

I Woke from a 300 Year

Slumber to a World

of Disappointment

THE
GREATEST
MAGICIAN'S
ULTIMATE QUEST

2

Author
Matsue Fukuyama

Illustrator
Genyaky



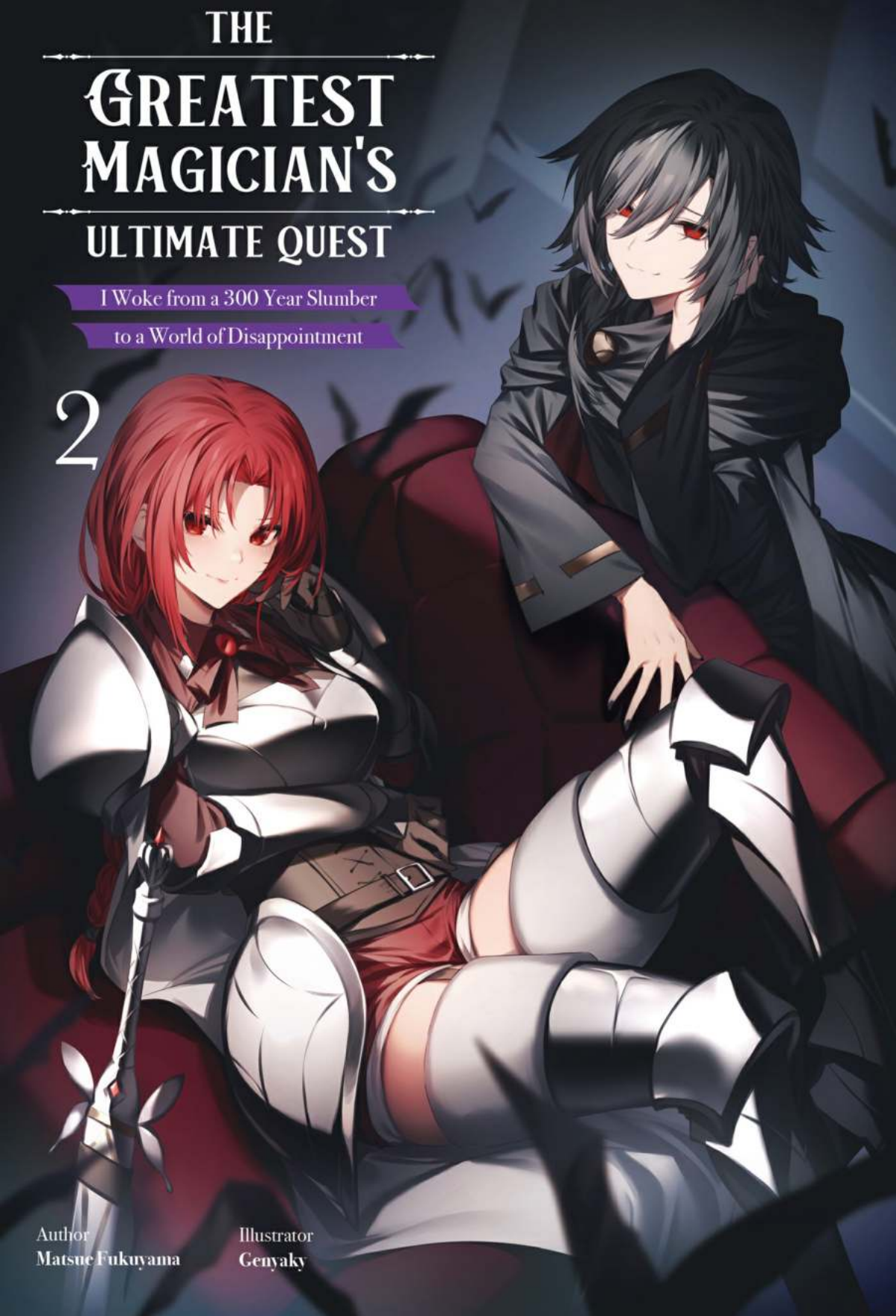
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“Stop that!
I’m not a baby!”

“I for one am *very* proud you’re such a
hard worker. Oh, what a good little
Azure Maiden you are!”

Fana

Talia





A dignified voice rang out
beneath the moonlight.

“Well,
that was all too easy!”

The world truly was no kind
place, but that wasn't
enough to deter the kind
knight Rosa.

By combining the mana of man
and machine, I prepared a spell
of grand proportions.

“When, when, when does it burn
bright? My dominion spreads like
wildfire, unstoppable and
unmatched.”





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Prologue

Three hundred years ago, when I, Kai Lekius, was still just a prince.

“I’m serious about this! Please don’t treat this like some sort of joke, brother!”

Pestering me as usual was my half brother, Al Shion. He was only a year younger than I was, yet his childish features would lead anyone to believe that there was a wider age gap. His hair and eyes were black, the same as mine. The shape of his eyes, mouth, and other features were quite similar to mine too, but he didn’t give off the same stern impression.

At this point in time, he was already the greatest warrior in our domain, which goes to show you really can’t judge a book by its cover. Now, this warrior without equal was struggling with a challenge unlike any he had encountered before.

“I’ve never once felt emotions quite like these. Whether I’m asleep or awake, all I can think of is Princess Anna. I find myself unable to concentrate on my training and studies.”

Yes, Al was engaged in the battle of a lifetime with the foe known as “romance.” Five days prior, Princess Anna had arrived at the royal palace, accompanied by a foreign emissary. Al had fallen in love at first sight.

“Forget about her, Al. She’s a princess. I can’t imagine anyone harder to seduce.”

I was lounging on a sofa while Al remained standing at my side. We were conversing in a room normally reserved for distinguished guests. The castle contained a few of these rooms, and I regularly occupied this one in place of a living room.

I counted with my fingers while lecturing my intruder. “First, there’s her political position. Bedding the princess of a country is no easy task, and this is the princess of Litrís—a country we were at war with a mere ten years ago. Then there’s her *religious* position. Princess Anna is the current Azure Maiden. The church considers her a saint, so who knows if they’ll even recognize such a marriage?”

I was somewhat serious in my warning, but my obstinate brother wouldn’t listen.

“Please don’t underestimate me! No matter the obstacle, I will prevail!”

I elected not to point out that this woman might not necessarily feel the same way as he did.

“Is this woman really worth so much to a man such as yourself? I admit she’s quite fetching, but she’s too demure, which is no fun at all. If you go for a woman with a bit more spice, you won’t get bored of her.”

“Don’t sully her name any further! I won’t let you stop me.”

“Oh, the tragedy. You would value some strange woman with a pretty face over your own blood.”

“How funny you should say that. Do I need to remind you how many times you’ve stood me up to go off with some woman you barely knew? Don’t tell me you can’t remember.”

“I can remember at least seven instances. After that, my memory fails me.”

I found myself laughing; these silly exchanges with Al were pretty amusing. By that age, around fifteen or so, I had become an accomplished magician, and the skills I’d developed had led me to be feared—not to mention that I already possessed an astringent personality. Even my father, the king of our country, had begun to show reservation towards me. In those times, Al, the one person who would speak his mind with me, had become irreplaceable.

“Forgive me, Al. I was just testing how serious your feelings about Princess Anna were.”

“That’s a lie. You were toying with me as usual.”

Right you are!

Al glared at me with scrutiny, so I returned the gesture with a broad grin. “It amuses me to think that you’ve reached that age,” I said.

“We’re only a year apart, yet you’ve become a womanizer involved with beautiful women. I can’t hope to compare to you in that regard.”

I imagine that’s why you’ve come to me for help.

“Brother, please, I beg you, tell me what I can do to make a woman look my way,” Al implored.

“Well, I suppose a common method is to start with a gift.”

“Princess Anna is not the type to be seduced by trinkets!”

“You sure are difficult, you know that?”

Don’t ask someone for help and then interrupt them with objections, I thought. You just met this girl. What could you possibly know about her? Are you sure you’re not just projecting your ideals onto her? Talk about acting like a virgin.

I considered voicing those thoughts aloud but thought better of it; they might cause the romantic novice to faint.

“In all seriousness, there’s one more problem with the Azure Maiden, and it’s the most troubling problem of them all,” I said.

“Are you speaking of the legend?”

“Right you are.”

Al had his dull points, but he was generally quite clever. I smiled at him again, this time with true geniality. As his older brother, I was quite proud of what a fine man he was.

Now, along with the many significant bodies of the world, there existed a major religious order called Magul. The order’s followers worshipped Shtaal, a deity of water and the cycle of reincarnation. Once in a generation, a mystic saintess (whom they referred to as the “Azure Maiden”) was born and canonized as the deity’s emissary.

I didn’t know whether this Azure Maiden truly was the child of Shtaal. It was perfectly feasible that the role was a contrivance to bolster their religious influence. However, I had heard accounts of the maiden using the water god’s powers without any specific training.

There were also plenty of dubious tales describing how her prayers could send even the worst of fiends to heaven. On top of that were tales that claimed the Azure Maiden was the same individual going through a cycle of reincarnation and that her memories remained intact from one life to the next.

“Let us suppose that this Azure Maiden really bears the memories of her predecessors,” I said. “Mentally, she would be a hundred-year-old crone.”

“I will not allow you to insult her like this!” yelled Al.

“Even I would think twice about engaging in romantic affairs with a long-lived being like an elf or vampire.”

“No matter the obstacle, I will prevail!” Al repeated gracelessly.

I found it adorable to see what a blockhead he’d become upon coming into contact with romance. Talk about amusing.

“Even if all the legends are true, my feelings for her won’t wither!”

“All right, all right. There’s beauty in your unbending will, so I shall grant you some brotherly advice.”

Al gulped.

“For now, make sure to spend more time around Princess Anna and just be yourself.”

“C-Could it really be that simple?”

“If an ordinary man told me he was going to woo some woman by showing her his true self, I’d knock some sense into him and tell him to better himself. But you’re not ordinary; you’re a fine man. So go as you are.”

Do you know how they say a superior force has no need to strategize? This involved the same principle. For someone as outstanding as Al, there was no need to rely on tactics for something as menial as romance. If this Azure Maiden really was a woman who had experienced many different lives, then she should be able to see the value of a man like him. However, if the legends were false, then she was simply a girl who would easily fall for someone like my brother. Either way, the odds were in his favor.

“Well, give it your best.”

“Thank you, brother!”

With my encouragement, the joyous Al flew out the room.

Ha ha, you truly are adorable, Al.

Every day for the duration of the emissary’s three-week visit, Al made sure to spend time with Princess Anna. On occasion, I would catch sight of them strolling through the garden or having breakfast together.

“See, you were worried over nothing.”

I cast a wry grin through the window of the storeroom that I used primarily for my research. Al and Anna were sitting in a patch of flowers in the courtyard, enjoying a conversation. Even from a distance, I could see in Anna’s distinctive aquamarine eyes that she was serious.

“First loves are fruitless things, and yours is with a partner of many obstacles. But you might just prevail, Al.”

My prediction would later prove to be quite accurate. One year on, our father would pass, and the Vastalask Kingdom would be swept up in the waves of conflict. With Al’s strong recommendation, our country and Princess Anna’s would enter into an alliance. It was decided that the two would marry to symbolize the strong bond these countries shared.

Indeed, Al succeeded in forming an eternal bond with his first love.

