!”

I chucked. “You can do that?”

“Maybe not by myself, but with help, I can! With the wisdom of the countess, I can! I’m sure of it!”

“My excitement continues to grow.” I let out a deep laugh of pure joy. And then— “Well, enough of that. Just let me have one more taste before you go.”

As I bit down on Rosa’s neck and took one last gulp, she let out an extraordinary cry of pleasure.

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Once I undid the effects of Zarzi, Rosa fled the town. I noticed a mournful look in her eyes; she probably harbored misgivings about leaving the corpses of her comrades behind. Still, there wasn’t anything she could do on her own, so she had no choice but to give up on them. Multiple times, she turned and looked back at the palace and glared at me as I loitered by the front gate.

“Oh my! Have you taken such a liking to the girl that would personally see her off, my lord?”

“Is that you, Lelesha?”

“At your service, my lord.”

She must have eliminated the troops who had attacked the rear, because she now stood gracefully at my side.

“Her name is Rosa. I’ll make this clear right now: the next time she attacks, you’re not to kill her.”

“As you wish. Though I must say, I’m quite jealous that she would receive such special treatment.”

“There’s something I’d like to know,” I said, ignoring her teasing.

“If it’s the number of children we’re to have, I would like to bear roughly ten offspring for you, my lord.”

“Fool. Who would ask something like that?” I knew it was just one of Lelesha’s jokes, so I laughed it off. Naturally, I didn’t remind her that it would be impossible for a magic doll and a vampire to have children. “Tell me, in detail,

what happened to this land in the three hundred years I was gone.”

“As you wish. Would you care to hear over a drink? I’ll prepare it at once.”

Lelesha and I set out back to the Abyssal Palace. I had no interest in resting in an abode that reeked of blood. To my vampiric sense of smell, the blood had a rotten odor, like leftovers discarded in a back alley.

I ordered my new retainer, Forte, to take care of the bodies and left. While I was at it, I handed off the palace to him. A man who had once been nothing more than the boss of a slum had overnight become ruler of an entire town. It was just like something out of a fairy tale, was it not?

As soon as we returned to the palace, Lelesha began to prepare. I leaned back on the sofa and smiled, enjoying the comfort of being in one’s own home.

Lelesha and Mil were quick to bring out snacks and drinks. Of course, for me, the blood of a girl like Mil or Rosa would have been far more appetizing, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t enjoy human food as well. I took a sip of wine from a silver cup and complemented my servant on her selection while I savored the taste.

“Very fine indeed.”

It was a well-aged wine with complex flavors that overlapped one another, but not in an overbearing or kaleidoscopic way.

“With your awakening in mind, I began to gather wines and spirits and put them in storage many decades ago.”

Lelesha proudly explained that she had a large stock of both new and old bottles. This was the sort of attentiveness I could always rely on her for. I clicked my tongue in satisfaction and brought us to the main subject at hand—during the last three hundred years, just what had happened to the country Al and I had built?

“I’m sure you’ll find that a less than pleasant subject, my lord. If possible, I would have preferred you to hear it from someone else.”

“That won’t be happening. Now, speak plainly.”

“As you wish.” Lelesha bowed deeply and then, with a look of resignation, began to speak. “In the end, the ideals of my lord and his brother lasted no more than fifteen years.”

“What? Are you saying Al committed some error in leadership?”

I had put on a grandiose demonstration—one that involved staging my own death—transferring power to Al because I had believed he was worthy of the role.

“No, my lord. There was no mistake in your judgment. I can say with certainty that the reign of your brother was the height of prosperity for Vastalask in all of its three hundred years. However, he was not blessed with a talented successor.”

Lelesha continued her explanation with deep discomfort while I sat and listened with a look of bitterness on my face.

Al had had five sons, but they had all been of average disposition. He had raised them as well as he could, but even the most promising of them had been only marginally capable of standing above his fellow man. While Al had still been alive, he had supported this heir, Tel Kuon, from behind the scenes and managed an effective reign. However, once Al had reached the end of his life, matters had begun to spiral out of control.

Without the backing of Al, Tel Kuon had had great trouble maintaining the fealty of his retainers. After all, those subjects had mostly been individuals who had directly served me. They had been an undeniably talented lot, but they had also been rather fickle. Over time, the unexceptional Tel Kuon had grown jealous of the capabilities of his retainers and irritated that they weren’t quick to obey him. As a result, he had committed the foolish error of strengthening his power base as a means of keeping them in line. Also, out of fear of being overthrown, he had been the one to prohibit the wide practice of magic, only allowing it to central authorities. Now I understood how the ideals set out by Al and I had crumbled after a mere fifteen years.

“The king had bared his fangs at his own retainers, leaving them with little choice but to sharpen their own fangs in secret.”

“It stands to reason.”

“All of Tel Kuon’s competent retainers feigned loyalty, while under the surface they joined together and conspired to slowly chip away at the authority of the throne. Meanwhile, they did everything they could to undermine the education of Tel Kuon’s heir.”

Their plan had depended on the latter part. The next king had turned out to be an unbearable fool to which even the term “average” would be charitable. The moment the lout had been crowned, he had left his duties to his retainers and immersed himself in chasing women and making merry.

“The next in line after that was, as I mentioned the other day, Emperor Kalis.”

“The imbecile who first proclaimed himself emperor, right?”

“Yes, my lord. Kalis was a man with delusions of grandeur; he renamed the domain to the Vastalask Empire and rewrote our history to claim that he was the founder of the state.”

“And where do Al and I fit into this rewritten history?” I asked with a sardonic grin. From everything Lelesha had told me, I already had an idea of where this was going.

“My lord and his brother were both mythologized.”

“Don’t sugarcoat it.”

“My lord was cast as the wicked god, Kai Lekius. He is a fearsome god of darkness who plots to destroy the world and has slaughtered millions of people. These days, parents chide disobedient children by saying he will come for them or make them his meal.”

“Ha ha! I rather like that!”

“I don’t find it a laughing matter. It displeases me to hear my lord’s name used lightly by masses who know nothing of him.”

Lelesha became sullen, but I continued to laugh at the matter.

“And what of Al?” I asked.

“Your brother is venerated as the beneficent god. He too is known by his real name, Al Shion.”

“So this Kalis fellow rose up with the protection and mandate of the beneficent god, Al Shion. He then defeated me, the wicked god, and was bestowed with the divine right to rule the Vastalask Empire. Is that how it goes?”

“Indeed, though I fail to see the humor in this, as you do.”

How pathetic. How truly pathetic. If one had true confidence, the leadership skills to win over their retainers, and the political skills to satisfy their people, a ruler would have no need to contrive some fable to justify themself.

“And after all that, the fool was generous enough to make all his retainers nobility?”

“Yes, my lord. If Kalis had not secured special privileges for them, he would not have been able to so easily maintain his seat on the throne.”

“The utter fool. He called himself emperor—king of kings? How appalling,” I spat.

I couldn’t express the extent to which I’d labored to change how the land was ruled. Once, nobility had been the norm, but I had built a bureaucracy led entirely by a king. Then this Kalis had come along and simply undone all that effort.

“And so we come to modern Vastalask. The imperial family has cast aside their duties and indulges in amusements. The nobility enjoy and abuse their privileges to the utmost. Even their lackeys, the civil servants and military, exploit the populace.”

“That’s enough. I understand.” I set the cup on the table, away from me. Its contents had suddenly lost their appeal. “Lelesha.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Vastalask is a domain Al and I worked hard to build.”

“Indeed.”

“We put to rest an age of conflict and bore hardships so that every soul may live peacefully.”

“Indeed.”

“And yet, after a mere three hundred years...I can’t bear to see it.”

“Then what will you do, my lord?”

“Do I need to say? I’ll decimate the current hegemony with my own two hands. Once I’ve accomplished that, I’ll rebuild my ideal domain.”

I had reincarnated as a vampire in order to research magic to my heart’s content, not to handle trifling matters such as these. But what could I do? I couldn’t just sit back and say, “Oh, so that’s how it turned out,” after seeing the ideals of Al and me be trampled on. How could I forgive such a deed?

“Breah was just the beginning. After that, I’ll take Arkus and use it as my foothold to spread my power far and wide until every corner of the land is under my rule.”

I could study magic some other time. I had an eternity, after all.

“Your will will be done.”

I nodded to Lelesha and sank into a deep silence. Thinking it best to have some time to myself, I waved a hand, dismissing her. I had expected my faithful servant to comply immediately, but instead she disobeyed my orders.

As I wondered what she was up to, she walked in front of me and sat down, straddling my legs. I felt the soft sensation of her bottom press against my knees.



“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Taking a moment to grieve the loss of your brother, as well as to grieve the death of your ideals and pray for the true soul of Vastalask.”

“Do that somewhere else.”

“I must refuse. To grieve alone would be a tearful ordeal.”

She didn’t say whose tears those would be.

Lelesha didn’t say another word and held my head to her chest. I let her do as she pleased and buried my face in her shapely bosom. I did feel a slight bit better.

She was right, I thought. *It is better not to grieve alone.*

Chapter Three: To Once Again Rule the World

“...and so, by those circumstances, I shamefully return alone.”

Kneeling with her head bowed, Rosa finished her report, having spared no detail of the failed attack on Breah. Needless to say, she was reporting to Countess Nastalia. The countess, a young woman with long, luscious black hair, was the ruler of Arkus province and one of the most prominent nobles in the Vastalask Empire.

Long ago, patriarchy had been tradition, and it had been difficult for a woman to become head of a family, but times had changed since then. Now, houses run by women were commonplace. In order to achieve this future, Kai Lekius, a firm believer in meritocracy, had pushed for women’s advancement in society, but that fact had been buried during the fabrication of history and was unbeknown to Rosa.

Even so, the sentiment remained. If one tried to assert to a citizen of modern Vastalask that a woman couldn’t succeed a house no matter how capable she might be, they would have been considered irrational.

“I see. So Scallard is dead.”

Lady Natalya of the Nastalia Earldom sighed, but she didn’t seem too upset over the prefect’s death. She and Rosa were in the countess’s castle in the provincial capital, meeting in her personal chambers built as a space of relaxation. With Rosa kneeled before her, Lady Natalya lolled in a chaise lounge while the two of them were discussing matters.

“It chills me to think this was done by a single vampire,” she said.

“Strictly speaking, I believe there was someone defending the rear of the palace. While I couldn’t make certain of their existence, all the troops assigned to the rear were swiftly eliminated.”

Rosa had been forced to retreat in shame, but it was the not even being able

to return with useful information that caused her shoulders to shake under the weight of her feelings of worthlessness.

“From what you tell of our opponent’s power, I wouldn’t be surprised no matter how many soldiers or knights we lost. The problem is that we lost Scallard, a magician.”

“The vampire also spoke of magicians and magic. What exactly is magic, Your Ladyship?”

“Ah, yes. It’s no surprise that you wouldn’t know, even if you are a former imperial knight,” the countess replied. With her head bowed, Rosa was unable to see her expression as she spoke.

It wasn’t for naught that the countess was one of the most prominent nobles in the empire. Rosa found it deeply relieving to discover that Lady Natalya already knew of “magicians” and “magic,” and she rejoiced that she had been able to return with information for her beloved countess after all.

“My lady, I beg you—please teach me what magic is,” Rosa implored, her voice trembling. “The knowledge might assist me the next time I face the vampire.”

She knew it was a brazen request. Ordinarily, if the countess ordered Rosa to put herself to the blade for fleeing alone, she wouldn’t have been in any position to protest, but Rosa was daring enough to ask for her life and another chance to fight. This, of course, wasn’t to save her own skin but out of desire to fight again for Lady Natalya’s sake.

“Rosa.”

“Y-Yes, my lady.”

“Come with me.”

“Understood.”

After flinching slightly, Rosa brought herself next to Lady Natalya’s chair while keeping her head low. Still unaware of the countess’ expression, she waited to see if she would or would not be forgiven. And then—

“I’m glad you made it back alive. Thank you for your report.”

Suddenly, Rosa was embraced by Lady Natalya. The female knight found her face buried deep in the cleavage of the countess's far more bountiful bosom. Soft and warm, Lady Natalya had received Rosa like a saintess.

Rosa felt as though she might cry once she realized she had been forgiven. Now she understood why the countess had wanted to hear her report in her personal chambers rather than in a throne room full of her retainers. This way, Rosa wouldn't have to bear her shame in front of the others, and the countess could comfort her like this. Lady Natalya's kindness warmed Rosa's soul.

"Indeed, I shall teach you about magic," the countess said warmly, "so please hone yourself in preparation for another fight."

"Oh, thank you so much, my lady! Next time, I'll be sure to make you proud."

"I appreciate your loyalty, but don't get yourself cornered, all right? If this opponent is what you say he is, then it's highly probable he's been alive for hundreds of years. He could be a vampire of the Lord variety, or worse—a True Blood. Understand this: this opponent may not be one you can handle by yourself."

"Understood. You have my word that I'll coordinate with my comrades."

"Thank you. Hearing that puts me at ease," the countess said before hugging Rosa even tighter.

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Not everyone was capable of the same benevolence as Lady Natalya. Rosa knew this well. She had begun to make regular visits to the castle to learn all about this so-called magic. Even now, she was walking down a corridor that was being cleaned. Wherever she went, fingers pointed at her back.

"Look. It's Dame Rosa."

"So it's true she fled by herself."

"And she fought a vampire, didn't she?"

"The men were completely butchered, but it seems Rosa's so pretty, the vamp sucked her blood and let her go."

"Oh my! Won't Rosa turn into one of them?"

“How terrifying!”

So went the gossip that had bloomed among the maidservants, chamberlains, and courtiers in the castle. Ridden with the deepest shame, Rosa silently endured their whispers. *I haven’t become a vampire or anything of the sort, nor did I sell my soul to Kai Lekius!*

But now she knew the pleasure of having her blood drunk. It was a sensation too sensual for her to forget. At a moment’s notice, she would feel her body yearn for that man. She’d even had dreams of dizzying trysts with him. When she awoke, she would sink into self loathing once she noticed herself locked in a passionate kiss with her pillow. Rosa’s belief in purity only strengthened her feelings that she betrayed Lady Natalya when she had these dreams. She had no choice but to be stern with herself.

Be strong, Rosa. Aren’t you the countess’s top knight? You finally met someone worthy of your loyalty, didn’t you? Don’t forget your joy in serving her!

Rosa had been born into House Rindelf, a line of warriors, and had accordingly been raised to be an excellent knight. With a courageous and straightforward temperament and, above all, a natural aptitude for the blade, she had been unable to see herself becoming anything else. She would often dream of offering her life up to a worthy lord and living out her days as a proud knight.

However, back in the imperial capital, that dream had not come to pass. Her first superior, the captain of the imperial guard and her second, a senior imperial knight, had both praised her in abundance, but, because she was a woman, they had deep down disdained her and not considered her to be a fighter. Both superiors had kept Rosa close at all times and acted as though she were of importance to them. However, in reality, they’d thought of the attractive female knight as a mere accessory to improve their reputation.

Once Rosa had become aware of this, she had insisted she be allowed to prove her strength, but the higher-ups had paid her no heed. In fact, her bosses had reacted with the indignation of someone bitten by their lapdog. Her first superior had been the kin of a marquess; the next, the second son of a duke. The very act of someone of inferior stature such as Rosa voicing words of opposition had been impermissible to them.

Rosa had vaguely understood this, but no matter how futile the fight, she wasn't prone to giving in. In the end, at the behest of Duke Marxizer (the father of her second superior), she had been transferred out west to Arkus. *But that turned out to be the end of my misfortune. It was because of that transfer that I met Lady Natalya.*

Arkus was stable and prosperous in a manner atypical for a province on the fringes of the land, which was proof of the countess's excellent leadership. She was a benevolent leader who would frequently reach out and aid the poor, and, of course, she valued Rosa as knight. Unlike Rosa's previous superiors, the countess didn't treat her as an ornament and would often entrust her with important duties. *You're in the best environment you could hope for, Rosa. You're being an absolute fool for letting yourself be seduced by a vampire's charm!*

Rosa slapped herself on the cheeks, reinvigorating herself, then quickened her pace down the corridor as though to shake off the gossip of the maidservants. Rosa stood up straight to portray an air of dignity as she marched down the corridor, but her attitude just seemed to irk those who were watching her. Their chatter grew louder and louder, as though they wanted Rosa to hear them.

"Oh my! How dare a filthy vampire stroll through our esteemed countess's castle?"

"Now we'll have to start our cleaning all over again."

"Hee hee, when do you think she'll sprout fangs that peek out from her lips?"

"I can't wai— I mean, how terrifying!"

While spiteful remarks pelted her from behind, Rosa ground her teeth. *Don't listen to them! Just remember how joyful Her Ladyship was to see you make it back alive. That alone is enough to make you happy!* Rosa thought, but at the same moment, she heard a voice come to her aid.

"Simpletons, the lot of you. Don't you know that a vampire drinking your blood isn't enough to make you their thrall?"

Reflexively, Rosa came to a halt and looked in the direction of the voice. There

stood a slender knight of fair looks and honey-blonde hair. The knight looked to be the same age as Rosa, but Rosa wasn't sure how old the knight truly was. This was because, as her long ears would indicate, she was an elf, a race known for their longevity. The elven knight spoke loudly to the gossiping maidservants.

"There are two conditions by which you become a vampire's kin. One is by having every drop of blood in your body drunk by a vampire; the other is for you to consume their blood. The former would turn you into a Lesser vampire, who would lose all free will. The latter would allow you to think for yourself, but either way, vampires abhor sunlight. Would such a being be able to walk around in the middle of the day? What ignorant fools you all are."

Confused, Rosa called out to the elf. "Jenni... To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Jenni came from one the elven families native to Arkus. To be precise, she served the earldom as representative of the elves, who were one of the earldom's oldest allies. Rosa, on the other hand, was a newcomer who had been picked up by Lady Natalya after being expelled from the capital. The difference in stature between the two had resulted in a rivalry that involved frequent conflicts and clashes.

"I'm not making any special effort to defend you, Dame Rosa. I simply cannot permit falsehoods to be freely spoken as truths."

"Oh yeah? That sure sounds like something an elf would fuss over." Rosa cursed herself for having almost let herself feel grateful towards the elf.

"Quite so," Jenni replied, making no effort to disagree. Then she added, "I hear you were bested by a vampire, Dame Rosa."

"What of it? Have you come to laugh at me?"

"I suppose I would have had it been a Lesser or Normal. However, I heard from Her Ladyship that what you faced may have been a Lord or True Blood. Should that be the case, our problems are far too grave to be laughing over."

Jenni was painfully serious in all matters, and perhaps even more so with Rosa, but her sound judgment in times like these was proof of her competency. Rosa relaxed a bit. Choice words floated through her head, but she had sworn to Lady Natalya herself that she'd cooperate with her comrades.

“If you’d like to hear the details, I can suffer the embarrassment,” she said instead. “My personal pride is insignificant compared to exterminating that vampire.”