Chapter 1: Onwards to the Next Invasion

My gaze wandered about aimlessly as I muttered to myself.

“The Azure Maiden, huh?”

It was late evening, and the sun was just about to sink below the horizon. Our forces had assembled to attack a fort, so I was stationed in my command center at the rear. As supreme commander, I was sitting on a folding stool, with Lelesha standing at my side. She was my finest masterpiece: a magic doll with glimmering blue hair and bewitching features.

“Is something the matter, my lord?”

“It seems I fell asleep for a bit. I had a dream of when Al and his wife met. It was quite nostalgic.”

“Ah, *that* Azure Maiden,” Lelesha said with a nod. She didn’t question why I’d had such a dream. Naturally, there was a reason.

At that moment, one of my retainers, Forte, entered the tent, drawing my attention to more immediate matters. “My lord, a herald from Fort Mark has arrived.”

“Bring him in. I’d like to see him.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Forte bowed and then swiftly turned on his heel.

Arkus Province lay in the western reaches of the continent, and in the west of Arkus was the town of Breah. From that town came a man who had once fallen from being a rich merchant to becoming the boss of a slum. Now that man served as my chief of staff.

I had grown fond of Forte because he was good with numbers, was quick to adapt, and, more than anything else, despised nobility. A staff of thirty knights, all from Arkus, was standing in the tent. However, though they were all professional soldiers, I placed far more trust in Forte. His previous experience as a merchant made him an excellent logistics officer.

“I’ve brought the herald, my lord,” Forte announced.

“Well done.”

My words were for Forte, but my eyes were zeroed in on the young

man he'd brought with him. The man's regalia suggested he was a knight of considerable rank. He didn't carry a sword with him, but a white flag to indicate that he'd come to negotiate.

"Your name?" I asked.

"I have no name to offer to rebels!" he replied.

My retainers began to murmur things about his disrespect. I chuckled to myself. "Oh, I see. I'm considered a ringleader of rebels, am I?"

"The denizens of this era are superb at telling jokes," Lelesha explained. "I can barely contain myself."

Only she and I were able to brush aside the young man's remark.

All things considered, I couldn't really blame anyone for calling me a rebel. The August prior, I had resurrected as a True Blood, an immortal vampire, in order to study magic for the rest of eternity. However, during the three-hundred-year period necessary for my resurrection, the Vastalask United Monarchy I'd built up had become an "empire" and devolved into a land run by nobility. Spurred by my anger, I had resolved to crush this empire and had begun by conquering Arkus Province. That was last October.

Arkus might have been one mere province out of two hundred and forty-one, but to the empire, losing it was a humiliation akin to having mud flung in its face. They would absolutely not accept or permit me or my forces. It was only natural that they would treat us as rebels.

It was now November. With five thousand soldiers under my command, I had wasted no time in setting out for the neighboring province of Runalog. We were preparing to take Fort Mark, a gateway between the two provinces. We had advised enemy forces to surrender and given them an hour to respond.

The enemy commander was entrusted with the lives of three thousand men. Would he accept my charity or refuse it? The answer was being brought to us by the young man who'd called me a bandit.

"May I have your attention, please?!" he yelled to all those present.

This one had guts; even while surrounded by my most threatening retainers, he stood tall. I tried intensifying my gaze on him and only succeeded in causing him to grow slightly pale.

"I am here to inform you all that we shall not surrender! Earl Creyala of Runalog Province is the father of the current Azure Maiden! Even those such as yourselves, who know nothing of the ways of the world, must know that! The people of Runalog are blessed with the divine protection of

Shtaal, god of water and reincarnation. We will not back down in the face of those who would pledge their loyalty to vampire filth.”

The young man paused before finishing his speech.

“I repeat: we will not surrender! That is our answer!”

A flat-out refusal. And a rather slanderous one at that. My retainers began to grow restless and were quick to reach for their weapons.

“I’ll kill him!”

“We’ll preserve his head with salt and send it right back to the fort!”

“Grant us your permission, my lord!”

But the young herald simply planted his rear on the ground as though to say, “Do as you please.” From the start, he had been prepared to die.

“Ha ha ha! Very good. All heralds should be as fierce as you!” I said.

So they are still around! Even in this fetid Vastalask, knights of true conviction can be found.

“Very well. Then hostilities shall commence. Hurry back and tell your liege that we’ll show no mercy.”

Startled, my retainers began to shout.

“My lord?!”

“You mean to let this scoundrel leave here alive?”

“I am a vampire. In the eyes of gods and their believers, I am nothing but filth, but that does not mean I lack a vital respect for human beings.”

Cutting down this courageous young man, who had come armed with not even a knife, would be barbarism. Even in that hellish world of strife three hundred years ago, to kill someone who had come to negotiate would make you the subject of ridicule and criticism. For a monarch, treating a disrespectful opponent graciously was all the more vital.

“My lord, I’ve prepared some refreshments for the good herald.”

“Save it for another time, Lelesha. For a man of loyalty, such hospitality will only be an insult.”

“Yes, my lord.”

The young man stared in complete shock as he witnessed our exchange. However, he quickly stood up—with conflicted feelings, I imagine—straightened his posture, and gave a bow. “I will make sure my commander receives your response. Also...”

“Also what?”

“Henceforth, how shall I refer to you and your forces?”

See here: even between human and vampire, mutual respect could be conveyed as long as their hearts were true.

“I have no complaints about us being called rebels, but have it your way. You can call us the Nightfall Corps,” I answered without much thought.

My retainers knew I had no intentions of acting like a head of state just because I’d taken Arkus Province. We were still nothing more than a military gathering and therefore had no need for grandiose names.

“As you wish. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

The young man bowed once more and left as he’d come, escorted by Forte.

Every one of my retainers, barring Lelesha, seemed quite displeased. I could tell they weren’t happy that I’d let the man leave here alive, but I also felt that they weren’t too fond of the name “Nightfall Corps.”

“Isn’t it a little lacking in flourish?” one of them asked with great hesitation.

Sure, it might be more typical for us to have a splendorous name like “Knights of the Black Wings of Arkus,” or perhaps they wanted a name like “League of Righteous Patriots” to make it clear whose side justice was on. I simply laughed with nonchalance and answered the knight’s question.

“My forces have no need to put on a theater of intimidation. As long as our strength is genuine, our enemies will know to fear us.”

Such had been my creed in that long gone era of conflict.

My retainers seemed convinced by my explanation and nodded to themselves.

“He’s right about that.”

“With our lord being powerful, it’s only natural for a reputation to follow our deeds.”

“We were speaking in ignorance.”

My vassals hadn’t served me for very long, so it would be foolish to grow irritated every time they couldn’t grasp my reasoning. Rather, I’d say it was my duty as a leader to take these opportunities to speak of beliefs and philosophies so my intentions permeated the organization.

This was how, three hundred years ago, I had expanded a country and unified a continent. You can’t form a proper organization if you keep these things to yourself and have the conceit to assume your subordinates will be able to read your mind.

Once everyone had quieted down, Lelesha turned to me for direction. “If you would give the word to commence the attack, my lord.”

I gave a leisurely nod. “Send word to Rosa and Jenni that they are to

wait for Fort Mark to prepare for battle. Once the fort's preparations are complete, they are to show no remorse and bring the enemy to their knees."

"As you wish, my lord."

Lelesha bowed deeply and began to convey my orders. She also instructed my knights to clear the tents on the east side of the fortress. As they obeyed, the view before me opened up. I could see not only my soldiers in formation, but also our nervous foes.

Under the cold winter sky, everyone's breath turned white. It was nighttime, but that didn't hinder a vampire's eyes. I could see the battlefield as clearly as if it were midday and had no need to rely on the faint moonlight or the bonfires that dotted the area. At ease, I lounged on my stool and observed the proceedings.

"Now, shall we see what Rosa and Jenni are capable of?"



"Hear me, soldiers of Fort Mark!" a voice called through the night. "I am Dame Rosa of House Rindelf, vassal of Kai Lekius and his foremost knight! On this night, I am the tip of the spear that is to be thrust into Fort Mark!"

The unwavering proclamation came from a female knight with hair the color of roses. At her hip was a family heirloom—Brihne, the Iridescent Blade. She wore recently crafted light armor that had been imbued with defensive magic. It had been a gift from Kai Lekius.

Even the soldiers of Fort Mark could tell at a glance that she was no ordinary knight, not to mention that she was standing atop a golem shaped like a crimson dragon. This magic weapon stood over fifteen meters tall and had been loaned to Rosa by her commander. The golem's name was God of Flame. Although the knights of the current era took honor in mounting magnificent steeds, top-class knights of three hundred years ago had won the privilege of mounting military golems.

He believes I can master this golem, and I can't fail to meet that expectation, Rosa thought. She had once stood in opposition to Kai Lekius and had despised him greatly, but now she had joined his ranks as one of his closest knights. On top of that, he had drunk her blood and made her a Noble vampire as well as his first descendant.

Rosa still spoke to her sire in reserved tones and didn't always show him her feelings, but deep down she respected him. Naturally, she felt a

strong desire to show off in order to earn renown and, subsequently, his praise.

“You want to show off too, don’t you?” she muttered. “Don’t you want to show your father how far you’ve come?”

She knelt down to stroke God of Flame’s steel back. This golem had been crafted using the finest of magic techniques and had an intellect comparable to that of an animal. It was loyal to its creator, but it was no easy task for anyone else to command it.

In her left hand, Rosa gripped a large ruby. Kai Lekius had told her this gem was the heart of God of Flame and that it had been created so that someone besides him could give the golem orders. However, the golem would not listen to orders given without conviction.

“And we definitely don’t want to lose to those two beside us, right? If you’re with me, then you’d better listen to my orders.”

Rosa cast a very blatant glance to her left, where another knight atop a golem. A new voice pierced the night air.

“Hear me, soldiers of Fort Mark! I am Jenni of Mashli Forest! I serve my true master, Kai Lekius, as his *foremost knight*! On this night, I fight as my lord’s blade entrusted with striking you down!”

The unwavering proclamation came from an elven knight with honey-blond hair. Her demeanor was cool yet childlike, and she bore the sort of slender frame unique to her kind. However, looks can be deceiving; she was just over three hundred years old and had immeasurable experience with a blade. Similar to Rosa, she wore light armor custom-made by her master, Kai Lekius.

Jenni was standing on the shoulders of a golem in the shape of a faceless cobalt giant named God of Thunder. This golem and Rosa’s God of Flame were of the “Twelve Magic Gods” that had been decisive weapons three hundred years prior.

“Listen to me, God of Thunder,” she said. In her left hand was a large sapphire—the golem’s heart. “No matter what tripe that red thing next to us might utter, it is imperative that everyone here knows that I am His Majesty’s foremost knight. As such, I shall be making full use of your abilities.”

“Hey! I heard that, Jenni!” shouted the keen-eared Rosa.

They were both atop enormous golems, with the distance between the two girls exceeding ten meters. Jenni had to wonder just what had happened to Rosa’s sense of hearing.



“Dame Rosa, it is well known that you are a genius in matters of the blade, though I must wonder if that means you have the physical strength, reflexes, and perception not of a human, but rather of a wild beast.”

“Excuse me?! If you’re looking for a fight, you’ve found one!”

Jenni’s blatantly cheap provocation was enough to infuriate the short-tempered Rosa. And then it happened. Rosa’s God of Flame craned its long neck and slammed into God of Thunder. These golems were fifteen meters tall, so their impact was nothing short of extraordinary. Having been struck as though by a whip, God of Thunder stumbled backward. Jenni managed to regain her balance quickly, but she had come dangerously close to falling off its shoulders.

“Just which one of us is it who’s looking for a fight, Dame Rosa?!”

“Th-That wasn’t me. It just did it on its own.”

“Save the insufferable excuses. To think you call yourself a knight!”

Jenni considered herself to be good-tempered, but Rosa’s shallow behavior was too much for her. Without thinking, Jenni tightened her grip on God of Thunder’s heart as she yelled. And then it happened. Jenni’s giant golem raised its right arm and swung the back of its hand into the head of Rosa’s dragon golem.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve starting an internal conflict, Jenni!”

“Th-That attack wasn’t ordered by me. God of Thunder moved on its own.”

“Quit the childish excuses! And you consider yourself a proud elf!”

As Rosa yelled back at Jenni, God of Fire once again struck God of Thunder with its long neck.

“Would you stop it already? Do you want to undermine me that badly?!”

While Jenni yelled back at Rosa, God of Thunder, of its own accord, made a fist and launched it at God of Flame.

“Excuse me?! Aren’t you the one who’s jealous and trying to do me in before the battle even starts?”

While Rosa was *again* yelling back at Jenni, God of Flame slung its entire body into the other golem.

“Dame Rosa, aren’t *you* the one vexed by the certainty of my gloryhood?”

As Jenni *yet again* yelled back at Rosa, God of Thunder moved on its own and retaliated by hauling its own body into the red golem. With the blood rushing to their heads, Rosa and Jenni failed to notice the cause of

their golem's movements. While the two had been gripping the golem's hearts and hollering at each other, the golems had picked up on the intense sense of rivalry shared between the two knights and, of their own will, had begun to strike each other.

The result was an unintended scuffle. The quarrel of two massive golems was a sight to behold, which made it all the more unbearable to watch. Kai Lekius, who was watching from a distance, and the nearby soldiers all looked on in dismay. Even the soldiers of Fort Mark, prepared for battle and lined up atop the fort's walls, watched with stifled laughs. Only Rosa and Jenni remained oblivious.

It was then that their heads were cooled by a sudden gale. Something large had streaked through the night sky and was now hovering nearby. Its beating wings were the cause of the wind. Rosa, Jenni, and all the soldiers, friend and foe, looked up to the heavens to see a military golem modeled after a bird. The golem, however, had four wings, sported a body of steel, and flew via magic. Its name was God of Wind.

God of Wind was another of the Twelve Magic Gods crafted with advanced magic. Unlike God of Flame and God of Thunder, which had very practical designs, God of Wind traced an elegant silhouette. On its back sat Lelesha, its reins in hand.

"Hear me, soldiers of Fort Mark! If you value your lives, move aside!" she declared, diving straight for the fort's gates. The soldiers stationed nearby began to flee to the left and right. Even if Lelesha hadn't given a warning, a large and fast-approaching hunk of steel was enough to activate anyone's survival instincts.

The head of the bird golem crashed into the gates with an impact that would put a battering ram to shame. In a single blow, the gate reinforced with iron plates and studs was smashed to smithereens. The golem's momentum carried it into the grounds of the fort, where it rose again to the heavens with a single flap of its wings. Then, from the back of the golem, Lelesha gave the order.

"Now! All troops advance!"

Many of the soldiers had been unable to keep up the sudden developments, but the order brought them back to their senses.

"Attack! Attack!"

"Lelesha's overwhelmed their defenses!"

"Now's our chance!"

"Follow me!"

The officers who knew Lelesha took their subordinates and raced one another to the gates of the fort. They charged with impunity; they had the advantage of numbers, and there was nothing to fear from a fort deprived of its gates.

Meanwhile, Rosa and Jenni were the only ones still confused.

“W-Wait, you guys!”

“How shameful.”

Because their allies had all begun the attack, the two girls couldn't move their golems. If they were to join in the assault under such circumstances, they would end up crushing their own comrades. Their only option was twiddle their thumbs and watch as their allies overwhelmed the enemy.

The humiliation of it all! Their liege had lent them military golems with frightful capabilities, and this was what had become of it.

While Jenni and Rosa silently shook with anger, the battle escalated towards its conclusion: Fort Mark accepted defeat and raised the white flag. With the moon to her back, Lelesha looked on with a smile both alluring and boastful.



“You really botched it.”

Rosa and Jenni gritted their teeth at my blunt statement.

“My most profound apologies, Your Majesty.”

“I'm prepared to accept the consequences.”

Both were kneeled before me, their foreheads lowered to just inches above the ground. Fort Mark had just been taken, and awards were being handed out. I had refrained from entering the fort and, still perched on my stool, was now holding a meeting in my tent.

“Rosa, Jenni, I strongly approve of the rivalry between you two,” I said with a strained smile on my face. “It's a wonderful thing to know someone who pushes you to greater heights. Such relationships influence and invigorate us all. That's exactly the kind of corps I wish to form.”

I spoke in a clear and pedagogical manner so that I would be heard by not only these two, but also by the others nearby.

“However, mutual sabotage is something I cannot abide by; in fact, I think it's despicable. Am I understood?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“But the golems started lashing out on their own. There was nothing we

could do,” said Rosa.

I indicated that I understood what had happened. Even Rosa, who was prone to confrontation, simply nodded obediently in response.

It’s easy for those at the top to simply scold their underlings and go out of their way not to hear their side of the story, but that won’t foster competent or loyal retainers. Discipline must be carried out with an understanding of not only why they failed, but also their thoughts and circumstances at the time.

“Of my Twelve Magic Gods, God of Fire and God of Thunder are the most loyal. If they recognize you as their rider, they will attempt to read your emotions and act on those emotions. It’s a rather endearing point of theirs. Rosa, Jenni, can either of you claim you had no desire to come out on top even if it meant trampling over each other? Were those feelings not intuited by your golems?”

Both girls groaned deeply. I supposed I’d hit the nail on the head. The two immediately slumped forward and expressed sincere remorse.

“My deepest apologies, Your Majesty.”

“L-Likewise.”

Very well then.

“It seems I was premature in entrusting you with God of Fire and God of Thunder. I’ll be confiscating them as punishment for your actions.”

Both girls lowered their heads further in submission. Meanwhile, some of the other knights expressed discontent with what they thought was too light a punishment. I realized there was a need to educate them.

“It would be no mistake to say that my belief is to reward the good and punish the bad.”

This wasn’t something to be haughty about. If you asked ten leaders what they stood for, they would all say the same thing. However, I felt there was just one problem with following through with such a belief.

“But I believe such a rigid policy alone lacks nuance and ultimately leads to reactive thinking.”

To always meet accomplishments with awards and failures with punishment is far too straightforward, yet somehow, there’s no shortage of people who think doing that is enough to make themselves a leader. It’s very important to understand what constitutes an appropriate degree of reward or penalty. All too many so-called leaders pay this no mind and let their brain go unused.

“Am I understood? Dishing out harsh sentences for any and all

mistakes just won't do."

What's the meaning of punishment? What's there to gain from it? For one, it's to make an example of someone. If someone were to witness another being disciplined, then they would likely avoid making the same error.

That effect was one you could be sure of, but my focus lay elsewhere. My belief was that disciplining retainers should be practiced to encourage repentance. If the offender was truly sorry for what they'd done and wouldn't make the same mistake again, I saw nothing wrong with a light or even superficial punishment.

"The errors Rosa and Jenni committed earlier were of no major consequence, and as you can see, they are quite repentant. Therefore, their punishment should be a light one. If, however, if they make the same mistake, then I will inflict a stronger punishment and require greater repentance."

That was my approach to discipline.

I added one last warning. "Understand this: Do not get ahead of yourselves and become complacent. Do not start thinking the punishments for your own mistakes won't be harsh as long as you repent. I can crack down quite severely."

"Yes, my lord," my retainers said in unison.

They all bowed as though they were in a hurry to prove they would never do anything of the sort. At least it seemed they were satisfied with my explanation. Everyone fell into a deep silence.

Eventually, that silence was broken by someone laughing. It was Lelesha.

"If the punishment side of things has been taken care of, is it not time for the rewards, my lord?"

"Indeed. It's quite clear that your breaking of the gate was the most praiseworthy feat of the battle."

"Oh dear, now it looks as if I was rushing you. Do you forgive me?" she said as though that wasn't exactly what she had done. Her mischievousness always delighted me.

"What sort of reward do you desire?"

"Oh, let me think. It's not in my nature to be covetous, so it's no easy task to come up with something," she said. No doubt she already had something in mind. "The stars are quite lovely tonight, my lord. Would you perhaps grant me the honor of chatting with me beneath the night

sky?”

Lelesha’s brazen flirtation in front of so many made me laugh out loud.
“As you wish!”

I truly found how bold she could be quite endearing.

Rosa and Jenni, still kneeling, gazed at Lelesha with envy.

“I wanna savor the night sky...”

“You’re speaking out loud, Dame Rosa.”

How nice. Now they’re repenting even further. I’m sure they’ll carry themselves properly at the next battle.

After rewarding Lelesha, I handed out commendations to the soldiers who had been the first to storm the fort. Since the commander of Fort Mark had wasted no time in raising the white flag, there hadn’t been many opportunities for my retainers to win glory for themselves, but they would just have to accept the hand fate had dealt them. Now, the only matter that remained was to deal with the commander and three thousand soldiers that had become our captives.

“I’ve brought the man in charge of the fort,” said Forte as he entered the tent. With him was the same young man who’d visited us earlier.

“You’re in charge?” I asked.

The knight answered while choking back tears. “The commander took responsibility for the fall of Fort Mark and put himself to the blade. Before he died, he left everything to me: Sir Camion.”

“I see. It seems I’ve been deprived of the chance to meet a great man. Take his remains to his hometown, and make sure he receives a proper funeral.”

I offered a small prayer in respect for the honorable commander. Sir Camion, however, had a peculiar request.

“You do us a great honor, but I cannot bear the shame of escaping with my life. Lord Kai Lekius, I recognize your authority and beg you: please let mine be the only head taken, and grant mercy to the rest of the soldiers.”

“No need. I’m not interested in butchering prisoners. Everyone is free to leave with their lives, and I suggest that you be the one to lead them, Sir Camion. You were entrusted to succeed as commander, were you not?”

It had been my intention from the beginning to let everyone of Fort Mark go free regardless of whether or not they asked. I’d also wanted to meet the former commander. Sir Camion seemed to have his doubts.

“Are you sure of this? I can’t speak for the other soldiers, but if you are

to let me go, there will be one more knight after your head. I plan to exchange blood for blood.”

“Do as you please. You have my word that I won’t resent you for your loyalty,” I said with a nod.

Sir Camion gave a bow seemingly born of genuine reverence. “You have my deepest respect.”

With our meeting concluded, I watched while Forte escorted the new commander out of the tent. Once he was gone, Lelesha spoke up.

“Now, my lord, I believe it’s time we finish our offensive.”

“You’re right.”

I rose from my stool and exited the tent, accompanied by Lelesha, Rosa, and Jenni. Outside, my men stood aside so as to clear a path. At the end of that path was the imposing majesty of Fort Mark.