“I would rather consider that a display of true pride,” Jenni said, her expression austere. “That is what makes you a fitting rival. Should this vampire be one who has resided in Arkus for a long time, then perhaps my people will know something. Just what might the name of this vampire be?”

“He called himself ‘Kai Lekius.’”

“‘Kai Lekius,’ you say?!” Jenni choked on her words, unable to maintain her usual tone and composure.

“D-Does that mean something to you?” Rosa asked.

Jenni’s face instantly clouded with rage, and she lowered her voice. “Unforgivable.” But then she suddenly shifted and spoke with vigor. “Completely unforgivable! I’ll bury that vampire with my own hands! My people know countless ways of slaying vampires. I’ll show them just how deep that knowledge goes!”

Although Jenni, too, was a knight, her skills with a blade fell short of Rosa’s. However, as an elf, Jenni possessed strange abilities that allowed her to employ the aid of spirits. *Maybe that has something to do with how to defeat an immortal being*.

Rosa shuddered with excitement. If it was for her beloved Lady Natalya, turning away the help of her rival was unthinkable.

◇♦◇♦◇

Grane was a town situated in the northern region of Arcus and home of the prefect’s office. The town was governed by Baron Dracchio, who also served as prefect of the region. He was a stout man approaching forty-four years of age. If one asked his retainers, he was “incompetent,” “greedy,” and “lacking in humanity,” among other things. (Of course, no one said those things aloud, lest they wanted their head to fly.) In a peak display of the benefits of nobility systems, having the good enough fortune to be born into the right family had allowed this halfwit to live as a member of the ruling class.

On this night, Dracchio was, once again, pushing the bounds of depravity. In order to take girls into his possession, he would first have a civil servant summon a girl and her entire family to his castle. He would lambast the parents over taxes they hadn't paid and, as punishment, order them to hand over one of their virgin daughters.

If this were any other territory, there would be no need for a baron to go to such lengths to round up town girls. They would simply have to order their soldiers to bring the girls to their chambers, and that would have been the end of it. However, Countess Nastalia, the ruler of Arkus, prohibited excessive improprieties towards the people.

Dracchio was a man of great stature, but he was also a coward and lacked the courage necessary to oppose the will of a "fiend" like Lady Natalya. Therefore, he would have his retainers think up various means for him to commit his misdeeds while skirting the law. For instance, they would impose a new tax for some reason or another and force the greater part of the population into debt and use that as a pretext.

The parents, having been ordered to surrender their daughter as a sacrifice, pressed their heads to the ground and pleaded with the baron.

"Please, forgive us!"

"I beg your forgiveness!"

But, of course, those pleas fell on deaf ears, and the baron ordered the girl be brought to his chambers. In the face of his cruelty, the parents were overcome with rage and began to punch and bite at the soldiers.

This was, undoubtedly, an act of treason. Licking his lips with eagerness, Dracchio ordered the parents be beheaded in front of the girl. With her spirit broken beyond repair, she followed him willingly to his bedchamber, where he enjoyed his fill of a girl now as lifeless as a doll.

"Fools. They were to oppose me, the prefect," Dracchio spat, not feeling a single pang of conscience. He was truly the embodiment of the pitfalls of nobility, of the horrors that sprang from granting unearned power to rotten souls.

However, this would be the last night the vices of Baron Dracchio would go unpunished.

“Kai Lekius comes for you; Kai Lekius comes for you,” a lone voice sang. It was the dead of night, and a torrent of wolves were flooding the main street of Grane.

“Kai Lekius comes to make a meal out of you!” the voice continued to sing. A swarm of bats vast enough to block out the moonlight passed over Grane.

“Are there any bad nobles about? Are there any soldiers or officials hiding behind them? Kai Lekius comes to make a meal out of you; he comes to make a meal of you all!”

Lelesha continued to sing while seeing off the bats and wolves. The bats and wolves, the dissipated body of Kai Lekius, were headed towards Baron Dracchio’s castle. This would be a battle between a lone vampire and a man with a castle and an army at his disposal. Needless to say, Lelesha held not a sliver of doubt that her lord would come out victorious.

The baron’s castle was patrolled by guards at all times. In front of the gates, atop the ramparts, in watchtowers, and in the woods of the rear garden, they stood on high alert. It only made sense that a man who had earned the ire of countless people would cower in fear of the countless ways one might attempt revenge.

All at once, the guards felt something change. A swarm of bats had blanketed the sky and covered the moon.

“What the hell is that?”

“Dunno, but it sure gives me the creeps. Should we report to the knights?”

“What’s to report? They’re just bats.”

“Sure, but that many...”

Exchanges like this took place all over the castle grounds, but not one of them reached a conclusion. In the blink of an eye, the bats swooped down from the

blackened sky and encompassed every guard, biting each one to death.

Meanwhile, the guards stationed about the inner and outer gates were struck by a pitch-black wave of wolves that tore at their limbs and throats. With the force of an avalanche, the bats and wolves pushed into the castle and began to wreak havoc.

“Eeeeeek!”

“What are these monsters?!”

“Let’s get out of here!”

“Aaaaah!”

The guards on the inside were eliminated just as those patrolling outside had been. The castle’s interior soon became a maelstrom of blood, flesh, and screams. The knights fell as the soldiers had, their superior skills making little difference against the overwhelming force of a True Blood.

“Stay away! Get back!”

One such knight had been reduced to panic in the face of the oncoming pack of wolves. He was callously using an undressed girl as a human shield. The girl had been held in the castle as a “hand-me-down” to the knights after Dracchio had tired of playing with her.

Just like the knight behind her, the girl went pale at the sight of the wolves baring their fangs. She dreaded her inescapable demise and shuddered at the thought of the pain of being ripped apart.

But the wolves paid the pitiful girl no heed; they targeted only the despicable knight hiding behind her. They bit his legs and dragged him down before, one after another, they piled on top of the knight and ripped him apart. The knight cried out for forgiveness, but the wolves showed no mercy. The girl, meanwhile, fainted at the horrific sight of a person being eaten alive right in front of her. Even then, the wolves didn’t do so much as look at her.

In truth, there were many girls who had been abused by Dracchio and remained locked up in the castle as playthings for the knights. There were also maidservants, cooks, gardeners, and stablehands who were all being forced to

work in the castle against their will. Many of them collapsed with fear in the face of the oncoming horde, but not once did the creatures attack the innocent. Their behavior was nothing like that of wild animals.

And then there was Baron Dracchio. He had been dozing in the castle's inner sanctum—the safest place he could be—when he started awake to the sound of ceaseless screaming. He realized immediately that he was in grave danger. The groans and shrieks echoing throughout the castle were enough to tip off even someone as thickheaded as he was.

Dracchio sprinted down the corridor and called out for the most reliable knight in the castle. "Inspector! Inspector!"

The inspector in question was a middle-aged knight dispatched by the Countess Nastalia to keep an eye on Dracchio. Normally, this knight was a severe thorn in the baron's side, but that fiend wouldn't have valued him if he wasn't strong. He had once been an imperial knight, or at least came within inches of the title before a rival had deprived him of the honor. Either way, there was an abundance of extraordinary rumors about this man.

Suddenly, a mocking voice rang out from behind him. "Would *this* be the inspector you're referring to?"

Dracchio lurched to a halt and slowly turned around. There before him was the knight he had been looking for, now lifeless and covered in blood. A strange young man was dangling the inspector by the neck.

"Who are you?" Dracchio asked.

"Kai Lekius," the man replied grandly, tossing the corpse to the side. In no particular rush, he strolled down the corridor and towards Dracchio.

"Stay away! Get back!" Dracchio shouted, spittle flying through the air.

But there was no escape for the baron. He had fallen to the ground the moment he'd spotted the bloodied inspector. The young man who called himself Kai Lekius looked down on the baron as he approached. Slowly. Steadily. Not stopping for a moment. His eyes glimmered with murderous intent.

"I beg you, don't come any closer! Don't kill me!" Dracchio cried, pleading for

his life. But Kai Lekius kept on walking.

“Forgive me! Oh, please forgive me!”

There lay the sad sight of a noble prostrated, grinding the head against the floor. But Kai Lekius kept on walking.

At last, the strange man reached the baron, pulled him up by the scruff of his neck, and forced Dracchio to face him. And then he spoke. “Don’t worry. I won’t kill you.”

“You’ll forgive me?!”

“Oh, I won’t dirty my hands with the likes of you.” Kai Lekius smiled broadly and laughed from the bottom of his heart. “I shall put you on a cross in the middle of the town square, with rocks piled nearby. But that’s no matter; if you’re a man who’s been kind to his people, not one stone will be thrown. They’ll undo the ropes and let you down. Isn’t that right?”

Don’t confuse whose forgiveness you should be begging for, the young man’s laughter seemed to say.

◇♦◇♦◇

The night I, Kai Lekius, conquered Baron Dracchio's castle came to an end, and in came the dawn. From the fourth floor of the castle, I gazed down at the town square. Something that had once been human hung from a cross there. It had already been barraged by the townspeople and now stood as a twisted piece of art. After a single glance, I lost interest in the wretched lump of flesh and walked away from the window.

In the castle, which still reeked of blood, I met with twenty-or-so men. We were gathered in a hall that had once been used by previous prefects as a space to hold audiences with the common people. Because the most recent prefect had neglected that duty, the room was now covered in a layer of dust. Lelesha had quickly cleaned the room for me.

I took a seat on an extravagant chair and spoke to the kneeling men. "All of you, raise your heads and stand tall. Our relationship is not that of a master and his servants. You can dispense with the formalities."

Yet not only did they remain kneeling, but they didn't even look up.

All of the men before me were knights. The one closest to me was a forty-something-year-old man named Georg.

"You have freed Grane from the tyrannical baron, and for that, we cannot find the proper words to thank you," he said. "We cannot find the proper means to praise you. As such, it would be a great honor if you would consider welcoming us as your loyal servants. Kai Lekius, please accept this request from us and the people of the town."

Georg's voice carried a strength atypical of his age. Many of the knights followed Georg's lead and lowered their heads even farther.

"Very well," I said. "I accept your request. However, I will leave the management of this town to you, the knights of Grane. After all, you are the heart of Grane. Do as you see fit and bring these people justice and prosperity." I paused for a moment before continuing in a severe tone. "But should you put personal interests first or become nothing more than another iteration of Dracchio... You understand the consequences, don't you?"

"Of course, my lord. The events of last night made us thoroughly aware of

your fearsomeness. What could drive us to be so foolish as to defy you?”

Georg and the other knights, clearly feeling tense, corrected their posture. These men had once served under the previous baron. Unlike the swine who had recently held the title, the previous Baron Dracchio had been unexceptional but also honest and kind. The knights had found meaning in serving him. But then that pig had inherited the title and began a tyrannical reign that had weighed on the consciences of these men.

Any attempts to reprimand the baron would only invite their execution, and they had no allies to call on for help. Just about all the other knights and soldiers had joined in the abuse and exploitation. These kind souls, a mere ten men, had been left with no choice but to feign loyalty. However, the men had shared a common ambition, and in secret, they had done what they could to help the people while watching vigilantly for the opportunity to bring the swine to his knees.

Then they had heard rumors of Kai Lekius.

Roughly a month had passed since I’d slain Prefect Scallard. During that time I had conquered the entirety of Arkus’s western territory and taken eight towns of varying sizes under my control. However, I had left the management of those towns to others. Similar to how I had chosen Forte from the slums of Breah, I had chosen prominent subservient citizens to lead each area.

Three hundred years ago, a bureaucracy I had built myself had been at my disposal. However, those days were long gone, and I had to make do with what I could get. To see who might make a fitting member of my next bureaucracy, I would keep a close eye on those I’d left in charge. Forte, for instance, seemed like a promising fit.

It seemed that Georg and his comrades had gotten word of how I was upheaving towns, and figured my ways were infinitely better than the tyranny of Baron Dracchio. That was what had led to them contacting me in secret and requesting that I eliminate the swine and free Grane along with the rest of the northern Arkus. There was no shortage of courage and initiative among this lot.

Of course, in an ideal world, they would have sorted it out themselves, but we all have our limitations. Not everyone could be me. I wouldn’t ask the

impossible of them; that's a habit particular to those who criticize others from a safe distance. But I digress.

I had taken a liking to Georg and his comrades and had made my way to Grane. After all, it had been my plan from the start to head north or south once I had conquered western Arkus.

"And what will you do?" I said, not to the knights of Grane but to the ten other men in the room. These were all knights under the servitude of either the eastern or southern prefect. They, too, were dissatisfied and aggrieved by the behavior of their leaders, but they had been more skeptical of the rumors of my capabilities and so had not made an immediate request. Instead, they had asked if they could first watch me depose the prefect of the north. They had wanted a preview of sorts. After all, once they crossed the line of committing treason, their lives would be at stake. I couldn't blame them for being cautious, so I had charitably forgiven their indecisiveness.

"Kai Lekius, we no longer harbor doubts about your strength."

"Please forgive our previous lack of courage."

"Following the knights of Grane, we swear loyalty to you."

"We ask that you bring freedom to the east and south as soon as you are able to."

"We shall assist you in any way we can."

The knights of the east and south farther lowered their heads.

I nodded. "First will be the south, then the east. Once we have central Arkus surrounded, we shall march on Lady Nastalia's personal estate. Do we have an agreement?"

"Yes, my lord!"

Once I'd dismissed the knights, I took some time to relax in the baron's parlor. I found it somewhat unpleasant to think that the room had once been used by that swine. However, Mil, who I had brought from the Abyssal Palace, was busily cleaning it up. She was still only around ten years old but made for a splendid attendant. Considering both her energy and diligence, I could

understand why Lelesha had taken a liking to her.

While I thought this over, she was giving it her all wiping a table clean. I lay back on the sofa and watched her work. As she vigorously scrubbed, her hips shook back and forth beneath her maid uniform. That and her concerted effort made for a scene most stimulating and enticing to a vampire.

Feeling mischievous, I snuck up behind Mil and sank my fangs into her dainty neck. She yelped in surprise.

“M-Master, please stop. I’m in the middle of cleaning.” She tried to resist with her small arms, but that wasn’t enough to stop me from playfully drinking her blood. “If I don’t do a proper job, Lelesha will scold me,” she said while resting her limp body against me.

What a diligent girl she was. Even when she should have been stunned by the sensation of having one’s blood drunk, she was still trying to resist the pleasure and focus on her duties. The wicked impulses in me grew stronger.

“Tell me, Mil, have you ever heard the tales of how vampires can’t enter someone’s house unless invited?”

“I...I have. Long ago, from my grandma.”

Mil’s answer was punctuated by heaves brought on by waves of lust surging within her.

“Those tales are a widespread distortion of the truth. They’re not quite accurate,” I explained.

“Then what is the truth?”

“A spiritual link is formed between a vampire and those whose blood they suck.”

By a more narrow definition, a vampire’s descendant was one whose “parent” vampire either entirely drained their blood or gave them some of their own. Either method turned the subject into the vampire’s offspring. As I had just reincarnated as a True Blood, I still had no descendants of my own. I had thought Rosa would be my first, but she had refused.

However, in a broader sense of the word, anyone whose blood had been

drunk became a vampire's kin. A spiritual bond was formed, and the the fate's of both parties were intertwined. By this definition, Mil was one of my descendants.

By drinking a subject's blood repeatedly, this bond would deepen. I had been drinking Mil's blood on a near daily basis, so it was safe to assume a considerable bond had formed between us.

"Oh... So what happens when the bond deepens?" Mil asked. A hint of pride crossed her expression. By now, she had entirely given in to the pleasure of having her blood drunk..

"If you were to truly reject my fangs, I wouldn't be able to lay a finger on you."

This trait had become the basis for the erroneous tales of vampires requiring invitations.

"Do you understand where I'm headed with this?" I asked with a wicked smile.

If this girl truly had been troubled by me and adamant about continuing her cleaning, then I wouldn't have been able to get close to her in the first place. But seeing as I could, somewhere deep down, Mil must have wanted me to drink her blood.

Mil was young but still a clever girl. The moment she caught on, her face became flushed. "You're a terrible man, master."

She sulked almost like an adult would and capitulated to my fangs, shifting around and asking that I embrace her while I drink.

"I've taken quite a liking to you, Mil," I whispered in the darling girl's ear. It wasn't for the taste alone that I drank her blood almost every day. "If you wish, I can come to you at any time and sink my fangs into you no matter where you are, even if we're far, far apart."

I wasn't saying this to be romantic. As a True Blood, I could sense when the hearts of my descendants called out for me. I could answer those calls and cross time and space to reach them. Consider it the inverse of how even a True Blood couldn't approach a descendant who didn't want them to.

“Is that true?” Mil sighed, not out of doubt for what I’d told her, but out of joy, and clung to me even tighter. “Lelesha won’t be too happy about this,” she whispered innocently.

“Don’t be afraid. Lelesha isn’t scary—at least not at times like these.”

I, on the other hand, spoke with the immoral pleasure of someone enjoying a spontaneous affair in secret.

“She probably won’t be back for some time,” I said.

“She won’t?” Mil looked surprised. She seemed to be wondering what sort of business would cause Lelesha to leave without me.

About that...

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Five mounted knights were traveling along the road southwest of Grane. However, they had their horses at a gait slow enough for the knights to converse with each other. The road entered a small forest where their boisterous laughter was absorbed by the trees and shrubs.

“Bwa ha ha, what a monster he was! Did any of you expect that?!”

“Indeed, indeed! With him, we should have no problem deposing the southern prefect from his office in Buery!”

“It’ll be simple. Things will change overnight!”

“Ha ha, look at you sounding all clever!”

The five knights, the oldest and most prominent among them being a man named Joseph, were very pleased with the situation. They all served under the prefect of the south—officially, that is—but were dissatisfied with Prefect Zindelger and had been secretly hoping to be rid of him.

Zindelger was deeply loyal to Lady Nastalia and pathologically stringent. Therefore, he permitted no misdeeds, and no misdeed went unpunished. Let’s say, for instance, we had a man charged with larceny for committing petty thefts, a woman charged with homicide for killing her lover during a quarrel, and two children charged with battery after hurting each other in a minor scuffle. With no mercy or leniency, all of these individuals would be equally

sentenced to decapitation. Such was the way of Zindelger.

The knights felt working for such a prefect was no way to live. No one knew just how small of an error would lead to their execution. And so, Zindelger was not a popular man. In particular, the old order of knights, who had served under the previous prefect, could often be heard muttering about “the good old days” before Zindelger.

Joseph and the four knights accompanying him fit into this crowd. They would say things like, “Back in those days, we could threaten innkeeps into clearing our tabs, or take bribes to look the other way. As long as we didn’t go too far, the prefect would laugh and forgive us. Yeah, those were the days.”

And now, at last, they were to be free of Zindelger’s oppressive rule—just like how Dracchio had been removed of his post in the north.

“Thank the heavens for this vampire!”

“Too right. All we have to do is let him take the reins and make sure we get comfy posts when it’s all over and done with!”