However, not a single soul remained inside. I had ordered that everyone, friend or foe, be removed from the premises of the fort. Sir Camion and the other soldiers of Runalog had been stripped of their weapons and positioned at an area where they could see the fort clearly. The soldiers of both sides combined to make eight thousand sets of eyes staring down at me as I stood before the fort.

“Let’s begin.”

From my lips spilled a loud incantation.

“By sturdy frames of cryptomeria and immovable bones of steel, restrain and terrorize the goddess of fertility. One moment of anger will not crack a thousand years of solitude. I bid thee, King of the Land.”

I raised and waved two fingers, completing the spell. It was Gyarasbeegram, from the twelfth rung of the four greater branches of magic.

The foundation of the fort began to tremble violently. The shaking ground turned to liquid, and with no support, Fort Mark collapsed under its weight. One gargantuan rumble after another reverberated through the area, shaking the very marrow of everyone present.

The localized earthquake I had induced via magic had reduced the fort to a mountain of rubble. In an age when magic had fallen out of use, this couldn’t have seemed possible for the hands of man.

My soldiers erupted into cheers and praised my name while the soldiers of Runalog sank into despair and called me a devil. Well, I was only me, so I didn’t care what they called me. I regarded neither praise nor slander.

“Once we’ve rested and regrouped, we move out,” I said in a placid

tone, unmoved by the sight of the destroyed fort. Rosa, however, seemed dubious.

“Was it really okay to destroy it?” she asked. “I think it’s kind of a waste. I mean, we could’ve used it.”

Jenni, still wearing a cool expression, answered proudly. “You may not be aware of it, but this is His Majesty’s way of going about these things.”

Albeit as one of the rank and file, Jenni had also served me three hundred years ago. This gave her an opportunity to take the upper hand on Rosa, a recent arrival. Making a face reminiscent of a snapping puppy, Rosa put the question to me instead.

“Why’d you destroy a fort we just took?”

It seemed she couldn’t stand the thought of Jenni knowing something about me that she didn’t. I gave her the answer just to placate her.

“I don’t plan on staying in this area for long,” I said. “If some wretch wanted to start scheming behind my back, I wouldn’t want to leave them a place to hide out in.”

I wanted to crush the empire and immerse myself in my research as soon as I possibly could. I wasn’t going to drag my feet. The same had been true three hundred years ago, when I had emphasized all possible haste in my efforts to put an end to that conflict. However, such a single-minded approach left the possibility that some of my adversaries might temporarily accept my rule and swear fealty, only to rebel once the storm—that would be me—had passed. So, to preemptively discourage any traitors, I had begun destroying forts, fortresses, and any other structures suitable as bases of operations.

Military facilities like Fort Mark would be destroyed beyond recognition, and walled cities would be stripped of their bulwarks. Without a defensible base, anyone harboring treasonous intentions would hesitate to rally troops. If it was all too easy to picture their revolt being quashed, they might not even feel much desire to rise up in the first place.

“In other words, by destroying the fort, I can prevent revolts before their conception.”

“I see the reasoning, but I still think it’s on the brutish side. But then why didn’t you do the same in Arkus?”

“I, myself, need a base of operations for the Army of the Night.”

Money, meals, materials, and men were necessities in doing battle, and we were extracting all those things from Arkus. My plan was to eventually conquer lands closer to the capital and move our base from the far west to

there. When that time came, we would remove anything that could be considered a fortification.

“To put it another way, Runalog Province is unfit to serve as a new base of operations. To me, it’s just another stop on the road to the fall of the empire.”

It was simply a matter of geopolitics. From that standpoint, I had every intention of continuing to flatten forts and bulwarks.

“Then I have one more question. It’s a rather blunt one.”

“It’s not like you to be hesitant. Ask away.”

It pleases me to see a less reserved and less astringent side of you now that you’ve joined forces with me.

“If you’re going to destroy the fort anyway, wouldn’t it be faster to just destroy the whole thing, guards and all, right off the bat?”

“In an age devoid of defensive magic, that would be the more succinct method.”

Rosa shrunk back slightly at my curt response. I could see it in her eyes: even if I could do that, she hoped that I wouldn’t.

“My campaign against the empire is halfway a product of my own vanity,” I said in an attempt to wash away her worries. “I don’t plan on feigning benevolence and attempting a bloodless coup or crying over every life lost. However, I don’t kill for the joy of it and would prefer to avoid as many bloodbaths as possible.”

Rosa seemed both convinced and relieved. “Th-That’s right! You *are* a man who fusses over philosophies and style.”

“This goes beyond my lord’s benevolence, Rosa,” added Lelesha. She pointed to the soldiers of Runalog. Led by the young Sir Camion, the departing soldiers began their withdrawal, their slumped backs radiating despondence. The sight of my leveling a fort with ease had instilled them with fear. “Whether they return home or join up with another military force, you can be certain they’ll spread word of the terrifying might of our lord. This will contribute to a wariness for violence among the people of Runalog and weaken the morale of the provincial army.”

“So letting them go free benefits us later!” Rosa said with a smile.

“There’s no need to lament,” Jenni added. “His Majesty is deft enough to be both benevolent and efficient at the same time.”

In taking this fort, Rosa and many other soldiers had gotten a chance to see my policies and beliefs put into action. *I’m sure they’ll grow acclimated in time, and I look forward to that day*, I thought. *Mighty is the*

army whose beliefs are the same at the bottom as they are at the top.
However, I would soon learn that the denizens of Runalog were united in a certain belief of their own.

Our next objective after Fort Mark was the fortress city of Khonkas.



Khonkas was the westernmost city of Runalog Province. Because of its distance from the provincial capital, its population came to around a mere twenty thousand, though in case of an emergency, its bulwarks would allow the city to hold out for the arrival of reinforcements from the capital. That said, these bulwarks ultimately amounted to nothing more than primitive mountains of dirt encased in bricks.

Or does that count as state-of-the-art in this era? I wondered.

The bulwarks wouldn't stand a chance against one of my golems. The mayor or captain of the garrison, or whoever was in charge of Khonkas, *should* have been aware of that. They *should* have been warned by the troops who had returned from Fort Mark.

“So here I was thinking how nice it would be if they surrendered before any fighting occurred,” I said with exasperation.

I was standing with my men, lined up before the fortress city. Joining us on the front lines were Rosa and Jenni, both on horseback, and Lelesha, who was standing atop God of Flame.

We had already issued our terms of surrender. If they complied, then the people of Runalog, civilians and officials alike, would be guaranteed not only their lives, but their assets as well. Anyone who wished to was free to leave the city. Considering our overwhelming strength, this was an offer without precedent. If this had been the world of three hundred years ago, Khonkas would have long been sieged, set aflame, and pillaged for all it was worth. Well, *I* wouldn't have done that, but that sort of thing had been the norm back then.

In response to my astoundingly gracious offer, the mayor of Khonkas honored me with a response. A man in his fifties stood atop the city walls and made his declaration.

“We, as pious citizens of Runalog, shall not yield to force, and we shall not lower our heads before the likes of a vampire!”

I gathered he was a cleric or something; he was dressed in a pure-white tunic that extolled frugality to an obnoxious degree. The mayor continued on.

“We do not expect disciples of evil to understand! The devout citizens of Runalog are blessed with the divine protection of Shtaal, god of water and reincarnation!”

Agreement and encouragement came from his comrades. Lined up atop the walls, particularly on the western wall facing us, were the citizens of Khonkas. Young and old, men and women, and even infants being clutched by their mothers, all twenty thousand of them were packed into the space. With pure intentions, the mayor, drunk on his faith, was riling up the innocent citizens.

“We of Runalog would choose *death* before turning our backs on the Azure Maiden, Lady Fana Creyala!”

“Hear! Hear!”

“We do not expect you, the disciples of evil, to know this: the Azure Maiden is blessed with the divine powers of Shtaal! As her faithful followers, we are guaranteed a place in heaven!”

“Hear! Hear!”

“As such, we have nothing to fear from death! We shall not sell our souls!”

“Hear! Hear!”

“What we fear are the fangs of the vampire and a hellish eternity spent as its descendants!”

“Hear! Hear!”

“Do not think you may defile our souls simply because you rule over the faithless of Arkus!”

“Hear! Hear!”

“Bear witness to our faith and our resolve!”

The shouting mayor jumped from the bulwarks, and the citizens followed his lead. They all wore smiles, harboring not a single doubt that they would go to heaven. Even the mothers holding crying infants wore smiles.

No one survived.

“Fools,” I spat in a voice dry as sand. I couldn’t think of anything else to say. I meant no disrespect towards their resolve or their faith, but this was ignorance. Incurable ignorance.

“He wasn’t wrong. The Azure Maiden can ensure anyone, no matter how sinful, makes their way to heaven.”

Three hundred years ago, I had witnessed it with my own eyes. Princess Anna, the Azure Maiden at the time, as well as my sister-in-law,

had taken pity even on those condemned to be executed. I had witnessed her using her miraculous powers to guide such souls to heaven.

“But to perform the miracle, the Azure Maiden must begin to guide the soul the moment it departs the body.”

I fought back the pain in my chest and forced myself to look upon the tragic sight at the base of the bulwarks. With the eyes of a magician, I could see things most people couldn't. I suppressed my emotions and observed.

I watched as souls separating from bodies twisted in every which way. Some souls drifted up to the otherworld known as “heaven.” Other souls drifted down to the otherworld known as “hell.” Twenty thousand citizens were receiving judgment for their sins.

The souls of sinless infants ascended. The souls of the mothers, who had killed their children, descended. In less than five minutes, twenty thousand souls had disappeared from view. Some had gone up. Some had gone down. But it was too late now. Even if the Azure Maiden were here, she couldn't save those already condemned to hell.

“If they didn't want to give in to me, they were free not to. I'd given them a way out. There was no need for them to die.”

I wonder if that mayor told his people my terms of surrender. I truly doubt it.

No matter how pious the citizens of Khonkas may have been, no matter how firm their belief in their spots in heaven, I couldn't imagine that all of twenty thousand people would be glad to take their own lives. There should have been a few hesitant ones. The mayor had most likely intimidated his people by telling them that they would otherwise become descendants of a vampire. That mayor, a cleric, had kept his citizens ignorant of the true nature of the Azure Maiden's powers. Or perhaps the mayor himself hadn't even known the truth. Maybe only the higher ranks of the clergy knew the truth but chose to spread a more convenient tale. It certainly wasn't hard to imagine.

I almost shuddered with rage. However, as the invader, I had no right to feel any sort of righteous anger, so I persevered and twisted my lips into a smile, even if it was somewhat forced.

“I've reached a decision,” I declared.

“What might that be, my lord?” inquired Lelesha, who had returned to my side after scouting the area.

“You said the current Azure Maiden is the daughter of this province's

head, correct? First, I'll need to get her on my side."

That way, there will be no need for us to do battle, and we can win the hearts of the people of Runalog without any trouble. After all, we've seen how devout these people are! If I can make the Azure Maiden say a black object is white, the people will recognize it as white.

"It would be the efficient way of doing things, just how I like it. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Indeed, my lord. It would seem like a rather villainous way of doing things—just how you like it."

I snorted, unamused by her response. It was as though she meant to imply I was some sort of magnanimous individual. If I was the "Sanguinary King," that couldn't possibly be true now, could it?

Chapter 2: Divine Knight Talia

Runalog City, provincial capital of Runalog Province.

Night after night, in the residence of Earl Creyala, extravagant feasts were being held. Never mind the invasion of the Army of the Night. Never mind the news that Khonkas had fallen and twenty thousand citizens had committed mass suicide. The lower nobility and elites of the province gathered, indulged in fine food, and made merry. Large quantities of firewood were being expended to feed the hearths and firepits of the castle, so even the cold of winter was no matter to them.

What held their attention more than anything else were matters of romance. Just as there were young boys and girls dancing with their sweethearts in the dance hall, there were men and women delighting in less faithful engagements amid the shadows of the courtyards. The majority of them were wondering the exact same thing: Who would Lady Fana Creyala, the current Azure Maiden and beloved daughter of the earl, take as her partner in marriage?

On this night, as on many other nights, Lady Fana could be seen resting on a chair by the wall of the parlor. She was an endearing girl of fifteen years and with somewhat childish features. However, her bluish-silver hair had a mystical quality to it, and her meticulous teal-blue dress made her look the part of the “Azure Maiden.”

She was beautiful, the only daughter of a powerful noble, and a religious figure of great influence. Naturally, there was no end of young suitors pining for Lady Fana. On this occasion, the second son of a viscount was passionately inviting her to dance. However, for the tenth-or-so time that day, Lady Fana found herself repeating the same line without showing a hint of disdain.

“I’m terribly sorry, but I’ve long had a weak constitution and develop a fever after even the slightest bit of exercise.”

“Then how about we head to the courtyard and admire the moon?”

Lady Fana wore a troubled expression as she spoke to the persistent young man. Perhaps her ability to still look so dear even when she wore such an expression was proof of her pure heart.

“Again, I’m terribly sorry, but I’m sure to catch a cold if exposed to the

night wind.”

Meanwhile, the young man’s desperation and foolishness were becoming plain as day. Other young nobles were suppressing their laughter as they watched the scene from afar.

“He really should just give up already. He’s making a fool of himself.”

“In all fairness, if he succeeds in winning her affections, then he’ll be the next head of Runalog. It’s not unreasonable that he’d become desperate.”

“Even if Lady Fana Creyala did take an interest in him, would her father permit the marriage?”

“Of course he would.”

“The earl dotes on his daughter. He’s always going on about how he isn’t interested in political marriages and will let his daughter marry for love.”

“Sure, but that has to be a front. The Azure Maiden is a powerful political tool, and I think he wants to keep that tool close to him.”

“So do you think Lady Fana Creyala won’t choose a partner? That way it won’t look like he’s trying to keep her to himself.”

“It’s quite possible. How often do you hear of an earl’s daughter who reaches fifteen without being spoken for?”

The young nobles nodded to one another. They all wore expressions that said they had given up on the Azure Maiden, but deep down, they were all considering how to beat the competition and win over the girl. They also cursed the viscount’s son, who was still buzzing about Lady Fana. While it would be a mistake to think those curses had been heard by the heavens, one knight, Lady Fana’s bodyguard, did begin to make her way towards Lady Fana and the young man.

“*Ahem!* Forgive my interruption,” said the knight.

The viscount’s son let out a short yelp when he noticed her. She stood at 180 centimeters tall; most young nobles would tremble if they suddenly found themselves being looked down upon by such a figure. Furthermore, as a guard at the event, she was wearing armor that made her all the more imposing.

Looking at her expression, posture, and body language, however, would inform anyone of her mellow personality. She was handsome but not eye-catching, with platinum-blond hair and well-defined features. Her name was Talia, and she was twenty years old. The female knight extended a hand to Lady Fana.

“It’s about time for you to retire, my lady. Let me escort you back to your room.”

But it was the young man who responded.

“What? Wait, the night is still young!”

He placed himself between the two women to prevent Lady Fana from being escorted away.

“Be that as it may, Lady Creyala is quite frail. If she doesn’t retire at a specified time, the physicians will be upset with me.”

“Well, it won’t kill her to stay up just a tad longer! I’m the son of a viscount. Do you think I’m going to let some mere knight order me around?”

Oh, how troublesome, Talia seemed to say as she placed a hand on her cheek. “I must remind you that I am a holy knight of the church of Rals and a bodyguard personally assigned by Lord Creyala.”

The order of Rals, god of lightning and judgment, held considerable influence in Runalog Province. Since Shtaal governed water and reincarnation, and therefore rain, the two deities were strongly connected, and the respective orders of both gods had long coexisted genially within Runalog. Worshipping at the altar of both gods was common enough that nobody would chastise one for it.

The two orders also cooperated in practical matters. Shtaal’s teachings were that of peace, so their clergy and faithful were generally opposed to arming themselves. Meanwhile, the order of Rals, god of lightning and judgment, was host to bands of divine knights and warrior ascetics. Therefore, the tradition within Runalog was that when Shtaalists required physical might, the Ralsians would dispatch warriors to aid them. In the same vein, Rals was a god of few followers and that lacked political standing. Shtaalists, who made up the largest religious faction in Runalog, would stand with the Ralsians politically.

In other words, should the mere son of a viscount defy a Ralsian divine knight, he would also make an enemy of the Shtaalists. Not only that, but to oppose a knight appointed by Lord Creyala himself would be an insult to the highest authority of Runalog.

Talia could have informed the viscount’s son of all this, but she had no desire to make a scene. Instead, she tried to meet him halfway and offered him a gentle suggestion.

“I’m afraid I don’t recognize you, but it’s clear you’re quite intoxicated. I would suggest that you, too, retire for the evening, sir.”

However, Talia was dealing with someone who had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

“Silence! A party for nobility is no place for a somber nun like you! Go to recite scripture or something.”

The young noble’s face twisted into a sneer as he began to knock threateningly on the breastplate of Talia’s armor. Talia’s warning had been gentle, but it seemed that she’d still struck a nerve.

“How troublesome,” Talia said, aloud this time, as she reached out with her right hand. With it, she grabbed the young man by the collar and lifted him off the ground. Since her youth, Talia had always been blessed with a strong physique and could boast of extraordinary strength. Lifting this man was a piece of cake.

The young man immediately lost his will to fight. “Eeek! You monster!”

“Oh my, what’s the matter? I’m merely giving you a boost. Come now, here we go. Upsy-daisy!”

“I...I was in the wrong! Put me down!”

Talia had worn a mellow smile, far be it from anything intimidating, yet the viscount’s son had lost his nerve and begun to cry. These were the sorts of youths one could find among nobilities raised without knowing anything of violence or rancor.

Talia released the young man’s collar. He fell on his rear and skittered away, still on the floor.

Lady Fana, who had been nervously watching the exchange, let out a sigh of relief. “Thank you, Talia. You’ve saved me yet again.”

“You’re very welcome, my lady. You’ll have to excuse me; I’ve always been of a rough disposition and can only handle matters such as these.”

“Not at all. You may seem imposing, but you’re elegant in manner and kind at heart. I’ve always admired you.”

Talia found herself bashful and tried to laugh it off. “Oh, how troublesome. If you were to begin to take after me, your father wouldn’t let me hear the end of it. Now then, let me take you to your room.”

“Please do.”

Lady Fana rose from her chair, allowing Talia to pick her up and hold her in her arms. Then they made their departure. Talia thought she heard some young noble grumbling, “That giantess is once again carrying Lady Fana away!” but she paid the comment no mind.



Talia and Lady Fana had met six years ago.

Blessed with a strong body, the young Talia had been raised among the same warrior ascetics as her parents, and at age fourteen, she had distinguished herself and received the honor of joining the ranks of the divine knights.

Word of her accomplishments had soon reached the ears of Earl Creyala, who, out of curiosity, had invited the exceptional young woman to the castle. There, the earl had developed a favorable impression of her. Talia was unmatched not only in her martial talents, but also in her powers of intercession—her ability to borrow the powers of Rals. However, despite being a warrior, she was approachable, demonstrated a caring personality, and possessed a graceful bearing. What's more, she had been brought up by the order, which meant she was well educated. An education from the order far surpassed anything you'd find among the decadent nobles of the empire.

Earl Creyala had been in good spirits when he had requested that Talia guard Lady Fana.

“My daughter is about to reach her ninth birthday,” he'd said. “I've been thinking that it's about time I found her a dedicated guard, and I'm sure that you, Talia, could both protect and educate her.”

The earl had wished that Talia would sometimes act as a sister to the princess and at other times as an instructor. Worldly thinking though it may have been, the church of Rals saw no harm in having a public authority as a friend. Thus, Talia had been officially dispatched by the archbishop and subsequently introduced to Lady Fana.

At this point in time, Lady Fana was not yet sickly but rather a playful bundle of energy. The average maidservant found herself exhausted by the little lady, but Talia wouldn't even break a sweat while watching over her. This led to Lady Fana quickly growing fond of Talia, who had immediately taken a liking to the purehearted princess. The young knight found it quite difficult to think of Lady Fana as a sister, but she learned what it meant to dote on another.

When Lady Fana had turned ten years old, her education in etiquette had begun in earnest. That was when her tomboyishness had started to fade, and she had begun to grow into a proper lady. Talia had been caught quite off guard by Lady Fana's intelligence. It was around this time that

Talia had begun to respect the earl's daughter more as her liege.

One year, when Talia was sixteen and Lady Fana was eleven, a deadly lung disease had swept a neighboring town. If left alone, the disease would very likely have spread to the capital.

The order of Rals had taken the situation very seriously and dispatched intercessionists to enact miracles on the town. Normally, handling a situation such as that should have fallen on Earl Creyala and the rest of the nobility, but both had lacked the competency necessary to do anything. Similarly, the order of Shtaal, the largest religious faction in the province, was infested with an upper clergy wallowing in wealth and avarice. Faced with such a situation, they had chosen to recite passages from the scripture and avoid doing anything dangerous.

If Runalog were to be saved from the epidemic, it would have to be by the Ralsians. Talia applied to join the intercessionists and was sent to the neighboring town. This meant she would be temporarily leaving Lady Fana's side, but even Earl Creyala himself had requested that she go; he knew the risk that the spreading of the disease posed.

Only Lady Fana worried for Talia's safety, but if the disease reached the capital, then she, too, might be infected. Talia couldn't allow that. Her desire to protect Lady Fana was, in part, why she'd decided to go.

The dogged efforts of the church of Rals provided dramatic results. Talia was reminded of the greatness of the lightning god as she prayed for miracles and watched the disease recede and the townsfolk slowly recover. Many priests were exposed to the disease during their work but were able to protect themselves through intercessions.

Not even a month had passed before the end was in sight. Still, roughly one in one hundred people remained unaffected by the miracles and couldn't be saved. The cause of this was a complete mystery, but there were no extra hands that could be spared to investigate. The Ralsians accepted it as fate and did everything in their power to help those they could.

Their efforts paid off; within a month, the disease was eradicated. That is, with the exception of Talia, who even a miracle could not heal.

"Is it my fate to die here?"

Talia had only partially come to terms with the idea. She didn't want to die. Who could blame her for being scared? She had difficulty breathing, trouble eating, and she felt her body growing weaker by the day. She had shut herself away in a small room so as to prevent the infection from

spreading.

The days dragged on and on as she waited to draw her last breath. No matter how mature she seemed, she was still only sixteen years old. The young girl's eyes had swollen from crying so much.