“And you’re willing to bow your head and flatter the likes of a vampire?”

“At this point, we’re masters of feigning loyalty!”

So very pleased with the situation, the knights laughed to their hearts’ content, but a woman’s voice cut through their laughter.

“Oho, secrets are meant to be discussed in more hushed tones, are they not?”

From atop their saddles, the knights looked around in bewilderment.

“Wh-Who’s there?!”

“Where are you?!”

“What’s happening?!”

It was at that moment that their horses began to rear. So as not to be thrown off, the knights gripped the reins and secured their feet in the stirrups, holding on for all their worth. Their training as knights might have helped them, but a normal rider would have been sent to the ground.

Then before they could catch their breaths, the knights noticed something

else. Still rearing, their horses had become still as statues albeit still drawing breath. The bloodshot eyes of the creatures darted around; the horses, too, had no idea what was happening to them.

“Wh-What in blazes?!”

“What is this?!”

“It would be terribly bothersome if you were to run away, so I bound you in place with my threads.”

The owner of the voice revealed herself. It was a woman in a dress—the ravishing beauty who had been standing at the vampire’s side. She had appeared standing on a tree branch and then hopped down right in front of the knights. The movement was so deft, it was as though she were weightless and bore wings.

Still in the ridiculous positions of clinging to their rearing horses, Joseph and the other knights began making blusterous attempts at flattery while making their excuses.

“It’s a p-pleasure to see you, Miss Lelesha.”

“Wh-What brings you out here?”

“We’re currently hurrying back to Buery. There, in the name of Lord Kai Lekius, we shall gather up the discontented and convince them to swear absolute loyalty to the king of the night.”

“Do you perhaps bring tidings from our lord? Was there perhaps something he forgot?”

“Aha ha, even our lord can show unexpected shortcomings...”

However, Lelesha wasn’t buying any of it.

“I will not permit lying.”

As Lelesha’s words, the five men were struck with intense pain throughout their bodies. The pain was enough to cause grown adults, and knights at that, to cry out.

“Aaagh!”

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!”

“H-Help!”

They had no idea what had happened or what was still happening to them. It was as though something invisible was directly stabbing their entire nervous system.

“Indeed, you guessed it,” Lelesha said with a casual smile. “My myriad threads can be manipulated to behave like needles. They can cause terrible pain, so do watch your behavior.”

The knights could no longer speak and simply nodded through their tears.

“My lord, unlike those of the northern and eastern territories, could tell that your loyalty wasn’t so genuine.”

“N-No, we would never do anything so—”

But Lelesha cut him off. “I believe I prohibited lies.”

The knights cried out in pain.

“My lord is not to be taken lightly. Just how many thousands—no, *ten thousands* of subjects do you think a monarch like him has dealt with? He needs not more than a glimpse to discern shallow minds like yours.”

The knights continued to cry out in pain. “Please, stop it already! We’ll change!”

“Oho, that didn’t seem to be a lie,” said Lelesha.

Unable to bear the pain any longer, the knights sniveled and begged.

“Yes, no lies!”

“We swear we’ll show true loyalty to Lord Kai Lekius.”

“Please show mercy! Show mercy!”

At last, Lelesha smiled like a saint and assented.

“Understood. You know, I was worried your pledges were just a means to escape the pain and that you might revert back to your plans of treachery. To prevent that, I planned to prolong the pain for half a day or so, but now I’ll

shorten that period to *two hours*."

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I, Kai Lekius, couldn't help but smile.

"Sounds as though you punished them quite severely, right, Lelesha?"

I was sitting in the northern prefect's residence, speaking facetiously to the beauty at my side.

"They were ruffians unfit to serve you, my lord," Lelesha said with a straight face, as though stating the obvious. "It was my duty to correct them."

Across from me were the recipients of that correction: Joseph and his comrades. All had a pallor that suggested they had seen hell.

"Hear me," I said to the knights. Rather, I said it not to those knights but also to Georg and his comrades, who were also present. "I do not seek anything special from you as leaders. I only ask that you follow reasonable courses of action. Therefore, I believe in rewarding good and punishing evil. Am I understood? Anyone who commits treachery or misdeeds is sure to be punished." I paused and let my glare fall on Joseph and the other knights of Buery. That alone sent them into shivers. "And those who accomplish meritorious deeds are sure to be rewarded. I shall ask again: Am I understood?"

Joseph timidly requested permission to speak. I granted his request.

"In other words, even those of us who erred in the past can still correct our ways and commit ourselves to loyal service and worthy accomplishments. Are you saying that if that should come to pass, then we, too, may one day find ourselves men of honor and stature?"

"Indeed. Under my rule, if you desire wealth and prestige, then you earn it through honest work and not conspiracy."

The Buery knights prostrated themselves before me.

"Yes, my lord!"

"We swear to serve you earnestly!"

"Please bear witness to our diligence!"

Next, Georg spoke up on part of the knights of Grane. “On that note, my lord, I would like to offer a suggestion.”

I granted the man permission to continue.

“I would ask that in the coming battle with the southern prefect, you grant us an opportunity to demonstrate our strength.”

“Oh? Are you saying you have no need for my strength?”

“Currently, the forces of the north and those of the west march under your banner. If we combine those with the inside help of Sir Joseph and his men, I see no reason why the southern prefect shouldn’t fall before us.”

As for the knights of the east, Georg determined that they would likely not participate as they’d be unable to prepare for such an expedition in time.

“Very well, I shall leave it to you.”

After receiving my blessing, Georg became visibly relieved before a look of determination crossed his face. Joseph and his comrades, too, bore sparks in their eyes.

I was pleased. Very pleased.

Ambition may be a good thing, but esteem should be envied in moderation. Competition among retainers is good for keeping a legion active and healthy. Of course, that doesn’t apply to mutual sabotage born from petty feuds and jealousies, but ensuring that doesn’t come to pass is part of a leader’s duty and a test of their capacity. I, for one, was a man once praised as monarch of a continent and who was aided by the dependable Lelesha, meaning these men could enjoy honest competition as much as they pleased.

“What sort of preparations do you need to make?” I asked the knight. I had only just single-handedly deposed the northern prefect, so Georg had to prioritize taking control of the territory. Joseph most likely required time to gather up allies in the southern territory.

“I would ask for one month, my lord,” Georg replied.

“S-So would I!” Joseph said so as not to lose to Georg.

“Very well. Show me what you’re capable of.”

I leant my cheek against my fist and left it all to them.

Once the knights had left, the audience hall returned to silence.

“I hope their capabilities are worth demonstrating,” Lelesha said with a mean smile.

“Even the wisest sage can’t know the contents until they’ve removed the lid,” I replied while leaning back in my chair. “Anyone claiming they do know the contents is a swindler. The western territory of Arkus has been left to Forte, and the north is in the hands of Georg. Eventually, the south will likely be entrusted to Joseph.”

Until the lid was pulled back, we wouldn’t know whether the three of them had the aptitude to handle such responsibility.

“While my lord is no swindler, he was a monarch who granted audience to innumerable retainers. By your exceptional sense of character, can’t you at least hazard a guess who’ll succeed? Think of it like betting on a racehorse.”

I chuckled. “Like a racehorse, you say?”

Lelesha’s dark joke amused me, so I decided to humor her.

“I have no worries in regards to Forte. I’d say he’s deserving of an even greater role. As for Georg, I can see him going either way, but I hope he can at least take care of the north. And Joseph, well, honestly I have high hopes for him.”

“And yet you intend to leave him in charge of the south. I’m deeply shocked that that fool just tried to use you for his own gains!”

Lelesha looked to the heavens and lamented. It was a gesture more fitting for an actor on stage, but she meant what she said. However, she understood that I wouldn’t change my mind, and so she dressed up her words so as not to invite discord.

“Retainers should first be tested with responsibility, I believe.”

Or my philosophy of sovereignty, to put it in a more grandiose manner. It would take more than a rebirth and the passage of three hundred years to

change my beliefs.

“Yes, my lord. Your hope is that Joseph displays unexpected aptitude or room for improvement. Am I correct?”

“Indeed you are.”

Without granting someone the opportunity, there’s no way of knowing if they are in fact competent or if they can grow into something more. Therefore, even should my retainers fail multiple times, I’d forgive them so long as they proved capable of self-reflection. However, I have no patience for incompetence.

“If I find Joseph to be unexceptional and lacking potential, *then* I shall have him replaced.”

It’s not as though I would make him take responsibility for his failures; I’d simply make sure the less competent found themselves in jobs of little consequence.

I asked nothing of my people. They were free to be incompetent and indolent. They could reap the benefits of the stability and prosperity that I sowed. But that did not go for those trusted with public authority. I would not tolerate incompetence from them, and they had to be tested at all times.

Naturally, I myself was no exception. An authority or public figure who can’t be driven out by competition is nothing more than a bandit. Nothing in existence is more despicable than figures such as these. And how else would you describe the nobles who had taken in root in this empire?

“A legion of excellent retainers is necessary if I’m to strike down this unsightly ‘empire’ and rule the land once again. The continent is vast and no single man can grasp every corner no matter how wide his reach.”

I had learned this well three hundred years ago.

In the end, what a king needed more than anything was the ability to effectively utilize his people. No matter the political savvy or military genius he might have, if his retainers were in disarray, he could only reign over the most meager of areas. In that regard, internal competition was necessary. I had to see if Georg, Joseph, and those alike were worthy of serving me or whether they could grow under my leadership. The ability to do so was proof of a king’s

magnanimity, or rather, that king's capacity.

"But you do believe it would be faster just to take care of matters yourself, don't you, my lord?"

"Of course, Lelesha. Even if it were to prove pointless in the end."

Chapter Four: The Three-Hundred-Year Bond

Now that I was in possession of an immortal body, one month felt like a blink of an eye. Georg and Joseph were living up to my expectations and preparing for their attack on the southern prefect's office. They had gathered their soldiers into one greater army in front of the city of Buery and in preparation for a siege.

From the west, Forte had brought one thousand two hundred soldiers. From the north, Georg had brought one thousand eight hundred soldiers. From the south, Joseph had brought three hundred soldiers. This combined into a force of three thousand three hundred men. The indispensable role of logistics officer had fallen to Forte, the former merchant, who had fulfilled his duty to perfection.

In response to these movements, the southern prefect's regular army had chosen not to hole up in the town but to instead advance outside and take the battle to the fields.

"Everything is as I anticipated, my lord!" Joseph reported with pride.

We were in a command room, cordoned off by a curtain. With Lelesha at my side, I stood facing Joseph, Georg, and Forte, as well as other key knights and military officers.

"I've persuaded quite a number of people to give up on Zindelger and unite under our banner. By brazenly recruiting so many, we've planted seeds of doubt within Zindelger that there might be conspirators lurking about him. As a result, the prefect was left without the choice to try and hold out in the town."

"Indeed," I said. "Trying to hold out in a siege if you have a conspirator in your midst would be suicidal."

A conspirator on the inside could pull all sorts of tricks, such as raising gates or setting fire to provisions. Regardless of whether it might have been possible, Joseph had chosen not to recruit anyone promising enough to allow him to

enact such a stratagem. However, as Zindelger didn't know that, he couldn't help but have his suspicions. It was entirely natural that he would determine it best to fight outside the castle walls.

"However, we, too, will benefit from avoiding the tribulations of a siege," Joseph added.

"His knowledge works against him," I said.

At that, Joseph became even prouder. Isn't it amusing to witness a child putting their all into their mischief? It was a similar feeling to that. *How very delightful*.

Next, Forte issued his report. "According to the reports of our scouts, Zindelger's army boasts roughly five thousand men. Their force is about fifty percent larger than our own, so some strategizing will be necessary."

I'd been thinking this since the moment I'd met him, but he truly was a useful fellow.

"Did you all hear that? Let's hear your suggestions, shall we?" I asked, posing the questions to the others. *Well then, it's time for my first battle in this era.*

As someone who once commanded legions of soldiers across the continent, I found it hard not to take an interest. Compared to the world of three hundred years ago, military affairs had progressed commendably. Magic, on the other hand, had deteriorated, so how might a battlefield of this era look?

"I have a suggestion, my lord," Georg, the oldest present, said hesitantly. "Our army, a force from three regions, is no more than a cobbled together mass. However, I've never heard Zindelger to be passionate about matters of military service and training. I don't believe his forces are anything exceptional."

"Hmm. What do you think, Joseph?"

"I have no objections to Sir Georg's keen observation. Zindelger considers himself a great prefect. While he is passionate about law and order, he views the maintenance of a military in times of peace to be nothing more than a waste of money."

"Therefore, my lord, I do believe we can expect no advanced maneuvers from

either side," Georg added.

"Understood. Then what shall we do under these circumstances?"

Georg, demonstrating his long experience as a knight, showed no hesitation in offering his predictions. "First, we will attack the enemy head-on. Faced with superior numbers, our forces will soon find themselves in an inferior position and begin to scatter. With no hope of an orderly withdrawal, we will have to accept this. However, the enemy force will see this and take it as an opportunity to launch a pursuit. But this, as with our own withdrawal, is unlikely to take place in an orderly fashion. This will inevitably result in our enemy scrambling to prey on our troops."

I continued to listen closely as the knight reached his conclusion.

"With this in mind, I present my strategy: We will station two hundred well-trained soldiers along their path of retreat. They shall strike at the exposed flanks of our enemy as they blindly chase after our men."

Forte had also been listening closely. "I see. Since our crumbling lines won't be an act but the real thing, the enemy will unsuspectingly give chase. It'll all be part of the plan." He slapped his knees, convinced of Georg's strategy. "Using the main force as bait sure is a fascinating idea. By that means, even a cobbled together mass can prove useful. Sir Georg, you're an expert commander, and I've learned a lot from you."

"It's a costly strategy, but I don't see how else we can win when our enemy has such an advantage."

"Well, in battle, it's suicide to have sympathy for your soldiers. It's just—"

"Just what, Sir Forte?" Georg asked, cutting Forte off.

"Can you provide two hundred well-trained soldiers?" Forte asked.

"I brought them with me from the north. They've been receiving my personal training for some time, so I'm confident that we can rely on them."

"I see! I see! You've thought of everything, Sir Georg!"

Forte was ecstatic over Georg's plan. Perhaps this was because the front lines weren't his realm of expertise. Meanwhile, Joseph, the other military man,

didn’t seem too pleased about having his domain trodden on.

“Well then, my lord, what do you think of Sir Georg’s strategy?” Lelesha asked, turning to me.

“I find your ideas quite fascinating, Georg. One day, I’ll reward your wisdom.”

“You honor me, my lord.”

Sorry, Georg...

“But I reject your proposal.”

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The battle between the official army and the mysterious vampire’s rebel army was about to commence. Prefect Zindelger’s forces were made up of five thousand men. He stood before them as they listened closely.

“All of Arkus Province belongs to our sovereign, Lady Nastalia! Nevertheless, certain traitors who have strayed from reason have been sweeping the northern and western territories, and, sadly, like maggots have sprung up even within our own territory. This shall not be forgiven! Men, this is by no means a civil war. I declare these uncouth rebels to be guilty! They may be an army, but really, they’re a conglomerate of incompetents not worth your fear!” The prefect waved to his forces. “Follow me! In a display of our loyalty to justice and to the Lady Nastalia, we shall bring down the hammer of judgment!”

The soldiers were roused by his spirited words. Though they were soldiers, a whole army’s worth of them, but this was a time of peace. Their usual duties involved cracking down on everyday criminals, and keeping that peace. Not one of them had ever experienced a battle. They were armed with poorly maintained spears, and they wore shoddy leather armor. That’s why Zindelger’s speech filled them with fighting spirit and dissipated their nervousness.

At the prefect’s order, a bugle sounded, and the soldiers let out a thundering battle cry as they began their advance. Their pace was erratic, and their formations were near to inexistant, but their enthusiasm was real. Zindelger knew that this was necessary when relying on numbers. His soldiers were sure of their victory, and the prefect felt scorn and a twinge of pity for the mere three thousand soldiers who had come all the way from the north and southern

territories.

That was until two golems appeared on the field. Who among Zindelger's soldiers was first to notice the golems? Well, that would be all of them.

The two beings that had been hiding among the enemy ranks slowly rose when they realized a battle was upon them. The imposing figures stood at least fifteen meters tall and towered over everything else in the vicinity. No matter where on the battlefield one stood, the golems were clearly visible.

The first golem was a crimson red. Its form, evocative of a dragon, struck fear into all those who saw it. The other golem was a cobalt blue. Its form, resembling a giant without a face, struck fear into all those who saw it. With the two standing among enemy ranks, the battle began. The red lotus and the azure bolt.

At the heart of the enemy formation, the dragon golem opened its jaws and unleashed its fiery breath on Zindelger's troops. Similarly, the faceless golem clasped its hands together and released an enormous bolt of electricity that mowed down the soldiers. Both golems boasted fearsome range and extraordinary firepower. Zildelger's men were burned and zapped, their bodies almost reduced to vapor.

These were indeed soldiers of an age that didn't know war, but just who could have predicted a battle like this?

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I, Kai Lekius, watched over the battle from my command headquarters on a hill. With me stood Lelesha and the rest of my top brass.

"M-My lord, this can hardly be called a battle..."

"It's a one-sided slaughter."

After witnessing the rampage of the golems I had brought from the Abyssal Palace, some of my entourage had turned pale; others had lost their voices.

"Is that so? But this is war as I know it."

Knowing what was going through their minds, I'd tried for a jocular tone. Lelesha responded with her usual amused comment about my humor being as

excellent as ever.

Given how far magic had regressed, I'd more or less expected the face of war to have changed. Honestly, I'd been a little exasperated when I'd heard the tactics and predictions Georg had put forth. To think he'd propose something so primitive as to engage in combat with no military golems or applications of combat spells—that he'd have our soldiers carrying shoddy spears over magic weapons! Without the physical enhancements and defenses provided by magic, our soldiers would practically be naked.

"Wouldn't you pity the soldiers thrown into such a crude battle, Lelesha?"

"Your kindness knows no bounds, my lord. Sir Georg's proposal relied on sending untrained soldiers to their deaths. Is that perhaps why you didn't care for it?"

"Who knows? Perhaps I just wanted to show off my golems."

"Hee hee, very well, my lord. I'll remember that."

So went the banter between Lelesha and me as we watched my golems crush the enemy. Meanwhile, Forte looked like he had something to say; I supposed he wanted an explanation. With a motion of my chin, I ordered Lelesha to address the group.

"The golem modeled after a dragon is 'God of Flame,' and the golem modeled after a giant is 'God of Thunder,'" she explained. "Both are military golems crafted by my lord. Long ago in the days of strife, they were feared as two of the 'Twelve Magic Gods.'"

"You mean to say that our lord's in possession of another ten of those things?"

"I'm afraid not. Some were destroyed, and others were entrusted to my lord's retainers."

"E-Even so, that means he owns more than two..." Forte found it all so overwhelming that he was left at a loss for words.