"I've come to save you!"

Talia would never forget the desperate look on Lady Fana's face as she burst into Talia's bedroom. Just like the bundle of energy she had once been, the little lady had ignored the protests of her family and rushed off to rescue Talia.

That night, the earl's daughter cared for Talia with her own hands.

"You shouldn't be doing this. Please, return to the castle."

Talia couldn't bear the thought of the princess catching an affliction that might be untreatable, but Lady Fana ignored her.

"I won't go home. Now, get some rest."

She was brimming with determination—determination to cure an ailment that had defied even miracles—and she proved that her self-confidence hadn't been misplaced. She performed a miracle that surpassed those of the intercessionists.

This was when she awoke as the Azure Maiden.

She, who bore all the blessings of Shtaal, wielded the god's power to disperse the disease that had been eating away at her dearest friend.

Talia was lying in her bed. Her coughing had stopped, and she could hardly believe how much better she felt. She stared up at the divine sight of Lady Fana awash in the light of the morning sun. Within her, a new kind of affection for Lady Fana began to take root. It was a different feeling from the reverence she had for Rals, but it was no less powerful.

"This is the person worthy of my life's service," she swore to herself.



Present day.

With the noise of the feast now behind her, Talia carried Lady Fana while listening to the lady's grumblings.

"I think it's fairly clear I have no interest in getting married, so why doesn't anyone understand that?"

"The young brats of nobility are raised without learning sacrifice. I believe that young man felt he would eventually win out and have his way."

“Well, that’s not fair! Father’s so strict about making sure I study history and arithmetic and piano and painting, but you’re telling me other houses aren’t the same?”

Lady Fana pursed her lips. She behaved herself on public occasions and, during Shtaalist ceremonies, resolutely carried out her rites as the Azure Maiden. Only around Talia did she grumble like this, which was proof of how much she trusted her knight.

“I for one am very proud of what a hard worker you are,” said Talia, who jokingly rocked Lady Fana in her arms. “Oh, you’re such a good girl! What a good little Azure Maiden you are!”

“Stop that! I’m not a baby!” Lady Fana snapped while laughing gleefully. “I’m grateful for my father’s efforts. I’d one day like to live up to his expectations and become a wonderful lady.”

That was why, in spite of her frail body and frequent illness, she didn’t neglect her studies. It was also the reason she showed up to these events that she had no interest in. If she were absent so often, Lord Creyala would have few opportunities to show off his beloved daughter.

“He lets me make my own choices and won’t force me to marry. I’m very, very grateful to him. I really am.”

The daughter of a noble would typically be married off as a means to a political end, so Lord Creyala’s kindness was a rarity. Furthermore, Lady Fana had a rather unique reason for her refusal to marry.

“You already have your heart set on someone, don’t you?”

“Perhaps you should say I *had* my heart set on someone. After all, it’s someone of the distant past.”

Lady Fana’s smile shifted into a forlorn expression as she sighed, much like a maiden in love.

Soon, they reached Lady Fana’s bedroom, and Talia set the girl down in a large canopy bed. The walls were decorated with paintings, all of them pieces by Lady Fana. Talia glanced at one: a portrait of a young man with black hair and black eyes. He was perhaps in his late twenties. His face was rugged; she wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d been a renowned warrior.

However, this painting hadn’t been based on a model, but rather drawn from Lady Fana’s memory. Four years ago, the lady had confided in Talia that this man was the object of her affections. She had also admitted something else about herself.

“Are you familiar with the legends about the Azure Maiden’s ability to

remember her previous lives? Well, they're only half true. I can't remember much about my previous lives, but sometimes I see them in my dreams. Even then, it's only fragments of my most distinct memories. I don't know which memories come from which life, and I don't see these memories in any particular order," she explained with a wry grin.

So while it was true she had memories of her previous life, those memories were vague and unreliable. Even still, Lady Fana had repeatedly dreamed of the days spent with the man in portrait, so only those memories were clear in her mind.

"At the time, I was a princess named Anna and fell in love with a prince from a neighboring country. Our love was so strong, even the passage of a thousand years wouldn't be enough to subside it. We wished to be forever tied, but we lived in an age of conflict entirely unlike the world of today. There were many obstacles separating us, but we did everything in our power to overcome them."

Talia could glimpse in Lady Fana's expression that her feelings were still burning bright. Nothing about their love lasting a thousand years felt like an exaggeration.

But it's all rather tragic, Talia thought. If those truly were memories from a previous life, then this man had already long left from their world.

While helping Lady Fana change into her nightclothes, Talia offered a prayer for her lady's love, even if it was just just cursory. "I hope your dreams afford you the chance to meet your beloved prince tonight."

"Getting my hopes up won't do any good; I don't get to see him that often," Lady Fana said with a pout. In the past, she had explained to Talia that she would dream of past memories maybe once a week and see her dear prince maybe two or three times a month. "I think I might see him if you were to sleep next to me, Talia."

"And how would that work? Besides, a respectable lady can't keep saying such childish things."

"But you *used* to sleep with me."

Talia put the sulking Lady Fana to bed. "Did we not promise that that was only until you turned fifteen?"



As with her height, Talia was blessed with a fine figure. Without her armor, she was quite a sight. Lady Fana had long enjoyed sleeping while burying her face in Talia's ample bosom. The princess had lost her mother at a young age, so Talia figured the girl was making up for affection she hadn't received when she was younger.

"Oooh, I hate this," Lady Fana griped while obediently closing her eyes. "In the end, only my dear Al Shion treats me kindly."

It wasn't long before she was sound asleep. In her more energetic days, the lady had been slow to fall asleep, but now she was sickly, bedtime always felt long overdue, and she would fall asleep almost immediately.

After briefly watching Lady Fana sleep, Talia left the room. She had her own room right next door and slept there every night. Once in her own space, she removed her armor and allowed herself to relax. At the same time, she stopped holding back her coughs. She coughed once. And once more. And then many times more. She had been coughing like this since two days ago, sometimes quite violently. *How strange. It can't be a cold.*

The moment she felt any symptoms of illness, she would heal herself with intercessions. A cold shouldn't take more than a single attempt to cure, yet her coughs hadn't subsided even after repeated treatment.

Perhaps I should request a leave of absence, she thought. *I don't want Lady Fana getting sick.* Winter had arrived, and as much as Talia wanted to be at her lady's side as much as she could, it didn't seem like she had a choice. *Tomorrow, I'll discuss the matter with Lord Creyala—*

Her train of thought was cut short by a particularly violent cough. She was horrified. A thick red liquid dotted the hand that she had held over her mouth. There had been blood in that cough. The stunned Talia stared at her palm in disbelief.

How could this...

The last time this had happened was four years ago, during the epidemic. Could that disease be the type to relapse? It should have been fully cured by the miracle of the Azure Maiden, but perhaps not.

That's impossible.

All Talia could do was repeat that phrase and pray to Rals.



Earl Creyala stood by the window of his personal quarters, listening to the distant clamor of the feast. The earl's wife had passed away some time ago, and under normal circumstances, he would be spending his night

dancing with the lady of another house or indulging in a fleeting romance. Tonight, however, he had a secret guest—one that a man of nobility could not afford to show anything but the utmost courtesy to.

“My deepest apologies for detaining you at such a late hour, Your Lordship,” the guest said with a courteous bow. The man, with his distinct but handsome features, was perhaps in his late twenties and wore what they called a “suit”—a recent trend that the earl found more bizarre than novel—along with a long necktie.

Saloi was his name. He was an imperial arcanist from the arcane academy, an institution that governed the imperial capital’s underbelly.

“Oh, not all. I must thank you, Sir Saloi, for coming all the way.”

Lord Creyala offered the arcanist a seat and personally selected a bottle from his cabinet. The earl had never cared for studying. He was not at all aware of why magic had fallen out of use, of its true potential, or that it was only taught in secret among those of the imperial arcane academy. However, he had at least heard the rumors that the elites of the academy were all fearsome creatures adept in the art of something called conjuration. The earl was in no position to be anything but kind and genial towards Saloi; the earl might have been of higher status, but the arcanist held more power.

“May I ask what brings you to this corner of the empire?” Lord Creyala asked, pouring a fine-aged wine into a silver goblet.

“Certainly, Earl Creyala. My business concerns the vampire Kai Lekius,” Saloi replied, bringing the glass to his lips without actually taking a drink.

“Oh, I thought that might be it!”

“Arkus may be at the fringes of the empire, but His Imperial Majesty is quite dismayed over losing the province to a vampire. By His Imperial Majesty’s decree, I have been sent to ensure that Runalog Province does not befall the same fate.”

“Oh, I’m honored! I knew our great and deeply benevolent emperor would not turn his back on us.”

Lord Creyala’s words had not been spoken out of courtesy, but rather out of true joy. Truly, he hadn’t come up with a single proposal on how to fight off the Army of the Night. The earl wasn’t bright when it came to politics or military matters; he had been born in a world at peace and had inherited his title simply because he happened to be the oldest son in his family. He had offered no solutions and chosen to avoid reality while

spending his days immersed in frivolity, but now that an elite from the capital had arrived, he could at least say he was entrusting the matter to someone else.

“W-Well then, Sir Saloi, I can assure you that my domain and my finest spirits are at your service. Now off you go to put down that vampire!”

“I’m afraid you can’t rest easy simply because I’m here, my lord.”

Saloi’s blunt response dashed the earl’s good mood.

“Kai Lekius is truly a foe to be reckoned with,” Saloi explained while still holding the glass from which he wasn’t going to drink. “Prior to our arrival here, my subordinates and I traveled to Arkus and looked into the status of our enemy.” The arcanist added an apology and explained that this trip was what had delayed him. “The results, I’m afraid, were rather bleak. Not one of the spies I sent to infiltrate his ranks returned alive.”

“Are you saying elite arcanists were killed?!”

“Yes, well-trained subordinates of mine. I imagine that this Kai Lekius is a magician of considerable caliber.”

“Magician” was a term unfamiliar to the earl, but he figured it was only natural that an expert like Saloi would know something that he didn’t.

“We were left to rely on hearsay and came across many stories that backed up claims of the vampire’s might.”

Lord Creyala hesitated for a moment. “Does that mean that even you, Sir Saloi, will have difficulty slaying the vampire?”

“The worst-case scenario would be that he’s a True Blood who’s been around since the era of conflict. Should that be the case, I’ll have to take rather drastic measures.”

“My goodness,” the earl muttered. The situation was far more dire than he’d realized. But it was still too early to despair. Saloi’s report hadn’t ruled out that there were ways of culling the threat.

“I would like to request your cooperation in this matter, my lord.”

The arcanist’s expression became serious. *This* must be the business Saloi had with Lord Creyala.

“But of course! No labor or sacrifice is too great a price to pay to protect this land entrusted to House Creyala by His Imperial Majesty,” said the earl in a bolstered tone. Truthfully, he had no intention of taking a single step from the safety of his castle and planned on letting his underlings do all the laboring and sacrificing. As for Saloi, he flashed a smile that betrayed nothing of his thoughts or emotions.

“Your judgment and fortitude make you an exemplary noble of the empire, my lord,” he said. “Thus, I have a few requests to make of you. First, I ask that you keep this meeting a secret. I don’t want it becoming known, by friend or foe, that the arcane academy is involved.”