"But now that you all serve me, I want you to remember this scene. This is how I do battle," I declared.

“Yes, my lord.”

“From here on, if you wish to speak of tactics in front of me, you will do so with this as your basis.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“As such, those who prove adept in utilizing those golems may just find themselves in possession of one.”

“E-Excuse me?!”

“Are you saying we might own such an extraordinary golem?”

“How generous you are, my lord.”

Every one of us is a sucker when it comes to material goods; my entourage’s pallor had entirely given way to clear joy. The faces before weren’t those people usually made in the midst of a battle. I will admit, considering the golems’ might, it wasn’t hard to imagine why they might feel as though we’d already won.

I snorted as I watched over the battlefield. “Is it over already? How dull.”

And what do you suppose happened then? As though in rebuttal to my grumbling, something soared into the sky from the enemy lines. It was a pegasus. Riding on its back was a knight in armor that glimmered with the flow of mana. That knight and beast combined made a dive headlong towards me.

“Oh, oooh, how wonderful! This is what a battle should be like!”

I feel nostalgic all of a sudden, as though I’m back in the days of old!

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Pegasus were proud creatures and powerful in their own right. Therefore, it was rare that they would let a human ride them. Conversely, to be able to mount a pegasus was proof enough of one’s exceptional heroics. Long ago, I had had several pegasus riders under my command. In battle, each one could have been equated to one thousand normal men. And now, one was soaring through the heavens, straight towards me.

“Brilliant! How truly brilliant! In honor of your courage and prowess, I shall be

your opponent! Lelesha, you are not to interfere.”

“Yes, my lord.”

What a well-trained attendant she was. She made no boorish attempts to stop me; she just gave me a courteous bow.

I quickly interwove my fingers and formed a mudra, then suffused my entire body with mana. With no tools or wings, just a spell called Saiku, I performed the miracle of flight.

Forte and the others yelped in surprise. They’d been curious to see how I might attempt to duel the rider when I seemingly had no means of flight. I suppose they hadn’t expected that I could use magic to fly.

“He’s flying? Our lord took to the skies!”

“Is this something all vampires can do?”

“No, wait. I have heard that all vampires, excluding Lessers, can fly, but isn’t that only while transformed into a bat?”

“That’s right. I don’t know of any legends that say they can fly while in human form.”

They were buzzing like a swarm of bees. Was it really that unusual for someone to fly using magic? Well, Saiku was from the fifth rung of the principal branch of magic, which must have been unimaginable to modern arcanists. I suppose there’s no helping it if it caused a panic among the likes of Georg and company, who were even more ignorant than the arcanists were.

I left the explanations to Lelesha and headed to my battlefield—the sky. There, we faced one another: the pegasus rider who had come to strike at the heart of our army, and me, the man who’d come to receive them.

With precision control of my mana, I hovered in place and called out to the rider. “You on the winged horse, I forgive your attack! Now, tell me your name.”

The pegasus rider seemed quite shaken by the sight of a man flying unaided, but he still found it in himself to shout unpleasantries. “Don’t be absurd! I have no name to offer to a shady fellow like you!”

Oho, this one’s got spirit. That said, I’m not fond of how he speaks to me.

“Don’t tell me modern knights are ignorant of the customs of the battlefield. Are you all barbarians who know nothing but brute force?”

I’d spat these words not with sarcasm, but with disdain and disappointment. This invited the anger of the pegasus rider.

“Then I shall deign to tell you my name. Cower! Tremble! I, a loyal knight dedicated to the service of the Lady Nastalia, was entrusted with the southern territory for my brave deeds! It is I, Zindelger!”

“Oh, so you’re Zindelger.” As my opponent had given his name, I followed the customs of single combat and proffered my own. “My name Kai Lekius. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

What’s that you say? It’s pointless to introduce yourself if you’re just going to kill them anyway? No, no, not at all. Single combat isn’t so uncivilized.

A battlefield is built on the conviction of killing your opponent by any means necessary, the result of this conviction being creations like God of Thunder. Single combat is the act of indulging in eccentricities and vanities on such a field. Such combat lacked the grace of an arcane bout, but it wasn’t not something that should be done while seeing red. Therefore, if this Zindelger fellow were to give me a satisfying fight, then I could simply take him as a prisoner of war, similar to how I’d let Rosa go out of respect for her skills.

“Kai Lekius? You would style yourself after the Sanguinary King and Wicked God?!”

“Think what you like. I am but myself,” I said with a smile. “Now, come at me, pegasus rider!”

I let my arms fall to my side and ceded the first strike to Zindelger. Not only did he ride such a rare creature, but his lance and armor were considerable articles. With my level of expertise in refinement magic, I could determine their grade just by watching the glimmer of emanated mana. Swords like Rosa’s Brihne, however, were forged to hide their true value.

Three hundred years ago, I had forged a variety of arms and armor for myself and Al, as well as for my retainers. But not everything I’d made was a masterpiece. I had learned from my mistakes and crafted many practice pieces

on the path to producing excellent works. I was by no means a genius; I was merely a magician who worked harder than anyone else.

Zindelger's lance and armor were of comparable quality to that of my practice pieces. Even three hundred years ago, arms of that quality had been nothing to be ashamed of.

"I'll make you regret that cockiness, you foolish vampire!" With that, Zindelger raised his lance and charged.

Hmm, how bold, I thought. Taming a pegasus to this extent wasn't something one could do without forming a strong bond with the steed and being an adept rider. *What fun!*

Utilizing Saiku, I slid to the left and dodged the charge. Or rather, I thought I'd dodged it, but the shock wave created by Zindelger's lance hit me at full force. This was an effect of the weapon's grade—the magic force residing in his weapon. If I hadn't been an immortal, he would have shredded my right flank and torn my arm clean off.

"Ha ha! Next I'll drive a stake through your heart!" he called.

It seemed my slight wavering had put the man in a good mood. He proudly circled on his steed.

"That's an impressive lance you have there. It may very well be one of my practice pieces," I said with a chuckle.

"Are you in any position to be prattling like this?"

"Heh, it's my turn is it not?"

I had already received a blow from Zindelger, so it was time for a counterattack. But first, I decided to test the waters a little. After all, skipping to the conclusion would be dull.

This was a time for eccentricities and vanities. I raised my right index and middle fingers and traced them in a complex pattern in the air. I focused my strength, pointed my raised fingers at the face of the pegasus, and released my mana. This was Dakser, a spell from the fourth rung of the spiritual branch of magic.

Do you know this fairy tale?

There was once a pegasus rider, who was celebrated as the strongest knight around. However, he was defeated by the weakest of apparitions. How was this so? Well, the apparition had targeted not the warrior but the pegasus, using a charm, rudimentary magic, to confuse it. Having forgotten who their master was, the pegasus had flung the poor warrior from his saddle, and he had fallen to his death. Three hundred years ago, this story had been a source of laughter among pegasus riders, but more so, it was a folktale that taught a valuable lesson.

"As such, every rider I knew took great care in protecting their pegas— Huh?"

The proud pegasus had forgotten who their master was and flung Zindelger from the saddle. I paused for a moment.

"That was just a trick. Has he taken no precautions to defend against such an attack? Wait, no. Surely, he has implemented countermeasures that allow him to fall off to no detriment. Surely, he has magical gear prepared for this. I see. How very practical. Such gear was inexistant in my era."

As I was in the midst of my soliloquy, Zindelger hit the battlefield *hard*, becoming nothing more than a lump of flesh and a filthy flower of blood.

Huh.

How dull.

How terribly dull.

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Zindelger, the leader of the enemy army, had fallen to his death. His forces had been crushed by God of Flame and God of Thunder. The army of the southern prefect had no reason not to raise the white flag.

Meanwhile, a single garrison still remained in the town of Buery. However, they chose to open the gates without a fight. If they hadn't, God of Flame would have just blown down the gates by force. Thus, we had succeeded in entering

Buery with little trouble.

I ordered Forte, Georg, and Joseph to take the enemy soldiers as prisoners of war and seize control of the town. Accompanied only by Lelesha, I made my way to the office of the late prefect. His residence was a fortified, almost castle-like, palace on top of a hill. If there were any holdouts or people of note still about, then they would no doubt be here.

“Hmm...” I paused. “There doesn’t seem to be anyone inside.”

“Indeed. Zindelger was not a beloved prefect. I imagine any guards, servants, or officials would have already abandoned their town and master and fled with whatever they could.”

“A tragedy I saw all too often three hundred years ago.” I sighed as we strode through the palace that looked like a deserted shell. “I’ve taken the south. Now all I need is the east, and I’ll have this Nastalia person surrounded.”

“Indeed. So, my lord, when do you intend to begin your conquest of the eastern territory?”

“I had thought I’d start once new government had been established in the south. However, I’ve been thinking; in regards to battle, Georg and the others have proven themselves useless for the time being.”

“Then may I suggest that you and I begin our conquest of the east immediately and leave them to pacify our domain?”

“That would be the most sensible route. As planned, we’ll leave the south to Joseph. Make sure to inform him of that later.”

“Yes, my lord.”

So as not to fall behind, Lelesha lowered her head in a slight bow while still walking. It was a simplified gesture, but that made it all the more respectful.

While we continued our exchange, Lelesha and I managed to pass through most of the palace’s interior. I took a step into an oratory in a corner of the castle, and then it happened. A shiver ran through me, and a moment later, Lelesha noticed it too. But we didn’t let it show on our faces and simply strolled into the oratory.

To modern Vastalask, with its shameless and grandiose history that had been fabricated as a means of justifying imperial authority, the term “god” only brought to mind Kalis and any emperors that had followed him, as well as Al Shion, the god of light, who was said to have bestowed their authority upon them. Worship of these emperors was mandatory. Such was the state of religion in this empire.

A result of this, all castles and estates of nobles and authorities had oratories where statues of the first emperor were displayed. Even the architecture was a prescribed form, featuring high glass ceilings that let in ample light.

“How about you quit hiding and reveal yourself?” I asked in a loud voice as I stood in the middle of the oratory.

The reply I received was a clamorous one.



The glass ceiling shattered in three places, and three shadows descended. One of them was the redheaded swordswoman, Rosa, of all people. She had Brihne, the Iridescent Blade, in her grip, her eyes alight with flames of vengeance.

The other two were unfamiliar to me.

One was a warrior wearing antiquarian armor, carrying a double-edged greataxe. The other was an elven woman with honey-blonde hair. While falling, she began an invocation of magic words.

“O luminous sprite, dispeller of darkness, cut this wicked power off at its roots!”

The interior of the oratory filled with light. A magic circle had been drawn on the floor in advance. It had been painted on with a transparent liquid extracted from a special fruit, which was a technique known only to the denizens of the forest.

The magic circle triggered and began to shine with a blinding light. It was a terribly complex and elaborate design that must have required no small amount of time and diligence. As I surmised the amount of effort and passion that had gone into the powerful circle, its purpose became clear to me.

“Even if you’re a True Blood, as long as you remain in that circle, you won’t be able to move!” the elf said in a sharp tone.

Rosa and the warrior landed cleanly beside her, and I began to chuckle to myself.

Ha ha ha...

Bwa ha ha ha!

Finally, something of interest!

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“My name is Jenni! I’m an elf of Mashli Forest, a knight who has served Arkus for generations! By order of Lady Nastalia and by my own righteous indignation, I shall end you, vampire!”

While she spoke, the elf continued to gather her mana and direct it towards the circle that bound me. Such a strong flow was rare even among elves.

She certainly seems promising!

The magic circle was binding me and sapping my mana was Braugloa of the *eleventh* rung of the four greater branches of magic. It was a daring spell that required preparation of an elaborate magic circle and the tricking of your target to enter it. However, its efficacy was second to none.

I see, so such a grand spell is capable of felling even a True Blood. Splendid job learning such a powerful spell, Jenni, I believe it was.

I wanted to tell all the insipid arcanists of the current era and their lackeys to learn from her example. But then it occurred to me: elves led prolonged lives, so perhaps this elf had lived in the age of strife herself!

“Heh, this is quite the spell,” I said. “Very well done indeed. It’s enough to bind even one such as myself. You have my praise, Jenni.”

“Silence, impudent vampire!” Jenni yelled, pointing her rapier at me. “Rue your conceited ways and die!

That was the signal for Rosa and the warrior to attack me.

Braugloa would fetter and drain the mana of vampires, such as myself, and any other undead creatures. However, those who were not undead were entirely unaffected. Naturally, Rosa and the warrior were able to move unhindered within the circle, and it was my head that they were coming for.

“I am Goliath, prefect of the eastern territory!” the warrior called. “Your wretched head will make a fine trophy!”

With that, he raised his greataxe above his head and charged. *Oho, it appears the prefect of the east has come to me instead.*

I wasn’t dealing with fools here. Standing around for too long wouldn’t do me any good. This was likely a calculated plan to gather the best in Arkus and eliminate me in one fell swoop, using Zingelger as bait to lure me in.

Ha ha, I see, I see. I like it.

Typically, a True Blood could be decapitated or crushed and still regenerate,

but inside this special magic circle, things might not be so simple. *But you're not the only ones who can move in this circle—Lelesha is no undead.*

She swiftly dashed in front of me and blocked the path of my assailants.

"My lord, forgive my impudence in coming to your defense."

Even the always graceful Lelesha couldn't maintain a cool demeanor under these circumstances. Clearly tense, she waved her small hands. Countless invisible threads shot out and formed a web to fend off Rosa and Goliath.

"Gah! What witchcraft is this?!" Goliath cried as the threads wrapped about him and restricted his movements. The warrior was wearing armor of a similar grade to Zindelger, which prevented his limbs from being severed by the threads. But it was only a matter of time.

Even heavy armor doesn't cover one's body completely—there were the eye holes, joints, and other openings. Lelesha's threads found their way into those gaps and began to slice away at the flesh inside.

Goliath screamed desperately, dying having accomplished nothing. It sure was a pity, but that's just what happened when Lelesha strook out in earnest.

Rosa, on the other hand, was giving Lelesha some trouble. Following Rosa's vigorous yell, her blade sliced through the air. She did all this while keeping her eyes shut, but even without sight, her strikes were accurate and she cut down every thread that came her way. She skillfully sliced through every near invisible thread just by sensing their presence. *Oh, Rosa, you might just be a genius with a blade after all!*

"My, aren't you a difficult one?"

In a rare display, Lelesha seemed genuinely irritated. Having been cut by Rosa's enchanted blade, her severed threads went up in flames and floated to the ground.

"That sword she wields wouldn't happen to be a work of yours, would it, my lord?"

"Indeed it is. That's Brihne, the Iridescent Blade. It appears that girl is one of Albert's descendants."

“I find that quite deplorable, my lord.”

Lelesha said this jokingly, but I imagined her lamentations were genuine. If Rosa hadn’t been a natural with a blade, she would have been swiftly slain by the threads. If Rosa hadn’t been wielding a blade forged by me, she wouldn’t have been able to cut through the uniquely durable wires, even if she could detect them. A great swordswoman with a blade to match—such a combination proved strong competition against Lelesha. In any case, a thread-wielder like her wasn’t well suited to fighting someone wielding a blade with a fire enchantment.

“I believe I need to be scolded, my lord. In spite of my strength, this young girl has somehow pushed me to my utmost.”

“You’ve done enough.”

I was sincerely grateful to my loyal and capable attendant. Because of her, I’d been able to concentrate on dealing with the magic circle.

“You said your name was Jenni, did you not? From whom did you learn this technique? Your father? Your mother? Or was it from the elders of Mashli Forest?” I inquired.

“I have no few qualms conversing with a vampire, but I’ll honor the name of my master. This technique was taught to me by a great hero of my homeland, Master Sheiha!”

“I expected you’d say that,” I said, the corners of my lips curling upward.

Jenni recoiled at the sight. “‘Expected’? What are you talking about?!”

As a way of responding to the bewildered elf, I began an invocation. “‘O luminous sprite, thou who departest with the setting sun...’ Is that right?”

Jenni grew pale. “What is this? Why do you know that cursebreaker? That was our most well-kept secret. Master Sheiha didn’t teach it to anyone not from our forest!”

“How could I not know it? After all, utilizing Sheiha’s ideas and knowledge, the two of us collaborated to create that spell.”

“What?!”

Every word I said came as a shock to the elf. Her eyes bulged, and she let out a crazed shriek. I, however, maintained my composure and continued my explanation.

“Initially, Braugloa could be cast simply with the magic circle, no invocation necessary. Sheiha, however, disliked such refinement. She said it ‘lacked respect for the sprites’ and added the unnecessary chanting. How inscrutable elves are!”

As I badmouthed one of my most trusted retainers, I couldn’t help but grin. Sheiha had been serious and inflexible, but that only made her all the more lovely in my memory.

“O luminous sprite, thou who departest with the setting sun, thy rest is our reprieve. Farewell till the next dawn; farewell for now.”

Lost amid my memories, I finished the cursebreaker. The circle dispersed completely, and I was released from the magical fetters that were the natural predator of vampires.

Damn it, Sheiha. Because she’d insisted on adding such an impractical element to the spell, I would have been in danger had I not remembered the cursebreaker. I briefly closed my eyes and only opened them again once my heart had sorted itself out.

“Now then, Jenni, have you prepared any other means of slaying a True Blood? I hope you can entertain me more.”

Now that I knew she was a disciple of Sheiha, I felt a degree of affinity with the elf. However, Jenni made not one more move; she just stood there, trembling from head to toe.

Is she already out of tricks? I wondered. *Or has she been taken with fear? Ugh, how exceedingly boring.* I had begun to lose interest altogether, but that turned out to be premature.

“You...” The elf paused. “Are you perhaps the real Kai Lekius?” she asked with a trembling voice.

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“Heh. That would be me, though I haven’t the foggiest whether anyone else with the name exists.” A moment passed before I continued. “Ah! Wasn’t Kai Lekius the name of the wicked god who interfered with the founding of the empire? He slipped my mind; I’m yet to meet the man, you see.”

Jenni didn’t seem to care for my lighthearted response. “That is not what I’m talking about! I was wondering if you may be an imposter! The ‘Wicked God’ Kai Lekius of the empire’s founding myth is a blatant falsification of history!”

“Oh, you’re well-informed.”

“I’m an elf. In the three hundred years I’ve been alive, I’ve been a witness to history.”

“I see. Go on then.”

“The real Kai Lekius—or rather, *His Majesty*—was the true founder of the Vastalask United Monarchy. He wasn’t a vampire like you! He died three hundred years ago!”

“Well then, Jenny, how does this sound? That founding monarch employed esoteric magic to resurrect as a True Blood three hundred years later.”

“That’s preposterous! I’ve never heard a reliable account of such magic...”

“If it were widely practiced, then it wouldn’t be esoteric, now would it? The magic is comparable to Sheiha’s advanced spells, which were only taught to those of Mashli Forest.”

“B-But resurrecting as a True Blood is a major undertaking—”

“Jenni, was the Kai Lekius you knew the type to be bested by such trials or to allow things to remain out of his reach?”

Jenni had no rebuttal and simply groaned. I looked her in the eyes and saw wavering between a desire to believe me and uncertainty of whether she could. Lelesha and Rosa, who had meanwhile been engaged in fierce duel, noticed something was wrong and ceased their fighting.

“What are you doing, Jenni?” Rosa called out. “What happened to the magic circle? Weren’t you the one so energized to slay this vampire?”

“Know your place, elven knight!” Lelesha added. “Is it not clear who stands

before you?”

Jenni rapidly shook her head at the alternating demands, but Lelesha’s following proclamation drew Jenni’s gaze away from Rosa.

“Kneel. Before you stands he who brought peace and stability to the land in a single generation. The absolute sovereign of the nine circuits and two hundred and forty one provinces. The master of the arcane. Unifier of the myriad royal legions and their strongest magician: His Majesty Kai Lekius Vastalask Elma the Providence I!”

Struck by Lelesha’s scolding voice, Jenni slowly dropped to her knees and lowered her head.

“Hey, Jenni?! What do you think you’re doing?” Rosa yelled, but Jenni ignored her. In fact, she seemed to have made up her mind and showed signs of reverence.

“Let me hear your name again,” I said.

“Yes, Your Majesty. I am Jenni, an elf of Mashli Forest. Currently, circumstances have led me to serve as a knight under Countess Nastalia. However, my original calling was to offer up my blade in service to you alongside Sheiha. It was the wish of our forest, and I believe in your vision of peace and equality for the land.”

Jenni stopped to breathe. “Three hundred years ago, as a young girl, I took on only the most menial positions in your myriad royal legions. Even when you graced us with your presence, I was only able to see your face from the farthest reaches of the crowd.”

Thus, she had not recognized my face and had been unable to judge my authenticity. What’s more, my face had returned to as it had been when I was fifteen or sixteen. *What a charming tale from an endearing girl. She’s quite amusing, isn’t she?*

“Sire... Your Majesty the Esteemed Kai Lekius, I have committed an unforgivable sin in raising my blade to you, but please grant me the opportunity to serve you!”

“Oh, no, I forgive you. Your tale was an entertaining one.”

“My deepest gratitude. You truly are a merciful king! It’s no wonder you were the only soul Sheiha bowed her head to in the thousand years she lived.”

“Enough, enough, I hear you. So what is it you wished to speak to me about?”

“Yes, sire. In the first one hundred years after your death, each reigning king was worse than the last, and Vastalask fell into decline. Kalis, the fifth monarch of the Vastalask line, then made matters worse. He declared himself emperor, ignored his deficiencies, grew jealous of your accomplishments, and buried our history with his own version. Sheiha stood in direct opposition to Kalis and earned his ire.” Jenni paused for a moment, gritting her teeth and biting her lip in anger. “Emperor Kalis arranged her assassination.”

Ah.

So that’s it.

That’s how Sheiha passed.

Sheiha had been a capable retainer. She had been an ally in my study of magic. And, more than anything, she had been an exceptional woman. All that had ended so trivially, it was depressing.

How dull. How terribly dull.

But what I found most disheartening was that this Kalis was a figure of the past—a place in time where my hands could no longer curl my fingers around his throat.

“And then?” I made sure to contain my anger so as not to take it out on Jenni, who wasn’t to blame.

“Sheiha accurately predicted that she wasn’t long for this world. Before her passing, she entrusted me with her affairs. Should someone of greatness comparable to yours appear, I was to offer my blade in service so that they may right the wrongs of this wretched land. Until that day, I was to lie in wait while serving Vastalask. I was to endure. It has been a truly, truly bitter two hundred years since Sheiha passed.”

As Jenni recalled the past, her speech became listless. Who could blame her? The last two hundred years had been cruel to her. Her respect for and orders

from Sheiha must have been all that had kept her going. After sniffing and rubbing her eyes, Jenni returned to her dignified visage.

“Sire, Your Majesty the Esteemed Kai Lekius, I have a request to make of you!”

“Go ahead.”

“Please, bring down this rotten land and return Vastalask to how it should be!”

“Very well,” was my immediate answer.

I would bear the two hundred year vision of Sheiha and Jenni. Crushing the current Vastalask had already been my plan from the beginning, but never mind that. If I couldn’t bear the burden of such a sincere wish, could I even call myself a monarch?

“Oh, thank you! From today forward, I am once again at your disposal!”

“Indeed. Now come.”

In a grand gesture, I extended a hand to Jenni. She wore an ecstatic look on her face as she all but jumped up and embraced me.

“First, I would like to slake myself on your blood. Is that all right?” I asked, holding her fragile elven frame.

“Certainly, Your Majesty! My liege, Kai Lekius, I offer up everything to you!”

With Jenni’s approval, I sank my fangs into her slender neck. An intense sweetness spread across my tongue. However, it was quite a pleasant taste, simple like honey but still somehow enthralling.

Without realizing it, I became lost in sipping her blood while Jenni received all the pleasure of having blood drunk. She looked intoxicated and cried out in ecstasy, her sense of shame having swiftly departed. She gave voice to all she had kept pent up for hundreds of years.

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After briefly indulging myself in Jenni's blood, I drew my fangs from her. A rich, sweet scent reminiscent of honey still rose faintly from the elf's thin neck. I resisted the urge to bring my fangs down on her again and checked the mana flowing about me. Denizens of the forest were rich in mana, so it may come as no surprise that I had recovered quite a bit.

But it wasn't nearly enough.

Jenni's Braugloa was exceptionally powerful and had drained roughly seventy percent of my mana. What else could I have expected from one of Sheiha's student's? Not to mention that the spell was of the eleventh rung.

"Your Majesty, more... Please drink more," a thoroughly aroused Jenni pleaded. "More... As much as you'd like..."

She clung to me and rubbed her thighs together, which was not at all something you'd usually see from a proud elf.

"You may possess the charm of a True Blood, but this is quite the reaction. Or is this perhaps the product of the elf's affections for you, my lord?"

"Spare me the jocularity, Lelesha."

While soothing Jenni, I glared at Lelesha. Then my gaze fell on Rosa. I still needed to recover more mana and was all too eager to drink more of Jenni's blood, but first I had a matter to settle.

"Jenni!" Her complexion as white as chalk, Rosa stared at the elf. "You've always pissed me off, but even then, I thought you a true knight, one of true pride! I acknowledged you as a worthy comrade in serving Lady Nastalia!"

Learning of her fellow knight's hidden objectives and promiscuous behavior must have come as quite the shock.

"Say something, Jenni! Say something! Don't you feel any shame?" Rosa yelled.

Jenni maintained a cool tone even through her lingering arousal. "From the beginning three hundred years ago, my loyalty has resided with His Majesty. If we're to speak of shame, then being an accomplice in malice was far more humiliating! I could hardly bear my time serving the Countess Nastalia, even

though I had no other choice!”

“Excuse me?! Are you calling Lady Nastalia malicious? Could you at least keep the jests to a minimum?”

“Dame Rosa, your ignorance is incorrigible. Or perhaps you’re simply blind. Either way, you’re the epitome of foolishness.”

“Hold on a minute! Sure, I’m not content with the empire either—I was driven from the capital, after all—but Lady Nastalia, head of Arkus Province, is different! She cherishes her people and shows excellent leadership!”

Jenni laughed. “Now you’re the one who jests, Dame Rosa. Do you consider it benevolence to care for livestock? No matter their treatment, all livestock meet the same end: to be served up and eaten. Countess Nastalia believes only in taking the necessary pains to prepare a fine meal.”

“I’ll here no more slander against Lady Nastalia!”

“Oh? Then what will you do, Dame Rosa?”

A thin, mean smile formed on Jenni’s lips as she provoked Rosa. I spoke up to playfully pose the red-haired knight a question.

“I think the matter’s already settled. Do you plan on continuing this fight?”

Rosa and I had already fought once; it was clear she couldn’t win. Moreover, I now had Lelesha at my side. The eastern prefect, whose name escapes me, wasn’t much, but she had likely staked her victory on Jenni’s Braugloa. With the elf now under my banner, the battle was decided. How amusing.

Rosa was no dunce; she could see reason. Keeping her sword drawn, she slowly backed away.

“Do you think I’d just let you go?” I asked playfully.

She scowled. “Then what would you have me do?! I’ll have you know, I have my own resolve! I may not be able to slay you, but I can cross blades with the woman next to you!”

To prove her point, Rosa channeled her mana into her sword. The flames engulfing the blade howled as they shifted from red to blue.

“Heh, there’s no need to be so standoffish, even if it is one of your charming points.”

“What?!”

Cue my third playful question.

“I’ve taken a liking to you. As such, I shall once again let you escape with your life. But doesn’t getting off scot-free sound just a bit too convenient?”

“Y-You don’t mean...” Rosa stammered.

“I do.”

“You want to drink my blood?! Wasn’t Jenni’s enough?!”

“I find your blood to be quite ambrosiac as well. Since you’re both here, I thought I could enjoy comparing flavors.”

“Unbelievable!” Rosa exclaimed, her face flushed a deep red.

She really is a fun one to tease. *How delightful. Reactions like these only make me want to have more fun at her expense.*

“Consider this, Rosa: should you meet your end here, your beloved countess will lose a valuable knight. However, should you return alive, you can continue to loyally serve her. Do you see? This foolish vampire is giving you the chance to escape with your life. Why not take me up on my offer and live to fight another day? The humiliation of having your blood sucked is only temporary, after all. Or is your loyalty to the countess too frail?”

As expected, Rosa reacted earnestly to my teasing and began seriously deliberating. The flames on her enchanted blade flickered back and forth, from red to blue and then back to red again, like a representation of her mind. Finally, with a bitter look on her face, Rosa reached a decision.

“You’ll just suck my blood then let me go home?”

“I have never once gone back on my word.”

Those who neglected their promises would never attain true success as magicians.

“All right, fine! Get it over with, and have your satisfaction!”

Rosa returned her sword to its scabbard and brushed aside her hair to reveal her nape. I stepped slowly up to her and, without hesitating, pulled her close and sunk my fangs into her pure-white skin. Instantly, a flavor that words cannot do justice spread over my tongue. *Delicious. The taste is refined, like liquified roses.*

Meanwhile, Rosa clenched her teeth so as not to moan from the sudden jolt of pleasure. However, she couldn't entirely resist, and small lascivious gasps escaped her. She should have just given in and enjoyed herself. She writhed with vexation as she tried to resist the pleasure.

My, isn't she stubborn? But that's just part of her charm.

"Your Majesty, Your Majesty, please suck my blood as well," Jenni pleaded sweetly, unable to hold back any longer.

Stille holding Rosa in my right arm, I pulled Jenni in with my left and savored the heavenly taste of her blood.

"Unbelievable! You really are comparing tastes! How humiliating..."

"Sire, please slake yourself with my blood, not the blood of that woman. Drink *mine*."

"Get along, you two," I said, chuckling, before alternatingly immersing myself in the pleasures of their blood.

"Forgive me for my envy, my lord," Lelesha said through pursed lips.

Lelesha had no reason to doubt that she was my favorite, so she normally wouldn't become jealous over such trivial matters. It was unusual for her. However, as she was a magic doll, her veins were rich with ether, not blood. I couldn't sink my fangs into her.

"I must protest. Could you not have made me in a manner in which you could drink mine as well?"

"Come to think of it, I never rewarded you for protecting me earlier."

"Oh? Might I be receiving such a reward?"

"But of course. It's only right to reward good and punish evil."

“Then I would ask that you partake not in my blood but in my lips, my lord.”

Lelesha stepped in front of me and lowered her gaze to my chin. I had no choice but to reward her; I pressed my lips to hers. It was a gentle peck—Lelesha preferred kisses like those of young lovers.

“Hey! Hey, do you hear me?” Rosa protested, tears welling in the corners of her eyes. “I’m not really needed here, am I? How long do I have to stay like this?”

“Until my mana is fully recovered.”

“Yes, and how long will that be?!”

“Jenni’s Braugloa was nothing to sniff at. Just a brief respite of blood won’t be enough,” I said, returning to drinking Rosa’s blood.

“Damn you to hell, Jenni!” Rosa cried, the sound so loud, it bounced off the ceiling of the oratory.

Chapter Five: He Who Commands the Everlasting Night

I had seized the offices of the southern prefect, and it was there that I received Forte's report. We were meeting in what had once been Zindelger's room.

It had been two months since I had left Forte in charge of the town of Breah and one month since I had handed him all of western Arkus. In that time, he'd compiled a dense report on the state of the territory under its new leadership and any signs of change It seems he thought that since he was taking such a long journey to meet me, it would be inelegant to bring only soldiers. One could call him fastidiousness or finicky, but he was a fine bureaucrat either way.

"Hmm, it seems the people of the western territory hold no resentment and accept our rule," I said, nodding as I looked over the report.

Forte was indeed a former merchant. The report he had provided included numerical values indicating a lack of change in the vitality of western markets and number of complaints (which is a nice way of referring to dubious slander). The numbers checked out and seemed perfectly natural, which was an indication that there were no embellishments made to the report. In my previous life, I hadn't been the type of fool who would let such things slip past.

"We followed your calculations and declared a ten percent reduction in taxes as well as a special halt of all taxes for the next two years. As a result, the people have accepted you as their new leader."

"Ultimately, the people care little as to who or what sits at the top. As long as taxes are low, the law is just, and the land is safe, they won't harbor any urge to revolt."

If one retained those three things, then there was no need to come up with complicated strategies to remain in power. Many of the vicars I'd dealt with, such as Larken, had been imposing somewhat hefty taxes in order to line their personal coffers. Therefore, it was a simple matter to reduce taxes by whatever

excess amount had been imposed. The two-year break on taxes could also be made up for by using the personal assets accumulated by Larken and the other vicars. The businesses that had cozied up to the vicars had been forgiven for their corrupt dealings and were instead required to cough up large sums of money. *I imagine Forte found it quite satisfying to hand those dogs their just deserts.*.

"Thanks to your guidance, the law and taxes are well in hand." A shadow came over Forte's face as he spoke. "However, I feel the need to report that we've run into trouble in regards to matters of safety."

The man showed deep reservation and honest shame at his own lack of strength.

The report he'd written hadn't tried to gloss over the issue. The cities were safe enough, but it seemed that somewhat isolated settlements and highways were rife with bandits, and there had been many a word of recent incidents.

"Many of the late vicor's soldiers were found to be of poor morals, and we had no choice but to relieve them of their duties. Many of the new recruits are not yet properly trained and are unable to satisfactorily replace them."

This likely accounted for why Forte had brought fewer soldiers to the battle than Georg had, even though Forte had been in control of the west for roughly a month. Should he have brought more of them with him, the stability of the region would have eroded further.

"It's not a rare pattern: delinquent soldiers being discharged from service and then sinking to a life of brigandry," I recalled.

"Indeed. Therefore, my lord, I would like to request your aid in this matter. Your assistance will allow us to crack down on these thugs and prevent the guards from being made light of."

"What exactly did you have in mind?"

"I would like to borrow something of enormous strength, something similar to the golems used in the assault on Buery. My hope is to make the brigands quake in their boots and lose their will to oppose us."

"Denied," I said, shaking my head. I know he was doing his best to come up

with a good strategy, but I absolutely couldn't permit it.

"M-Might I ask why?"

"Even if it is to keep the peace, it would be excessive to use monsters such as golems as a form of deterrence. They'd likely intimidate the innocent as well the brigands, and that would spell a rule of terror."

When trying to end an era of conflict with all possible haste, you do what you have to do, but this was, more or less, a time of peace. It would be completely contradictory of me to work to uproot a fetid system of nobility only to begin a rule of terror. It would also not be to my taste. That'ss why I make for a dull politician.

"I see," Forte replied. "That was very shortsighted of me. My apologies."

"There's no need to apologize. I delight hearing the opinions of others. Don't worry about making errors. Just speak your mind."

I only stood to gain from the exchange, and it would be a learning experience for Forte. Two birds, one stone.

Forte thought deeply and quickly proffered an idea. "Then how about harsher sentences? We'll make a show of handing down severe punishments, but only to brigands."

"Well, that's not too bad. But what exactly would these punishments be? Under current law, the punishment for brigandry is death."

"Then I would like to once again request your aid in this matter..."

"I have no objections. What is it you'd like?"

"In that case, my lord, might I request that you use your magic on captured brigands? I'm thinking of the spell you used on Larken—the one that preserves them as a decapitated head."

"Ha ha, I see!" I slapped my knees. The man had convinced me.

Displaying decapitated heads to the public to make an example of the beheaded criminal had been common practice since antiquity. However, many would argue that sinners just didn't care about what happened to their body once they were dead, and so many continued to commit crimes.

This is where my necromancy came in. It would truly be hell to be made an undead decapitated head with your mind still intact, to spend decades on display and live on as a prime target of thrown stones. I had no doubt that many would find the short-term fruits of brigandry to not be worth such a fate and in turn clean up their act.

Another great thing about making an example of said criminals was that it would grant assurance to those throwing the stones. Perhaps it was a drastic step, but it would teach the value of living justly and the foolishness of committing crimes. Such lessons were the basis for maintaining harmony and order.

“Very well. Once I have control of the eastern territory, I’ll head out west.”

“You honor me, my lord.”

A faint smile formed on Forte’s lips. He bowed deeply and soon took his leave.

Once Forte had departed, Lelesha and Jenni came in with refreshments.

“Forte seems to have won your favor, my lord,” Lelesha remarked.

“Quite. He’s come far for a man who, two months ago, was nothing more than the boss of a slum. He’ll grow even more with experience.”

“With luck, he’ll grow to become one of your confidants.”

“That’s a matter of the future. We have time, so why not wait and see what happens?”

The condition for taking one of my civil administrators as a confidant was for them to surpass me in one field of expertise.

“Perhaps you might prefer to take a more lax approach to your conquest of the eastern territory. The two of us could explore the sight of Buery and enjoy ourselves like lovers would. Doesn’t that sound splendid?”

“Nonsense!” I laughed off Lelesha’s joke and brought a silver cup to my lips. “Hmm, I would like to leave tomorrow, but...”

I hesitated to finish my sentence. There was something bothering me.

“It’s Dame Rosa that you have on your mind, isn’t it, Your Majesty?” Jenni

asked with certainty. After setting down the refreshments, she had retreated to a corner, where she was standing as though on guard duty.

She was observant; that was for sure. She may have been a new arrival, but she understood me well.

“I ask, sire, because the blood of that woman seemed especially to your liking.”

Jenni spoke in a stiff tone, but I could detect a slight pout in her words. How adorable. I beckoned her to come closer.

“It’s not only the taste of her blood that interests me, but also her skills and strong will. If possible, I’d like her to join my ranks, just like you did.”

During our last battle, Lelesha had taken down the eastern prefect, Golia-something-or-another. At this point, their underlings were probably in a state of utter panic. Taking over the eastern prefect’s offices in Mashrisa would be like taking candy from a baby. I had half a mind to sit back and let this be an opportunity for Jenni to prove herself.