“My lips are sealed.”

“Furthermore, there’s someone I’d like to borrow from you...”

Lord Creyala was surprised when he heard the name proffered by Saloi. But the earl was desperate; he wasn’t going to deny the man.



The following morning was a terribly cold one. Talia awoke at the crack of dawn and shivered as she slipped out of bed. Before adding more firewood to the hearth, she offered her daily morning prayers to Rals. A knock at the door broke her focus.

“Come in. The door’s unlocked.”

One of Lord Creyala’s maidservants poked their head inside the room.

“Excuse the interruption, but His Lordship is calling for you.”

This early in the morning? Talia wondered.

It was normal for clerics and servants to rise early in the day, but Lord Creyala rarely rose before breakfast. The earl’s important morning routine entailed taking the meal with his beloved daughter. Although frequently showing up to the table disheveled, he was very strict about the procedure and so wouldn’t be late.

To think I was just about to ask for a brief reprieve from my duties. I wonder if something’s wrong.

After quickly getting dressed, Talia was escorted to the earl’s office. Being led there meant that this business was official rather than personal, which was another rare occurrence. Their usual meetings—meetings concerning Lady Fana—were considered personal matters to the earl and were held primarily in a parlor or living room.

“Oh, Talia, do come in.”

“Yes, Your Lordship,” Talia said in a voice that failed to conceal her nervousness.

“Thank you for meeting us so early in the morning,” said the earl. His face looked unusually tense as he greeted her and lacked its usual geniality.

The young man next to him was likely the source of that tension. Talia had never seen him before. His attire—the suit he wore—was also

unfamiliar to her, and he had a rather handsome face. Lord Creyala introduced him.

“Talía, this is Sir Saloi. He’s been sent from the imperial capital’s arcane academy as per covert orders from His Imperial Majesty.”

Talía didn’t know the truth about magic, but she had heard of the arcane academy. It was a conjuration research institute that answered directly to the emperor and that many elite arcanists belonged to. Talía generally thought of arcanists as gloomy old men, but Saloi seemed young and well-mannered.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lady Talía.”

“Likewise, Lord Saloi. However, I must inform you that while I’m a divine knight of the order of Rals, I have received no official title from the empire. It would be inappropriate to call me ‘Lady Talía.’”

“Very well. Then perhaps I should call you Dame Talía. Oh, and I’m simply an arcanist, so there’s no need to address me as ‘Lord.’”

“Very well, Sir Saloi.”

Saloi extended his right hand, and the two exchanged a firm handshake. Talía was caught off guard, for his hand was cold as ice.

With the introductions concluded, Lord Creyala began to speak. “I imagine you’re familiar with the news of a vampire by the name of Kai Lekius appearing in Arkus Province and taking up arms against the empire.”

“Yes, my lord. However, the order of Rals only recently began their investigation. I am not aware of the details.”



This was an era without even newspapers. News was monopolized by the most privileged and took considerable time to trickle down to common folk like Talia—all the more so when the news was from Arkus. Countess Nastalia had regulated religion and forbidden the establishment of temples and similar establishments. Therefore, it wasn't possible for the Ralsians in Arkus to report to Runalog. But enough about that.

“Truth be told, Arkus Province has already been seized by the vampire and his rebel army,” Lord Creyala informed her.

“They have?”

“Not only that, but they haven't stopped to rest and have made headway in Runalog.”

“They have?!” Talia cried. Fortunately, Lord Creyala took no notice of her unseemly outburst, and Saloi nonchalantly picked up where the earl had left off.

“By mandate of His Imperial Majesty, I am to assassinate this vampire.”

“Assassination? You won't be leading our forces to subjugate the rebels?”

“Correct. In his infinite benevolence, His Imperial Majesty has forbidden us from rallying troops without due cause. That would only make the public aware that there's unrest in the world and trigger unease. Doing so would also spill the blood of our own men. We wish to avoid such a situation.”

“I see. What a delightful way of thinking,” Talia said with genuine admiration. It had been by mere chance that she had ended up serving a daughter of nobility; to Talia, even Lord Creyala was a figure larger than life. The emperor was someone beyond her imagination, and she was overjoyed to find that an absolute ruler who lived in a whole other world would consider even common people like her.

“That is why I've called you here, Talia,” Lord Creyala continued. “Will you cooperate with Sir Saloi in slaying the vampire?”

Talia wasn't surprised by his request. She'd figured this was where the conversation was headed. Saloi explained his reasons for requesting her cooperation.

“Vampires are wicked creatures who have turned their backs on the light. To exterminate one, I believe a divine knight skilled in combat and intercessions would be a better fit than an arcanist.”

“Indeed. I've never slain a vampire, but as an ascetic warrior, I have

many a time borrowed the power of Rals and felled creatures of the night. I am confident in my abilities and my experience.”

“Excellent. Let us combine your faith with my gray matter to protect Runalog from the vampire’s fangs.”

“As a knight of the god of judgment, I would be honored to cleanse the world of such a presence. It’s just...” Talia paused and glanced at Lord Creyala. He immediately realized what was bothering her.

“You don’t want to stray from Fana’s side?”

Although Talia had planned to request a reprieve on account of her coughing, if the young knight were resting in her room, Lady Fana would never be too far away. An expedition such as this would take Talia far from the young lady.

“Listen, Talia, if Runalog falls into the vampire’s hands, our problems will extend beyond merely keeping Fana safe.”

“That is correct...”

“In all of Runalog, there is no fighter more skilled than you. It would be a great relief to me if you were to go.”

Talia didn’t fail to notice his earnesty; while Lord Creyala held the authority to order her to go, he had instead simply made a request. Saloi began to share matters far more fearful.

“On my way here, I heard that Kai Lekius is demanding that we hand over the Azure Maiden.”

“Whatever for?!” Talia cried, leaning forward as she spoke.

“According to the vampire, if anyone can defeat him, it’s the daughter of Shtaal,” Saloi explained. “Therefore, if we hand over the Azure Maiden, he will take it as a sign of our surrender and halt military aggression. What’s more, rather than send a written declaration to Lord Creyala, he instead sent people to spread the word throughout the province. He made sure even the common folk know of his offer.”

Talia was becoming more and more confused. She could understand why the vampire wanted them to hand over the one person he had reason to fear, but why had he spread word of his demands?

“What could he be up to?” she asked.

Saloi shrugged. “I don’t know his reasoning, but now the people of Runalog believe she can slay the vampire, and many are hoping that she’ll personally exterminate him.”

By that point, a considerable number of people, particularly those from towns between the vampire’s forces and the capital, had evacuated their

homes and were heading to the provincial capital in order to make a direct appeal to the Azure Maiden.

“That’s...”

Talia didn’t know what to say. She found herself picturing masses of refugees pushing their way into the castle and demanding that Lady Fana slay the vampire. If such voices were to reach the young lady’s ears, being the kind girl she was, Lady Fana would certainly feel a sense of responsibility and compassion. It was all too easy for Talia to imagine.

Lord Creyala gritted his teeth. “Who would hand such a dear girl over to a vampire? And we can’t let her bear the burden of slaying the vampire—that girl couldn’t hurt a fly!”

Talia thought the exact same thing. As she made up her mind, her mellow demeanor swelled with anger and determination.

“Very well, my lord. I shall slay this heinous vampire even if it costs me my life.”

If that meant she would have to briefly leave her lady’s side, then so be it. It would be no different than four years ago, when she’d left to prevent the epidemic from spreading to the capital. At that moment, she made a vow to herself.

I will protect her, no matter the cost.



They spent the day making preparations to depart the next morning. Before leaving, Talia stopped by the neighboring room to do her duty of waking Lady Fana up and to say goodbye, but Lady Fana, who liked to sleep in, was already up and waiting for her. She sat up in her bed and cast a worried gaze at Talia.

“Father won’t tell me very much, but you’re going to do something dangerous, aren’t you?”

Talia put on her usual mellow smile to put Lady Fana at ease. “Not at all. I’m simply going to exterminate a vampire, nothing extraordinary. *Ahem*, you may not be aware, but I’m a terribly strong woman *and* a divine knight.”

Lady Fana shook her head. “Don’t try to fool me! If it were that simple, you wouldn’t be going. Stuff like that could just be left to some other warrior or one of father’s knights.”

Talia pressed a hand against her cheek. There was no fooling Lady Fana. “Indeed,” she said. “This vampire is believed to be pretty dangerous,

but I wasn't lying when I said I was strong." Talia flexed her right arm as she said this. "Please, believe me when I say I'm sure I'll return victorious."

"You're right. You're the finest knight in Runalog, and you're my knight." Lady Fana didn't seem so much convinced as she seemed to have accepted that it would be selfish to hold her back. She climbed out of bed and looked up at her knight. "I know you worship a different god, but may I pray to Shtaal for your success in battle?"

"But of course. It is said that the god of water and the god of lightning are like spouses or siblings. I'm sure that if you wish it, Shtaal will convey your wishes to Rals."

"If you say so, Talia, then I'm sure of it."

Lady Fana was a Shtaalist idol but not a formal priestess. Talia was far more familiar with matters of dogma.

"I wish I could fight. Then I could go with you," she said, embracing Talia as she prayed for her.

"It's also important to have someone waiting for your return," Talia replied. "It motivates me to come back alive."

Talia was overwhelmed by her love for Lady Fana and squeezed her without thinking. Lady Fana wrapped her arms around Talia's back and hugged with all her might. Briefly, the two held their embrace, exchanging each other's warmth and affection.

"Well then, I'd best be going," Talia finally said.

"Bring me back a souvenir."

Lady Fana had said this as a joke, but Talia could tell how hard the young girl was fighting back tears. She was gazing up at Talia, her eyes still brimmed with uncertainty. Talia pretended not to notice and smiled.

"My, I sure hope there's something beyond the capital that'll be to your taste. This task might prove more challenging than slaying the vampire."

She gave a graceful bow and departed.

Talia had no way of knowing what happened after that. Lady Fana returned to her bed, curled up, and let out the coughs she had been holding in. She coughed intensely for a good while, and the hand she held over her mouth became stained with blood. Something was ailing her lungs.

Lady Fana groaned and breathed heavily. Tears formed in her eyes, yet in her heart, she wished.

Please... Please come back safely, Talia.

She gave little thought to her own condition and hoped only for the safety of her beloved sister. Indeed, she *hoped* and *wished*. In times like these, Lady Fana did not pray.

As the daughter of Shtaal, Lady Fana undoubtedly felt the god's love. By praying, she could borrow the bountiful mana of Shtaal and receive tangible gifts such as the ability to heal wounds or protect her body from incoming blows. What her prayers couldn't do was manipulate fate or ensure happiness in one's future. It wasn't that these prayers wouldn't reach Shtaal; the god simply couldn't do anything about them. Gods weren't omnipotent and omniscient, and Lady Fana knew this. Or rather, she had been taught this in an age long past by none other than Kai Lekius.

Chapter 3: Deicide

I, Kai Lekius, had made my way to the warehouse district of Khonkas. It was a balmy afternoon, but the sun's rays couldn't harm a True Blood. I watched as military provisions such as food, arrows, and medicine from Arkus were carried from wagons and into storehouses. I also kept an eye on Jenni as she oversaw the operation. I'd always found working women to be quite beautiful.

The elven knight was deftly giving orders to the logistics workers.