Either way, once we conquered the east, we would have Countess Nastalia surrounded. The day of reckoning was approaching. When the time came, would Rosa stand in my way for a third time? It was likely she’d fight till the bitter end if her master’s life were at stake. No more would she let me toy with her like a kitten. However, I would find it a shame to fight Rosa with the intent of killing her.

“Is there no good way to take the girl in?”

Until I find a means to do so, perhaps there’s no need to rush into taking the eastern territory, though I know that’s just my own selfish thinking.

While I contemplated in silence, Jenni spoke up. “At her core, Dame Rosa is kind and easily deceived. Unfortunately, that honesty of hers also serves to blind her.”

Well that’s harsh.

“However, her sense of justice is genuine, and her spirit is unbreakable. I, too, think it would be a shame to lose Rosa.”

Scrap that—she's complimenting her.

"I thought you two were on bad terms."

"We're hardly friends, but you could consider us rivals. I'm not so naive that I would consider an utter fool to be a fitting match for myself."

Good, very good. It's a wonderful thing to have a worthy match who pushes you to grow. It brought me back to a time three hundred years ago that felt like only yesterday.

I'll be honest—when I first met him, I hadn't been too fond of my half-brother. In fact, I had rather despised him. I couldn't help but fear someone like him. His talents with a sword had been blinding, and his perfect disposition had made him loved by everyone. At the time, I had been haunted by fears that he might steal my position as crown prince. It was the ignorance of youth; I'd been only seven years old at the time.

However, my fear had led me to setting aside my dreams of brandishing my sword before armies under my command and instead pursuing visions of using magic to lead countries. I'd found my purpose in life very early on. As the older brother and the crown prince, I'd felt I couldn't lose to Al and had dedicated myself to studying magic and statesmanship. Ironically, this had seemed to motivate Al to work even harder. Unaware of my fear of him, he had grown to respect and admire me.

At the same time, I had begun to change how I viewed Al. I had grown to appreciate this younger brother of mine who seemed to always be right on my heels no matter how much progress I made. I had developed a deep respect for Al's will; he had worked hard because I had, and he hadn't grown complacent with his natural talents.

I had been very fortunate to have found such a compelling rival in my younger brother. The idea of ceding the position of crown prince to him had become an acceptable one. I had begun to think of our bond as more than one of family—Al had become an irreplaceable best friend to me. I had awkwardly reached out a hand to him, and he had been all too happy to accept it.

We had stayed by each other's side until we had conquered the continent together. I can say with certainty that without him, I wouldn't have been able to

master magic to the degree that I had, nor would I have been able to become the progenitor of the Vastalask line.

"I've made up my mind. I shall see to it that Rosa becomes one of my knights. Settling matters with the countess can wait."

A smile appeared on Jenni's normally stern face. "Thank you, Your Majesty. Fear not—Rosa's sense of justice is true and will help her realize who it is she truly wishes to serve."

The elf looked full of confidence as she spoke.

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The provincial capital city of Arkus, also of the name Arkus.

"How horrible that was," Rosa grumbled between her umpteenth sigh. "Just my luck."

She was downtrodden. Her movements were sluggish. She couldn't maintain her usual dignity. The saddle shook with the *clip-clop* of the horse's hooves, and Rosa's body swayed with it.

Down the bustling main street rode Rosa, slowly making her way towards Lady Nastalia's castle. She was to report on her defeat at the hands of the vampire Kai Lekius back in Buery. Naturally, she did so with a heavy heart.

That deplorable vampire! He continues to toy with me! Does he know nothing of the pure heart of a maiden?

Her journey to the provincial capital had taken three days, yet she still grew irritated just thinking about the whole ordeal. This had been the second time Kai Lekius had drunk her blood. She had once again been inundated with the dizzying pleasure.

Rosa was still a girl who knew nothing of men, but she imagined normal copulation couldn't compare to the sensualities of having her blood drunk. She hadn't wanted to give Kai Lekius the satisfaction of knowing how good it had felt, but her voice had betrayed her. She had gritted her teeth but been unable to suppress it.

Looking back on it, she realized that her vain attempts to resist may have only

made it more enjoyable for him. It would explain why when she tried to say things like “This doesn’t even feel that good!” and “You’re really bad at this, you know?” he would only drink up with increased vigor. She’d been dancing entirely to his tune!

To top it off, he had said this afterwards: “Should you ever want me to suck your blood again, call me any time. Whether we stand as friends or foes, I’ll be there.”

How arrogant could he be?!

Needless to say, Rosa had refused him outright. “What do you mean friend or foe?! You just want to suck my blood, don’t you?” she’d cried.

“Well, I won’t deny it, but I wouldn’t go out of my way for just anyone. Three hundred years ago, there was no shortage of people who would have fainted from the honor of receiving my visitation.”

Rosa couldn’t help but laugh, and not just at the “three hundred years ago” nonsense. “Firstly, you said I could call you anytime like it would be no trouble. How the hell would I do that? Are you telling me to sit down and pen you a courteous letter?”

“You needn’t worry about how. At this point, I’ve imbibed a considerable amount of your blood, so we have quite the spiritual bond between us. Thus, if you wish for me and should I respond to said wish, I can be at your side in an instant, no matter how far the distance between us.”

“Vampires really are absurd!”

“Especially True Bloods such as myself.”

“Agh! Fine. I get it now. But I’ll set traps and surround myself with legions of soldiers before calling you to me, so be ready for that!”

“Oh, how terribly frightening! I’ll remember to keep an eye out when you call.”

“Could you at least be a little concerned?! Do you take me for a fool?!”

Such was the humiliating exchange that had occurred before they’d parted ways.

Honestly, I don't understand Jenni in the slightest. Not only did she betray someone as great as Lady Natalya, but she did it to serve that blood-sucking deviant! How blind can one be? Now I feel like an idiot for ever having considered her my rival!

Rosa continued her grumbling as she passed through the castle's front gate. She then banished her negative thoughts and sat up straight on the saddle. She was a first-class knight; she knew how to draw a line between personal and professional affairs.

Once again, Rosa was to meet Countess Nastalia not in the audience chamber but in the countess's personal chambers. She had no doubt that this was out of consideration and mercy for Rosa, who bore the shame of returning alone. How truly benevolent she was!

Rosa renewed her reverence for her liege as she quickly made her way through the corridors of the castle. Already, she had reached the building's inner reaches, the private domain of all who have ruled Arkus. No longer were the halls filled with working civil and military administrators, but instead the maidservants favored by the lady. Typically, a retainer without an escort would not be permitted to walk these parts of the castle. Rosa, however, had special permission as she was trusted so deeply by Lady Natalya. Similarly, Rosa had also received special permission to keep her sword at her hip while meeting with the countess. It was proof of the countess's capacity and courage as well as her acknowledgement of Rosa's pride in her heirloom.

Rosa wasn't far from Lady Natalya's chambers when the corridor brought her to a cloister. She had reached the courtyard. The garden was a small one, but it had a greenhouse that housed Lady Natalya's precious roses. Before making her appearance, Rosa made sure to stop by the greenhouse. There was a reason for this stop: right after her battle—and unwanted blood donation—with Kai Lekius, Jenni had called out after her.

"I have a favor to ask you, Dame Rosa. You'll be reporting the details of this encounter to Countess Nastalia, will you not? When that time comes, I'd like you to pick one of the countess's roses and bring it to her."

"Huh? Why should I listen to the request of a traitor?"

“You can consider it a provocation. If your loyalty to Countess Nastalia is genuine, then you’ll give her a rose. However, if you lack the confidence to do so, then you’re free to ignore me. I’ll simply laugh at your meagerness for the rest of my life.”

“Fine. I’ll take you up on it! Once I’ve delivered the rose, I’ll hear an apology next time we meet!”

“Understood. On my honor as an elf, I’ll bow down before you.”

“I’m looking forward to it!”

“Listen, Rosa. Be sure to use pruning shears. They’re in the shed. I worry you may try and use that sword of yours like some brute.”

“Your concern is entirely unnecessary! Not even I would do something so senseless!”

Nothing that elf says ever makes any sense! Rosa thought as she made her way to the greenhouse. *But I’ll show that turncoat how loyal I am to Her Ladyship!*

Since childhood, Rosa had dreamed of becoming a proud knight in the service of a benevolent leader. She had Lady Natalya to thank for that dream coming true. Jenni, meanwhile, had offered herself up to some vampire the elf knew little about. Rosa decided that next time they met she would laugh in Jenni’s face.

With her mind made up, Rosa boldly stepped into the greenhouse. She didn’t even bother glancing at the alluring, blood-red roses and made for the shed. Inside, she found neatly arranged tools and equipment for caring for the flowers.

Shears, shears...

Rosa was still searching the shelves for the shears when suddenly she heard something. It was a strange sound, picked up largely thanks to Rosa’s sharp senses. To be precise, it was the sound of voices, voices like a crowd of whimpering girls. And it was coming from beneath her feet.

“What...? What is this? First vampires and now ghosts...”

While Rosa couldn't suppress her discomfort, she also couldn't turn the other way when there might be undead lurking in her liege's greenhouse. Feeling the need to investigate, Rosa knelt down and searched for the source of the voices. She soon found it. Covered by an unassuming hatch was a staircase that led underground.

"Could this be some sort of store room?"

Her discomfort was increasing steadily, but her sense of responsibility drove her onward. As she descended, the girls' whimpering became noticeably clearer. With a gulp, Rosa stepped off the bottom stair and onto the cold stone floor.

Visibility proved no issue due to the many lit torches. Perhaps they were always lit. With a torch directly to her side, Rosa's shadow stood tall against the cobblestone walls. A glance around her revealed the surprisingly wide underground chamber.

It was a prison built into the rock's surface.

A countless number of girls were held captive, chained to the walls. Not one seemed to have their sanity intact; only despair could be glimpsed in their eyes. None of them showed any reaction to Rosa's arrival. They just continued to whimper.

"What... What's going on here?!"

"Rosa, you naughty girl, this was a *secret* of mine."

Rosa spun around at the unexpected response. There stood her beloved Lady Natalya.

"Your Ladyship? Just what is the meaning of this? Who are these girls?" Rosa asked.

While descending the same staircase Rosa had, Lady Natalya replied immediately. With each step the countess took, Rosa felt herself being cornered.

"Aren't you aware that I gather up impoverished girls from all over Arkus once they turn fourteen?"

“I...I’m well aware of that,” Rosa murmured. “However, that’s to prevent starving girls from selling their bodies or committing crimes, is it not? It’s so you can educate them and give them reputable work, is it not?”

“Well, of course I’m doing that as well. But I don’t hand over my favorite girls, the ones I take a particular liking to, to anyone. I keep them locked up here, where I can love them everyday.”

“What...”

“It’s not only vampires who enjoy the blood of pretty girls, you know?”

Lady Natalya flashed Rosa an alluring smile. It was a smile so extraordinarily beautiful but also vaguely chilling.

“My lady, what do you mean? Please, speak clearly!”

“Do I need to spell it out for you, Rosa? Or do you simply not wish to acknowledge the truth?”

Lady Natalya’s smile went beyond simple meanness. Her lips were contorted in a smile of pure wickedness. As she smiled, she tapped her feet against the stone floor. This was hallowed tread, the form of incantation. Rosa wasn’t ignorant of this—.Lady Natalya herself had taught Rosa the fundamentals of magic so that she could better fight Kai Lekius.

Lady Natalya finished her spell, and her magnificent form began to change. From the torso up, she remained the same, but her bottom half grew and grew. Rosa’s eyes slowly rose to follow Lady Natalya’s face as it came close to the ceiling. Then her transformation was complete—or rather, she had exposed her true form. From the torso down she bore the tail of an enormous snake, and from her mouth flitted a forked tongue.

“A lamia...” Rosa whispered.

Lamias were human-snake hybrids that fed off the fresh blood of humans. To think that her beloved Lady Natalya, a noble of the empire, was actually such a monster!

“Rosa, you good-for-nothing. You sat back and watched Jenni betray me, didn’t you? How sickening. If that old elf’s left us, then that vampire is the real

Kai Lekius. You see, I never actually believed someone like you could put him to the sword. In other words, I have no further use for you as a knight." Lady Natalya sneered at Rosa while brushing up against the ceiling. "But that doesn't change how I feel about you, Rosa. I've been looking forward to the day I would suck your blood!"

She licked her lips with her forked tongue. Rosa froze like a frog at the mercy of a snake.

"Do you consider it benevolence to care for livestock? No matter their treatment, all livestock meet the same end: to be served up and eaten. Countess Nastalia believes only in taking the necessary pains to prepare a fine meal."

Jenni was right. She'd known the truth all along.

Agh, what a fool I've been! I've been deceived by the sweet words of a monster!

"I cannot permit this! I won't allow you to make any further sacrifices out of these girls!"

She wasn't going to groan about her bad luck like she usually did. She had already drawn her sword. Rosa was following her sense of justice, and that sense told her to be rid of Lady Natalya. Brihne was engulfed in crimson flames, and the knight attacked.

"How adorable. However, such folly won't even scathe me!"

With a sneer still on her face, Lady Natalya twisted her fingers into a mudra. The lamia's shadow began to writhe. However, it wasn't just the one shadow that stirred, but also the abundant shadows formed by the torches on the walls. Rosa didn't know it, but this was the work of Dablanga, a spell from the fifth rung of the illusory school of magic. The dancing shadows surged to attack Rosa.

"Out of my way!"

Rosa tried to cut them down, but couldn't. An illusory being like a shadow could be sliced over and over to no avail, but somehow the umbral hands of the shadows could reach out and hold Rosa down.

“Let me go!”

Rosa fought and struggled to break free, but it was no use. It wasn’t that so much that the shadows were strong; they were simply unaffected by Rosa’s pushing and pulling, and it wasn’t long before she couldn’t move at all. This was a taste of the fearsomeness and malignancy of magic.

This explained something else too: it hadn’t been out of faith or respect that Rosa had been allowed to keep her sword at her side while meeting with Lady Natalya; she had simply been allowed to do as she pleased because she posed no threat to the countess.

“Oh, just give up and offer up your blood to me,” Lady Natalya said as she closed in on Rosa. With her long, long body, the lamia could close the distance between them merely by leaning forward. “It can be your final service, your final act of loyalty to me. A maiden’s blood is delightful on its own, but the blood of someone as pure as you, Rosa, will surpass the finest of spirits!”

Lady Natalya licked her lips and brought her face closer to Rosa. Rosa’s expression twisted in agony as two fangs pierced her neck. She faced the other way and endured the terrible sensation.

Indeed, having her blood drunk by a lamia was nothing short of misery. It was not at all like the dizzying sensation brought about by Kai Lekius. Lady Natalya also noticed that something was off.

“D-Disgusting...”

The countess removed her fangs from Rosa’s neck and reflexively turned away as she wiped the fresh blood from her mouth.

“How can you say that when you’re the one who drank from me without permission?!” Rosa protested, shaking with humiliation.

Rosa had formed a strong spiritual bond with Kai Lekius, an exceptional individual even among vampires. Neither of them knew it, but her blood was now permeated with a spiritual substance that made it impure to anyone but him. However, as a magician, Lady Natalya was quick to cotton on.

“How dare you make me drink something so disgusting, you whore?!”

Fuming with rage, the lamia swung her right arm. Her five bladelike claws struck flesh and tore through Rosa's abdomen. It was a fatal wound.

At the same time, Rosa was slammed against the moldy wall behind her. This freed her from the shadows, but with the wounded stomach, there was nothing she could do.

"Don't think I'd let you die an easy death, Rosa! I'll skin you alive and make you my trophy!"

Rosa slid down the stone wall as she sank to the ground.

Damn it...

Her teeth clenched, Rosa held back her tears. She was frustrated to have ever been deceived by Lady Natalya. She was frustrated that Jenni had been far more perceptive than she had.

Damn it...

In spite of her efforts, tears rolled down her cheeks. She was frustrated at her inability to carry out justice and save the captive girls. She was frustrated at the thought of dying without knowing the whole truth.

"I hope you keep your promise!" Rosa screamed with the last of her strength. She cried out from the bottom of her heart, asking for *him*. And then—

"Ha ha ha... Bwa ha ha ha! Mwa ha ha ha ha!"

It only took a moment for a bodiless chuckle to ring out and then shift into rapturous laughter. It was a laugh that Rosa knew well, the laugh of a monarch, such a scornful laugh that it irritated her and so bold that it made her envious.

"Who's there?!" Lady Natalya asked sharply.

"Don't you know whom you're talking to, peon?"

From Rosa's elongated shadow erupted a swarm of something black. They were spiders, a swarm of countless spiders. The spiders convened on one spot and seemed to meld together into one shadow. There stood the True Blood, Kai Lekius.

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I, Kai Lekius, answered Rosa's call and appeared at her side in a dimly lit prison. Glancing around, I noticed a mold-covered wall with a dying knight slumped against it.

"It seems you've taken a serious beating. Do you need me to rescue you?" I asked teasingly while leaning over the near dead Rosa.

"No," she croaked between gasps. "You don't."

She was strong-willed to the end, not that I was surprised; I had more or less expected as much. Still, I decided to pose her another question.

"Then for what purpose did you call me?"

"Strength. I want the strength to bring about justice..."

Blood was pouring from her abdomen, but the light was yet to leave Rosa's eyes.

Wonderful. How truly wonderful! This is what makes you fit to be my first descendant!

With my index finger, I sent a stream of magic across my stomach. This was enough to make an incision in my skin and draw droplets of blood.

"Do you want strength?"

"I do."

She had asked, so she would receive. In exchange, she would become my descendant. We were forming a pact, and Rosa knew exactly what that meant. She opened her mouth and accepted the blood that dripped off my fingers and onto her tongue, making my mana mingle with hers and explode.

"Oho..."

I, Kai Lekius, couldn't contain my elation. As I watched, Rosa conceded her humanity and began her metamorphosis into a vampire. Her entire body changed at terrifying speed, and I watched the wound on her abdomen close up. This was proof that she had acquired the undying body of a creature of the night. I was awestruck by the sight of such a miracle, something I hadn't been able to witness during my own transformation.

Rosa howled and rose to her feet; it was cry of my first descendant. She was covered in blood, but she stood with beauty, dignity, and determination as she faced down the lamia. Flames erupted from the blade of her sword. They shifted from red to blue to *white*.

No longer human, Rosa's mana was far greater than it once had been. By channeling every bit of that mana into Brihne, she had drawn out the true power of my masterpiece. Even the blade's first owner, Albert, had only been able to activate its achromic flames for a moment, but his descendant could now keep those flames alight with ease.

"Prepare yourself, Natalya!"

Rosa raised the blinding sword and swung at the lamia.

"I thought I'd humor you and watch you struggle, but all you do is borrow someone else's power!"

The snake-woman responded in kind by using Dablanga to strike out with her shadows. The lamia's provocation had been a low blow, but Rosa didn't let it bother her.

"Borrowed power or not, my priority is saving those girls!"

Rosa wasn't one to lose sight of the meaning of justice. One after another, she cut down the swathe of malign shadows. Even shade could be cut through with the white flames of Brihne. Rosa's just blade came diagonally down on the lamia, who let out an agonized shriek as her right shoulder was sliced open.

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The snake-woman coiled up and clutched at the seared mouth of her wound.

"Give it up, Natalya! I'll never forgive you for what you've done to these innocent girls, but it doesn't change the good you've done for this world! If you promise to lead a life of repentance, I'll spare you!" Rosa proclaimed, holding her blade in a flawless stance.

"Did you hear that, Natalya? I'd suggest you cry and thank Rosa for her kindness."

I personally would have shown no mercy, but it was only reasonable to leave

this to Rosa. I wanted to respect her decision; such a sweet deed was very much like her and very commendable. I wasn't going to do something so graceless as interrupt or lecture her on how to do things.

Countess Nastalia showed no response. She remained coiled up, occasionally glaring at Rosa. Then her eyes fell on me.

"Are you the vampi— No. Are you Kai Lekius, the true founder of Vastalask?"

"Heh, was he not the evil god who interfered with the empire's founding?"

"That is but a distortion of history."

I thought I detected a hint of respect in the lamia's tone and eyes.

"I— No, *all* of the Nastalia bloodline holds the deepest respect for you."

"Oh?"

"Our debt to you has been handed down through our family for generations. Through charisma and a fearsome rule, you brought to life the ideals of equality for all. We lamias had been despised as monsters, but under your rule, even we could be chosen and given positions based on our capabilities. That was the case for one of my ancestors. The Nastalia earldom has you to thank for its existence."

"Apologies, but I don't recall this ancestor of yours."

I had no memory of heavily employing any lamias. This wasn't because of any sort of discrimination; I had simply never come across anyone particularly exceptional among their kind.

"I suppose that's only natural. My ancestor was weak and could do nothing more than serve as a grunt in your corps. But at the time, even that was exceedingly kind treatment for us." Natalya dipped her head in a show of reverence. "Thanks to you, we were able to secure a place under the eye of our liege. Generations passed, and during the reign of Emperor Kalis, the then Countess Nastalia gained favor with his Imperial Majesty and, via the bedchamber, gained the title of Countess. All of this was only possible because of the foundations established by you, Kai Lekius."

"Just how insufferable could Kalis have been? He let someone prostitute

themselves in exchange for a noble title!”

“Say what you please, but it was you who enabled us to live for generations with power and prestige, so we of the Nastalia line consider ourselves indebted to you and Emperor Kalis equally.”

Struggling to imagine a greater indignity, I failed to contain my disgust. “You’d put me in the same camp as that dolt? How revolting.”

“I find this all so unfortunate,” Natalya said, shaking her head mournfully. “It was my wish that you would rest peacefully beneath the ground for the rest of eternity. Even if your legacy was erased from history, the Nastalia line would never forget you. We would continue to worship you for until the end of time, and yet—”

Natalya paused briefly before screaming, her hair flailing about wildly. “Why did you have to resurrect in this era?! The empire no longer needs you! You are nothing more than an obstacle! You are no longer the ruler of Vastalask—you’re simply a ghost of the past!”

“A ghost, you say? Funny. Perhaps you have a point. To you, I am nothing but a malign spirit. And so, from here on out, I shall become the wicked god Kai Lekius and destroy this empire.”

“I cannot allow that!”

“Then what will you do? Strike me down with your own two hands?”

You, a shoddy magician who couldn’t even qualify as one of my knights?

The countess began to cackle. “You must be joking! I know my strengths, and we Nastalias have made sure your power has not been forgotten.” She took something from her breast pocket. “I am powerless in the face of a hero who survived such a hellish era of conflict. Emperor Kalis was just as powerless, but Vastalask is not! You would do well to realize and take pride in it! Watch closely and bear witness to the secret ward that will see Vastalask to its thousandth year and beyond!”

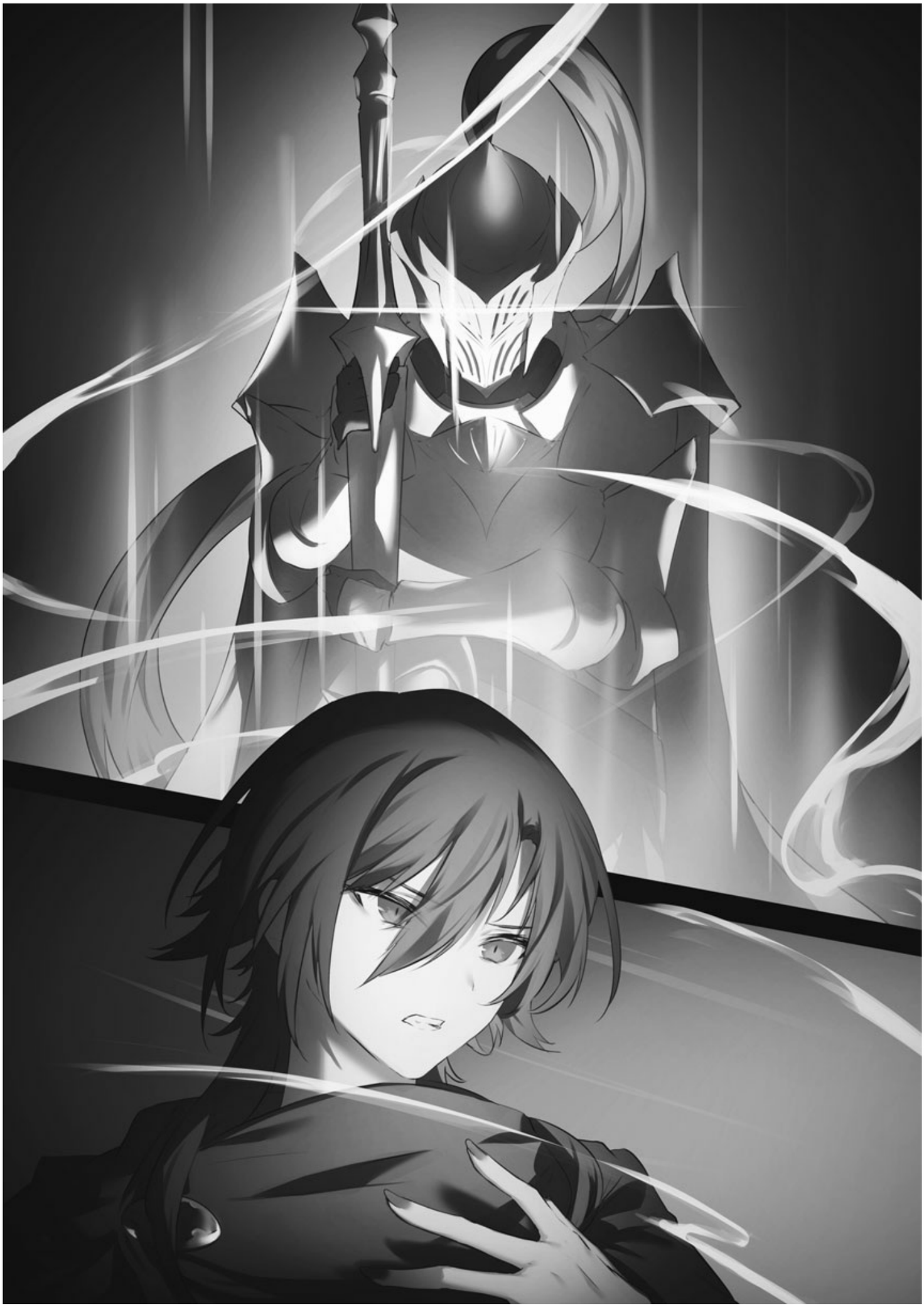
Shrieking, Countess Nastalia tossed that something into the air. It was a bone—one of the two hundred and six bones in the human skeleton. The countess began an echoing invocation.

“A foe of the empire is before us! An enemy of the world is before us! O guardian deity of Vastalask, grant us aid! Grant us your mercy! Alight before us, and smite this enemy of Vastalask!”

Not a moment later, the bone began to glow and seemed to manifest in the form of a person.

I see. So it’s come to this. Indeed, this could kill me.

There stood a warrior in silver armor brimming with immense mana. In the warrior’s hands was a greatsword of a similar grade. It was a blade that could bring down a god.



I hadn't forgotten that armor. Nor had I forgotten that sword. The former was the divine armor Velsarius, and the latter was Kainis, the holy blade. Both were my finest masterpieces. I had used only the finest techniques to craft this set for my brother and successor, Al Shion.

Therefore, alighted, manifested before me, blade at the ready, was Al himself. In order to protect the fetid nobility of Vastalask, his soul—or rather, his desire to defend his land—had been ritualized so as to permit him to fight even after death.

As long as Al's remnants continue to exist, I could be forced to fight him again and again for all of eternity.

An infernal rage had burst from within me. "You fettered the soul of my beloved brother and deified him as a guardian of the land? You would drag the soul of my dearest relative through the mud to protect those such as yourself?"

Do you know the name of this feeling within me?

"Kalis, the empire, the nobles, do any of you comprehend what you've done?"

You will regret this. You will regret the day you angered me, Kai Lekius.

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The countess began to shout in an insolent manner. "Let the hands of your brother guide you to your slumber—this time for all eternity! The Nastalia line will continue to worship at your grave forevermore. Even if your name has faded from the annals of history, we Nastalias will pass on memories of your great deeds from parent to child for generations to come. This I swear!"

She wore a look of fealty on her face as she made her promises sound plausible.

"Not another word."

I rapidly snapped my fingers four times in a distinct rhythm and traced them in a straight line. In an instant, the skin about the lamia's mouth tore open and an incision opened down the inside of her mouth. This was Gablas, a spell of the fifth rung of the hexen branch of magic.

"I'll deal with you later."

I gave not another glance to the countess as she moaned and held her hands to her bloodied mouth. I had a formidable foe to prepare for.

Indeed, this man was a formidable foe, for even until the very end, I'd never been able to convince myself I could beat him. Before me was Al Shion, equipped with the finest armaments I had even made. By advanced magic rites, he had been made an Eternal Champion, a guardian deity of the land. If he couldn't be considered formidable, then who could?

Without saying a word, Al readied his greatsword and came at me. I pulled Rosa in next to me and quickly muttered an invocation.

"There's no greater defense than retreat."

This was Srain of the sixth rung of the principal branch of magic. The spell allowed one to perform the miracle of teleportation, albeit only over very short distances. Using it, I managed to both evade Al's attack and escape the prison.

Fighting an all-powerful warrior in such tight space would have been beyond reckless. Doing so would endanger not only the girls chained up in that prison, but also my first descendant.

"Run, Rosa. Run as far as you can."

"What?"

"I won't repeat myself."

We were in the greenhouse that lay above the prison. I pushed away the bewildered Rosa and without delay cast Saiku. I then blasted a hole in the ceiling by using Ys and flew through the opening.

Al didn't waste any time pursuing me. A vast pillar of light shot up from the greenhouse; it was Al breaking through the ceiling of the prison. He immediately caught sight of me and took to the skies at high speed. In his previous life, Al had not been able to fly on his own, but being deified as a guardian of the empire had given him new powers. This ability was but just one example.

The manner in which he came straight at me was almost in earnest. I responded by rapidly twisting my fingers in a mudra for successive casts of

Shaarp, a spell from the illusory branch's fourth rung.

Layers of black webs composed of shadows fanned out caught Al to impede his advance. Those illusory webs are typically impervious to steel, but they were all sliced through at once. This was only natural; the Holy Blade was a righteous weapon capable of cutting through mana itself.

Back in the age of strife, enemy summoners would exchange their lives to manifest the archdevil of the Mirage Realm. Kainis had been forged to slay such a monster. Brihne was a fine sword, but there was nothing it could do that Kainis couldn't. Therefore, Shaarp was nothing more than a minor hindrance to Al, who pressed on with almost no decrease in his speed.

However, I had succeeded in slowing Al down, no matter how minutely. I used this time to recite an invocation at a speed nobody else could match while repeatedly forming mudras. Shaarp had been nothing more than a means to buy time.

"Alabaster King, come forth from your tempestuous realm and swiftly dispose of those before me."

With a spell from the eight rung of the summoning branch of magic, I brought forth Hraesvelgr, the king of the Tempestuous Realm. I directed the monstrous bird towards Al, and the two soon clashed. Al used an array of the finest sword techniques while Hraesvelgr used their beak and cyclonic wings, each opponent attempting to bring the other down. Both showed extreme fierceness and strength, but Al seized the upper hand. This, too, was only natural. Velsarius would hinder not only physical attacks but anything fundamentally intended to harm the wearer.

Hraesvelger made a display of tenacity befitting the king of their Tempestuous Realm and attacked with inordinate force. The mighty king succeeded in scratching Al's armor but nothing more. Al, on the other hand, swung true with the Holy Blade and struck Hraesvelgr's life-force, vanquishing the bird.

It was a total victory for Al.

That was fine. Hraesvelgr had merely been yet another means of buying time. This fight was between Al and me—a recreation of the battles to the death from that twisted world in the past. That's why, I, too, had given it my all from

the start.

“Inferno of the east, flames of the black threads of Kalasutra.”

I had used the time I had bought to channel my mana, speak an invocation, and point my right hand at Al. Projectiles of black flame shot out in rapid succession as Al resumed his pursuit of me. This was an advanced tenth-rung spell combining both the four greater branches and the hexen branch. It was called Gradsaralos. Even with the protection of Velisarius, Al was forced to go on the defensive.

Of course, I wasn’t so optimistic as to think that this would be enough to defeat Al. While unleashing the volley of flames, I prepared my next attack. Indeed, even the combination spell was just another means of buying time.

“Mirage of Abdala, butterfly of Teselia, spire of the Helmeim Desert.”

The moment I finished reciting the magic words, I stuck out my left hand and aimed the spell at Al. It was at that same moment that Al appeared directly before me. He had used Hagan, the most basic of techniques.

This brings back memories.

Al had mastered this cornerstone of combat and elevated it to an art. He was so swift, you’d think he had teleported. Not even the eyes of a True Blood were able to track him. After weaving through the volley of black flames and closing in on me, Al swung his sword without mercy and without a word. My protruding left arm was sliced clean off.

If this had been a wound from a normal sword, my arm would have immediately begun to regenerate and return to its original form. My forearm, however, showed no signs of reforming.

I didn’t imagine that this Al, the one worshiped as a guardian deity, was capable of feeling much, but perhaps it satisfied him to start with just an arm.

Oho, I’ve got you now.

My lips twisted into a grin, for Al’s plan of attack had been all too obvious. In fact, I had led him into it. I had first released Gradsaralos from my right hand and then stuck out my left, so he had cut my left arm to prevent further attacks.

It was a reasonable move, was it not?

However, my left arm was a feint, and this was just yet another means of buying time. My next spell required an invocation and ascendant whistling. A sharp tune emanated from my lips. My escaping breath brushed over Al, who was right in front of me.

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In the skies above the countess's castle, a battle like those during the age of the gods was underway. The cloudless sheet of blue allowed for an unhindered view of the monstrous duel.

In the shade of the courtyard, Rosa stood agape as she stared upwards. Kai Lekius had told her to run as far away as she could, but she just couldn't bring herself to. Her instincts as a knight—or rather, as a warrior—told her that if she missed this battle, if she didn't burn it into her memories, she would forever regret it.

"But which of them has the upper hand?" she wondered aloud.

A battle between a True Blood vampire and an Eternal Champion was something so far removed from Rosa's sense of normality that she wasn't even sure what was happening. She had been talking to herself and not expecting an answer, but an answer came anyway.

"The greatest magician in history, Kai Lekius, and the greatest warrior in history, Al Shion. Three hundred years ago, there was much debate over who would win if the two were to meet in battle."

With a heavy flapping of its wings, a pegasus landed in the courtyard. On the creature's back was a saddle on which sat Lelesha and Jenni. The elf's first aerial flight must have terrified her, for she was shivering and clinging to Lelesha's back like a child.

"In the end, the predominant conclusion was exceedingly obvious: if the circumstances were favorable to a warrior, then the warrior would win, and if the circumstances were favorable to a magician, then the magician would win. And nobody is better than my lord at creating favorable circumstances for themselves."

“So these are favorable circumstances for him now? Or is he currently turning things to his favor?” Rosa asked.

It was during this discussion that Kai Lekius’s left arm was cut through. Figuring his left arm would return to normal soon enough, the three women felt no concern. However, that didn’t happen. Rosa and Jenni both began to yell.

“Oh no, His Majesty!”

“What are you doing?!”

Only Lelesha maintained a composed visage. “I shouldn’t need to tell you that it’s plain as day that my lord has the advantage,” she said.

Rosa couldn’t believe her ears. “You’ve gotta be kidding! What about this is favorable?!”

They say love is blind, but perhaps “loyalty is blind” would be more fitting for Lelesha. A glance at the sky would confirm that the vampire had been forced to go entirely on the defense after having his arm severed. You could dress it up and say he was heroically soaring about the skies, but really all he was doing was evading the Eternal Champion.

“You would call this favorable?” Jenni remarked.

Lelesha answered without any doubts or reservations. “Broadly speaking, magic is more powerful than martial arts, but it requires time to prepare. Therefore, in a battle between a warrior and a magician, buying time is a necessary step.”

“I know that, Lelesha. Unlike this redheaded barbarian, I know the basics of magic.”

“Are you trying to pick a fight with me, Jenni?!”

Jenni ignored Rosa’s protests and continued to question Lelesha. “However, is this really him buying time? Is he not just being pushed into a corner?”

“Oh dear, you seem to be under quite the wrong assumption. In fact, I would applaud my lord for such excellent work.”

“How can you say that?!” Rosa shouted.

“It’s not something you can understand by using your eyes.”

Before Lelesha could explain further, there was a development in the battle above. Kai Lekius could no longer evade the Eternal Champion and was sliced in two by a horizontal slash that started at his shoulder and ran down to his flank.

Rosa cried out, and Jenni screamed, but Lelesha didn’t seem at all worried. After some delay, Rosa and Jenni came to understand Lelesha’s inscrutable attitude.

The bisected body of Kai Lekius dispersed like a cloud of mist.

“Huh?”

“Wh-What just happened?”

“It’s simple. That was not my lord’s body but rather a simple illusion,” Lelesha answered calmly.

It was Folomenia, a spell of the ninth rung of the illusory branch of magic.

“S-So you mean that wasn’t Kai Lekius flying around up there, but just a projection?”

“Indeed. Thank you for being quick to understand, Dame Rosa.”

“But will that really work?” Jenni asked. “I can understand that we were fooled, but would such a trick fool an Eternal Champion?”

“As you say, a simple illusion would have been seen through in an instant, but a spell from the ninth rung is a different matter entirely,” Lelesha explained with pride. “However, to fully utilize Folomenia, one needs to both use ascendant whistling and let their breath touch the target. This is extraordinarily difficult to pull off on a warrior like Al, but this was the aim of my lord’s plan.”

Lelesha paused before continuing. “First, he drew attention to his arms by using Gradsaralos, an advanced spell. He next used his left arm as bait and let his brother cut it into two and succeeded in using this brief period to perform an ascendant whistle. I explained earlier that my lord is second to none in creating favorable circumstances for himself, did I not? Every move he made was calculated.”

“Then where’s the real Kai Lekius?” Rosa asked.

Before Lelesha could answer, Jenni pointed to a speck in the distant heavens. “I see him! Over there, Dame Rosa!”

While the Eternal Champion had pursued and dealt with the illusion, Kai Lekius had floated at a much higher altitude while reciting a lengthy invocation.

“Thanks to that illusion, my lord was granted ample time,” Lelesha said, smiling coldly as she watched the guardian deity fly about. Kai Lekius yet continued the lengthy invocation.

Suddenly, a change came about in the heavens: the refreshing blue sky slowly began to change color. The blue gave way to a darker and darker black. Soon, it looked like a night sky bereft of stars.

This was the work of Kai Lekius. This was the work of he who commanded the eternal night.

“What rung of magic is that spell from, Lelesha?” Jenni asked.

Lelesha gave her answer not only smoothly but with actual glee. “The twenty-fourth,” she said.

Kai Lekius then performed the final rite to cast his consummate spell. Meanwhile, Rosa noticed for the first time that he was holding up something in his right hand. That something was the severed portion of his left arm. As though he were offering it up, Kai Lekius held up his severed arm to the dark sky.

“A rite involving a long invocation as well as the sacrifice of part of one’s own body. A spell of the twenty-fourth rung wouldn’t ask for anything less.”

“Then does that mean that letting his arm be cut off was part of his plan from the beginning?” Jenni asked.

“Every move he made was calculated,” Lelesha proclaimed with pride.

Rosa and Jenni were at a loss for words. Both of them watched with bated breath as they waited to see what a spell of the twenty-fourth rung was capable of.

◇♦◇♦◇

I, Kai Lekius, solemnly continued my invocation.

“Furasank fiatetora, zezek, susek, suswis...”

It featured a meaningless string of syllables that were different to remember.

“Unyedan toltresswin kohein piachi devet...”

Those were the near uninterpretable words of a secret language from a world beyond ours.

“Otesetvo simitin dovahjin dechiahn...”

I had entered a half meditative state and was reciting the words almost automically.

“Sheftde suetfem, pentasay dujilion...”

Only by reaching a degree of mastery could one complete a spell of the twenty-fourth rung. That was the way of consummate magic, the magic to kill gods.

To finish, I offered my severed forearm as a sacrifice. I lightly tossed it over my head, and it was sucked into the void that covered the sky. That’s correct:the *void.* From the ground, it mostly likely resembled a starless night sky, but anyone who thought as much would be wrong. It was a gateway bridging the gap between our world and another. The vast black object that could be mistaken for the sky itself was so large, it couldn’t accurately be described by words. From it, I called forth a creature of the other side.

The best way to describe the being would be to call it a random string of numbers. Like snowflakes descending from a gray sky, a haze of numerals fell from the void. These were beings who came from a world dictated by different physics and inhabited by beings and matter entirely different than our own. Those from our world were fundamentally unable to properly perceive the sight of these otherworldly lifeforms. Therefore, our minds converted their forms into ones we could recognize—strings of numbers.

The falling numbers began to gain speed and form streams, or perhaps “tentacles” would be a more accurate comparison. The numerical appendages brushed against each other as they simultaneously made straight for Al.

Naturally, he resisted. He swung his Holy Blade, but it didn’t do him any good.

You might compare it to cutting through water; even a child can do it, and with a blunt sword, no less, but to what end? Swinging at the numbers was no different. Even a swordsman like Al with a blade like Kainis had no means of fighting it off. All he could do was drown in the torrent. No one of our world, no matter how great, could hope to resist a Great Old One.

Drowning in the depths of the numbers, Al was drawn into the pitch-black sky. Struggling desperately, he was swallowed up by the void. I watched with apathy as the aberrations of the other side made prey of him. If I hadn't made a concentrated effort to suppress my emotions, I would have gone insane with anger and despair.

Al,

My beloved brother,

My most precious friend,

The man I found worthy of entrusting my everything to,

You may no longer be the Al I once knew. Your soul's been toyed with; you've been deified a guardian of the land; your humanity has left you; you've become a menial divinity, and yet...

And yet I ask that you forgive me.

And I bid you farewell.

I didn't take my eyes off Al until he was completely out of sight. The void vanished, and the blue sky returned as though it had never been gone. All the while, my right hand was curled into a fist so tight, my nails dug into my palm.

◇♦◇♦◇

Using Saiku, I returned to the ground, where Lelesha ran over to greet me. Following her was not only Jenni, but Rosa as well.

"Excellent work, Your Majesty!" Jenni said.

"A splendid display of magic, just what I'd expect of you, my lord," Lelesha added.

The two rushed at me and all but embraced me.

Wait, wait. I'd love to hug the two of you back, but I'm an arm short right now.

Not that the two seemed to mind. Lelesha took the lead and gently pressed herself against my left flank. Jenni gladly circled around to my right and wrapped my intact arm around her. I glanced at Rosa, and she looked the other way as if to say she wasn't *that* happy to see me. *Everyone's in their natural places, just as they should be. All of them are adorable in their own way.*

While those thoughts passed through my mind, Jenni turned towards Rosa and called out to her. "My condolences, Dame Rosa. It seems you have no place here."

"Sh-Shut up! I don't need a place like that!"

"Why not be more honest with yourself? You wore the look of a timid maiden after His Majesty rescued you."

"Excuse me?! When did you see that? And from where?"

"After His Majesty brought you to the surface. I watched from the sky."

"So you saw it while you were shaking in the saddle of that pegasus?"

"D-Don't say it like that."

How delightful. They're so lively and charming.

However, fawning over the girls would have to wait, and I couldn't stay sullen forever. There was something I still needed to take care of. I moved away from Lelesha and Jenni and quickly looked around. My gaze fell on the one who had been lying on the ground this whole time: the so-called "Lady" Natalya. She had returned to her human form, but her clothes were still torn. Half naked, she bowed down before me.

"Forgive me for my ignorance, Your Majesty Kai Lekius, the unifying monarch!" she declared after noticing my gaze.

She must not have known enough magic to be able to fully heal the wound in her mouth; her enunciation was garbled. Countess Nastalia ignored the blood coming from her reopened wounds and began to shout.

“I, Lady Natalya of the Nastalia Earldom, am deeply repentful of the presumptuousness of my actions in opposing you. Such treachery is deserving of death, but I beg you, sire, to show your exemplary graciousness and grant me forgiveness.”

It was certainly an eloquent way to beg for one’s life. This was the natural response of someone born to nobility and privilege. *How shallow*.

“How dare you employ my brother as a guardian deity?” I replied. I didn’t make it clear whether or not I forgave her.

“That was another act of presumptuousness and foolishness that I deeply regret. But, if I may be so bold, sire, I would say I was doing as I’d been taught to do in such a situation and acted halfway on reflex. We heads of the empire are granted remains of His Majesty Al Shion and taught to request his aid should something threaten the empire’s existence. So please, I beg your forgiveness.”

“Hmm, so are you telling me all nobles and provincial leaders and whoever are in possession of Al’s remains? His soul has been shackled and can be used in battle.”

“Y-Yes. It is as you say, sire.”

“I see.”

Upwards of two hundred provinces existed on the continent, and a little more than two hundred bones made up a human skeleton. To deify a human as an Eternal Champion required large-scale magic rites. I had more or less seen this coming, but after hearing it directly, I still found myself exasperated!

“Natalya.”

“Y-Yes, sire.”

I signaled with my eyes for Lelesha and the others to step aside and approached the prostrating countess. She lifted her head with excitement when she heard her name.

“I ask that you go easy on me,” she said as she hastily lifted up her long hair.

“Not another word,” I ordered before sinking my fangs into her wretched

neck. I fought back my disgust and sucked up with all my strength.

“Even I might be granted such a pleasure?!” the countess cried.

As if I’d do such a thing, you fool. Vampires can turn other beings into vampires. One way is for a Noble or higher variety to offer up their blood. The other way is for the vampire to drink a person’s blood down to the very last drop. The latter, however, transforms the victim into a Lesser: a puppet stripped of their identity. This is the fate that a wretch like you deserves, Natalya!

The countess seemed to catch on to what I was doing.

“P-Please stop, sire! Show mercy! I beg you, show mercy! At least grant me the honor of a normal death!”

She fought as hard as she could, but a lamia couldn’t resist the strength of a True Blood.

You can repent over the next few centuries you spend as a puppet. Perhaps then you’ll come to understand how it feels to have the sanctity of your soul defiled!

When I was finished with that travesty, I addressed my long-time partner.

“Did you hear her, Lelesha?”

“Yes, my lord. Individuals in possession of your brother’s remains are rife throughout the empire, and this is something we cannot permit.”

“It appears we’ve found yet another reason to crush this empire.”

“And I shall accompany you, my lord,” Lelesha said with a dip of her head.

“I...I too shall endeavor to serve you in any way I can!” Jenni added enthusiastically.

The two of them then turned towards Rosa, who was standing idly.

“What will you do, Rosa?” I asked.

“I’ve made my decision, even if it was on the spur of the moment. I now wonder if I was perhaps being hasty,” she replied.

I assumed she was referring to the pact she’d made with me. Lelesha and

Jenni seemed to have already figured out that Rosa had become a vampire; a glance at her mana was all that was necessary for those of their intelligence.

“Oh, Rosa, you just don’t know when to give up,” Lelesha commented.

“You’re a knight driven from the capital—a knight who’s been betrayed by the one you relied on,” Jenni said. “There’s no place left for you in the empire.”

“I know! It’s not like I retain any affection for the empire or its nobility.” Rosa was putting on a brave face, but her eyes were wavering with uncertainty. She turned to me. “I’ve stood against you as an enemy multiple times now. Will you forgive that and accept me?” she asked.

“I shall. As I’ve said, I’ve taken quite a liking to you.”

If I hadn’t, would I have given you my blood? I thought it funny that she would still ask such a question at this point, but I supposed some things must be put into words.

I held out my arms in a sign of acceptance. Indeed, both arms—my left arm had finally healed. In draining the countess’s blood, I had recovered a significant amount of mana.

Rosa snorted. “Vampires! You’re completely absurd!”

“That includes you now, Blood Daemon Rosa.”

“Save the wordplay, Jenni!”

Rosa grabbed my left arm, and Jenni wrapped her arms about my right.

“Well, I do have you to thank for the displeasure of drinking that woman’s rancid blood.”

If I hadn’t been driven by rage, I would never have been able to drink it all.

“Oh my, perhaps you need a palette cleanser, my lord,” Lelesha remarked.

“Please, sire, indulge yourself in my blood,” Jenni implored.

“Hmm, perhaps I’ll take you up on that.”

“You heard him, Rosa. Are you content to stand around and do nothing?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Now that you stand with my lord, does it not vex you that Jenni might steal all his attention from you?”

“I...I don’t need any attention! I’m a knight. I only live for honor on the battlefield!”

“My, you’re so stubborn.”

Jenni pressed herself closer. “Dame Rosa is quite content as she is, Lelesha. His Majesty can drink as much of *my* blood as he wishes, after all.”

“I never said I wouldn’t give him any blood!” Rosa cried. “I can at least offer some as way of thanks for him rescuing me.”

“So you say, but you simply can’t forget the pleasure you felt when His Majesty sucked your blood, can you, you lecher?”

“*I’m* the lecher, Jenni?”

Lelesha put a hand on her forehead. “Their bickering has me worried for our future,” she said.



I, on the other hand, was quite amused and couldn't help but laugh. After I had become enraged by the countess's use of Al's soul, the delightful girls before me had put my stiff expression at ease.

"Well then, if you'll allow me..." I pulled in both Rosa and Jenni and took turns in sinking my fangs into their necks.

Epilogue

In the outskirts of the capital city of the Dagrakan region's Arulka Province, the vast army commanded by Marquess Mornsbern was engaged in a decisive battle. The enemy was the rebel army of Kai Lekius, also known as the "Nightfall Corps."

In the westernmost reaches of the empire, Arkus Province, an armed uprising had begun and spread like wildfire. In an instant, all of the Vestoath region had been consumed. Starting with Countess Nastalia, the major nobles of the region, such as Marquess Weils, governor of Vestoath, had been made thralls of the vampire leading the rebel army.

Since its very conception, the empire had not faced such a calamity. To make matters worse, the rebel army had begun to invade the neighboring region of Dagrakan after taking Vestoath. By Emperor Kalis himself, House Mornsbern had been granted this land and the mandate to govern it well. It was the marquess's duty to not only defend their land, but to eliminate these rebels.

The marquess had wasted no time in summoning the heads of the seven provinces he ruled and mobilizing a grand army, but even this wasn't a large enough force.

"Those things! What are those things?!"

From the rear lines of his army, Lord Mornsbern was shouting in panic. From his command post atop the hill, he had a clear view of the entire battlefield. The figures of the monsters employed by the rebel army weren't easily ignored.

There was, for instance, a faceless giant with lightning bolts shooting from its hands, and a steel dragon spewing fiery breath. Then there was a four-winged bird that formed tornadoes with its wings, and a monstrosity that resembled a moving swamp. Each and every one of them had strength comparable to a small army of normal soldiers. Not even the strength of a thousand men was sufficient to face these beings. The four of them alone were enough to trample the hundred thousand men mobilized by the marquess. And to think the rebel army was a mere twenty thousand soldiers!

Earl Bellocchia, a military advisor, reported in. “According to the Imperial Arcane Academy, those military golems were frequently called upon during the age of strife three hundred years ago.”

“That doesn’t help me!” Lord Mornsbern shouted. “Our forces are helpless against just a few golems!”

While they talked, the four golems rampaged towards the foot of the Marquess’s hill and began to set his soldiers ablaze. The gigantic inferno lit up the night sky.

Indeed, this battle was occurring during the night. The rebel army only attacked when the sun was down, hence the name “Nightfall Corps.” There was, however, a practical reason for this tendency.

A runner flew into the command center and all but screamed his report. “From the enemy’s right flank! A vampire platoon’s approaching!”

The commander, who called himself Kai Lekius, employed a platoon consisting of hundreds of Lesser vampires. Because prolonged exposure to the sun would turn Lessers to ash, the rebel forces didn’t engage in military operations during the day.

The Lesser vampires would drain the blood of their foes and make new Lesser vampires. When that happened, it was all over for foes of the Nightfall Corps. These Lessers would forget the debt and loyalty they owed to the empire and become puppets of Kai Lekius. This is what had happened to Countess Nastalia and Marquess Weils along with the rest of the nobles of Vestoath.

To be defeated here by the rebel forces would mean Lord Mornsbern would meet that same miserable fate. He would not have it. He would rather die. This was a battle he couldn’t afford to lose.

“Have the arcanists hold them back! What do they think they’re fed and paid for? Here, they can repay their debts with their lives!”

Earl Bellocchia spoke up. “Y-Yes, Your Lordship, but—”

“But what?! Get on with it!”

The earl pointed to the night sky. “Forgive me for not speaking up earlier, my

lord! Enemy valkyries are closing in!”

Lord Mornsbern looked upwards and saw six white outlines against the pitch-black sky. The stark outlines were caused by the shimmering mana of the arms worn by a squad of pegasus riders. All six of the riders were fetching young women and favorites of the enemy commander. The enemy pegasus riders, known as valkyries, announced themselves once in range.

“Prepare to taste the might of Rosa, the foremost knight of the Nightfall Corps!”

“How absurd! His Majesty’s best knight would be *me*, Jenni!”

“Do not be fooled! The title of His Majesty’s most powerful and most beloved knight both belong to me, Maria Kults!”

The riders descended rapidly and annihilated the marquess’s forces. To think they had already been plenty helpless against the golems and vampires!

Lord Mornsbern turned towards one of his confidants. “If it’s come to this, then it seems we have no choice but to request the aid of the Eternal Champion.”

The confidant offered up an object wrapped in a silk cloth. Inside the cloth was a bone, a large femur of a human’s right leg.

“Hand it over,” Lord Mornsbern ordered. He swiped it from the confidant.

At the same time, a woman’s singing echoed through the night.

“Kai Lekius comes for you; Kai Lekius comes for you.”

“Wh-Who goes there?”

The voice ignored the marquess’s question and continued singing.

“Kai Lekius comes to make a meal out of you.”

The owner of the voice was a woman of frightening beauty. She walked with impunity through the ranks composed of the marquess’s finest troops. Not one of his loyal men attempted to stop her. In fact, they all stood still as though bound by some invisible force. The woman continued to sing amid the bizarre scene.

“Are there any bad nobles? And are there any soldiers and officials hiding behind them? Kai Lekius comes to make a meal our of you. He comes to make a meal of you all.”

“Such discourtesy! Identify yourself, you bizarre witch!”

“Oh my, I’m the discourteous one?”

“What?!”

“Bow down. You stand before my lord.”

As she spoke, a black swarm erupted from her shadow. It was a swarm of innumerous bats. The bats coalesced and melded together, taking the shape of a human. The king of the vampires had made his appearance!

“It’s your choice: hand over Al’s bone and be privileged with an ordinary death, or incite my wrath and walk the path of a Lesser vampire. Take your pick —what will it be?”

Afterword

It’s a pleasure to meet you all. My name is Matsue Fukuyama.

When I was a child, I encountered *Record of Lodoss War* in my school library and was enthralled by a character called Wagnard. He had been entranced by magic, and in order to study it to the highest degree, he became an immortal being. I found him terribly cool, and the motifs surrounding him were forever carved into my heart.

I went ahead and tried to write a smorgasbord work in which I shamelessly packed as many cool motifs in as I could. This was the beginning of *The Greatest Magician’s Ultimate Quest.* After I’d completed and submitted the work, I was honored with a silver prize in the first Drecom Media Awards, and the work became published.

Winning some form of light novel award had been a dream of mine since I was a child, and now I’m the recipient of a brand new award. For as long as I live, I don’t believe I’ll ever forget the joy I felt when I was informed I’d be receiving the prize.

I’d like to take this opportunity to thank every one of the judges. Similarly, I’d like to offer my deepest thanks to two people for their help in the publishing of this book: Obara, my editor, who guided me as I rewrote my script, and Genyaky, whose illustrations and atmospheric cover gave form to Kai Lekius and the rest of the awesome cast.

More than anyone, though, I’d like to sincerely thank all of the readers who picked up this book. I hope you were all able to enjoy the plethora of cool elements I shamelessly packed inside. Nothing would make me happier than to find that you could relate to my intentions. I hope to meet you all again in volume two.

Matsue Fukuyama