"The crates of tobacco go over there! Not there—one spot over!"

Managing provisions was a dull but important task. An army runs on its stomach, and this was how the five thousand men of the Army of the Night were kept going. Jenni had a meticulous nature, was respected by the soldiers, and, most importantly, had extensive experience in the clerical side of the military, all of which made her the perfect candidate for this role. The task was also Forte's domain, but I wanted him to focus on managing the broader aspects of provisioning, such as bookkeeping and planning. Thus, I was quite pleased that the still budding Army of the Night had acquired a fine knight skilled in more than just fighting.

Noticing my gaze, Jenni ordered the men to take a break and then ran up to me.

"How may I be of service, Your Majesty?"

"I'm just here to observe. I would ask that you pay me no mind and carry on, but I suppose we can consider this a good time for a break."

I'd said this so Jenni would relax a little, but she maintained her stiff posture. *Well, that's just fine*, I thought. *Her fastidiousness is quite endearing.*

For the record, my visit wasn't to check if Jenni was doing a proper job. I had no doubts regarding her competence. However, when it came to dealing with an army of five thousand, I believed in the importance of showing my soldiers that I was keeping an eye on all aspects. That way, the soldiers wouldn't see me as a distant figure and would in turn fight with greater motivation. If this were an army of men numbering in the tens of thousands, there would be no need for the soldiers to feel close to their commander; I could have just left the job to my subordinates.

Frankly, I found the job to be quite dull, but I would just have to bear it. As the one who had formed this army, I was responsible for it and couldn't neglect necessary tasks. To sit around and ignore my duties would make me no different than the nobles I so despised and no better than a leader of bandits.

With that in mind, I decided to conduct something resembling an inspection and asked Jenni a few questions.

"Have you run into any problems?"

"No, Your Majesty, we have proceeded without trouble. However..." Jenni paused. "May I request your permission to speak openly?"

"Certainly. I delight in opinions. Let's have it," I said with a nod. Jenni demurely began again.

"I've seen large amounts of alcohol, tobacco, and tea leaves, and I can't help but wonder: Aren't there a few too many luxury goods?"

"Forte was supposed to order luxuries in moderation. Did he go overboard?" I asked.

"I wouldn't say that, but while alcohol may not be quite so special, both tobacco and tea are still luxuries in our world. Unlike three hundred years ago when magic flourished, these sorts of provisions aren't normally available to common soldiers. When I consider the large costs of running an army, I can't help but have doubts about regularly treating the soldiers to these things."

"I see your point, but continue on like this," I said.

"As you wish," she immediately responded. "For future reference, might I ask your reasoning?"

Jenni was no puppet fettered by loyalty or fanaticism. She sought a satisfying explanation for my order. Her consistent attitude and competency regularly revived my old urges to recruit and rally, so I was more than happy to answer her.

"I can't let myself become pained and dispirited with the death of every soldier I lose. I'll send as many men to their deaths as is necessary to secure victory."

"So you want to let these men enjoy these luxuries today because they may not see tomorrow?"

"That's a part of it, but only a small part."

I wouldn't say that has nothing to do with it, but neither would I say it's important.

"To put it bluntly, rank and file soldiers are ultimately treated as

disposable resources. However, I don't want them to think of themselves as such. I want to maintain some respect for human lives."

So I gave them luxuries. Gifts were far more reliable than words in conveying how much I valued my soldiers.

"Thus, my soldiers don't see themselves as a resource to be used and therefore develop a sense of pride."

That was my aim. If they had pride, they would fight with valiance no matter how dire the battle. If they had pride, they would respect the rules of the battlefield and not run rampant. To put it another way, soldiers without pride were no different from brigands.

"Therefore, even if it costs us, we can't stop treating the soldiers."

More to the point, if funds were the extent of our problems, as long as we could keep winning and taking territory, we could just keep investing in our soldiers. This was the same as three hundred years ago.

"That's the way I see it."

"I see. You're absolutely right. Consider me impressed, sire." The now satisfied Jenni bowed deeply. "At the same time, I find myself quite embarrassed. I was among your ranks three hundred years ago, yet I still don't understand your thinking. It's rather pathetic of me."

"You're being too hard on yourself. It's only recently that you've come to stand at my side. From here on out, you'll come to understand my ways. Of that, I'm sure."

Spurred on by enthusiasm, Jenni subconsciously leaned forward. "Yes, sire! I hope to learn much at your side."

Her cheeks, flushed like those of a young maiden, revealed a glimpse of a side of her that differed from her usual cool demeanor. If we hadn't been at work, I would have sunk my fangs into her dainty neck and drunk my fill of her blood.

But I suppose that can wait.

"After dinner, would you like to come to my room?" I asked.

"I...I would. I would like to become acquainted with your wisdom as soon as possible, sire."

Seeing Jenni jump at my invitation, I couldn't resist the urge to tease her. "Hmm. So you're more interested in dry lectures than fraternizing with me. Well, I suppose that's fine."

"Th-The lectures can wait for some other time. I'd rather have your affections. Please, ensure that even this dense knight has no room to doubt your affections."

“Bwa ha ha, just say so from the start!”

Jenni blushed and hung her head as I ruffled her hair vigorously. “I-If you would excuse me, I have duties to attend to.”

Still unable to look me in the eye, she hurried off while combing her disheveled hair with her hand. Her flushed face was so red, it incited the teasing of the soldiers.



After that, I moved on to the next spot that I wanted to observe.

While we were stationed in Khonkas, I had my soldiers camping out in the various plazas throughout the city. Khonkas did have a barracks, but as this was a city with a meager population of roughly twenty thousand, the building had been designed to house no more than three hundred soldiers. That wouldn't be nearly enough for the Army of the Night's five thousand men.

The citizens of Khonkas may have committed mass suicide, but that didn't mean I could give their now empty houses away to my soldiers. Perhaps that might be fine in a more peaceful time, but we were currently in the midst of invading Runalog. Soldiers undergoing military operations must act as a group. If they don't, they get sloppy.

That, however, was the reasoning of a commander. To the soldiers, it must have been quite vexing to be forced to sleep outside while surrounded by so many unoccupied houses. Therefore, the least I could do was visit my soldiers to ease some of their tension—or so I thought until I reached the plaza.

As it turned out, my soldiers might have had more pent-up frustration than I'd expected. The fifteen hundred men camping in the plaza had divided into two groups and were staring each other down. So much blood had gone to their heads that they didn't even notice my arrival. They were merely trading insults, but it was only a matter of time until violence broke out among them. The tension was palpable.

What in the world happened here?

I listened closely and tried to pick out what was being said. As for one side...

“Who best deserves our veneration and respect if not Rosa?!”

“She's the very definition of a prodigy with the sword! How could you be blind to that?!”

“And she's beautiful!”

“Her dignified profile... Her fiery locks... She’s a living work of art!”

“And she speaks her mind even to Kai Lekius!”

“Even so, it’s clear how much she cares for our lord!”

“There you have it: Rosa’s the best!”

On and on went their dimwitted clamoring. And as for the other side...

“On the contrary, our reverence and respect is best deserved by Jenni!”

“Not only does she know her way around a blade, but she can borrow the power of fairies! No other soul can compare!”

“And she’s gorgeous!”

“Her slender frame... Her doll-like features... She’s a walking work of art!”

“I get shivers when she orders us around with that cold voice of hers!”

“Yeah, she’s kind even to soldiers like us!”

“There you have it: Jenni’s supreme!”

And on went their idiotic howling.

I couldn’t find the words to express my dejection. Who could have expected that my men would oppose each other as members of “Team Rosa” and “Team Jenni”? What was I to do when the Army of the Night ate itself alive over such a trifling matter?

I just want to go home and sleep.

A long, long sigh escaped from my lips. Someone heard it and hastened to my side. It was my loyal attendant, Lelesha. She immediately knelt down and began to apologize.

“I’m terribly sorry, my lord. This is all because I failed to keep watch on the soldiers.”

“No, I rather doubt this could be your fault.”

I had left the soldiers under the watchful eye of Rosa, Jenni, and the other knights from Arkus. Lelesha’s duties mostly concerned the handling of my personal affairs. She was supposed to be training the new maids and cooks, but she must have heard the commotion and rushed over.

“Yes, my lord, but we can’t let this dispute carry on any longer.”

“I suppose we shouldn’t call Rosa and Jenni over to placate the men.”

The appearance of their objects of worship would only add fuel to the fire.

“Then I would ask that you allow me to handle the situation, my lord.”

“All right, I’ll leave it to you.”

Feeling slightly dejected, I couldn’t bring myself to devote any energy to this. However, I was no stranger to what a talented individual she was.

She stood up and headed directly for the soldiers, who were on the verge of beating each other's brains out.

"Silence at once!" she called at a volume one might think impossible for someone of her size. "What are a bunch of grown men making such a fuss about in the middle of the day?!"

That deafening shout was all it took to cut through the clamor and silence the fifteen hundred men. But looking upon the quieted crowd, she found herself not yet satisfied and began to offer them a stern lecture. Going off her tone, she closely resembled someone training a dog.

"You are making three mistakes. The first: though we may not be in the midst of a battle, you have forgotten your duties as soldiers and fight among each other. This is impermissible, and you should all be ashamed."

Lelesha's words stung like a whip; fifteen hundred soldiers simultaneously hung their heads and groaned. Lelesha continued her scolding.

"The second: both Dame Rosa and Dame Jenni are still girls, if you ask me. Whether singing their praises as knights or as women, you're all ten years too early."

The soldiers had obediently accepted her first chastisement, but at the second, they began to protest.

"H-Hold on, Lelesha..."

"Even from you, that's going too far!"

"He's right!"

"Don't you dare speak ill of Rosa!"

"Jenni's no mere girl; she's three hundred years old!"

They had been a nuisance when they had stood divided as Team Rosa and Team Jenni, and they were still a nuisance when they were united against Lelesha.

But my finest masterpiece was unperturbed. With one simple word, she brushed aside their protests.

"Silence! Your third, and most incorrigible error is that you have spent a great deal of time standing while in the presence of our lord!" she shouted, proudly sweeping her right hand towards me.

In an instant, everyone in the plaza was on their knees—all fifteen hundred of them, no exceptions. Judging from their faces, it seemed they still hadn't noticed me standing before them, yet something was forcing them to kneel. It was Lelesha, using her steel threads to manipulate their bodies. The soldiers looked terribly frightened and uncertain. While bound

by Lelesha's threads, they would be unable to move so much as a finger.

I couldn't help but feel somewhat discomfited. It would have been nice if the soldiers had noticed me naturally, but their attention had been forced on me by Lelesha. To just casually leave after that would be...well, kind of ungraceful, to say the least. However, if I was going to diffuse the tension in the air, it seemed I had no choice but to say something, so I reluctantly—very reluctantly—stepped forward.

“To anger a beautiful woman can invite terrifying consequences. Try not to do anything else that might get you scolded.”

These words weren't directed at the soldiers so much as they were a means to calm Lelesha. I felt like a father trying to cover for their son after seeing them receive a scolding from their mother. Lelesha could always tell what I was thinking, so she bowed and released the soldiers from her threads.

Well, that takes care of that. Or at least, so I thought. Even though the soldiers had regained control of their bodies, they remained kneeling on the ground. I glanced at Lelesha, asking her for an explanation, but she only shook her head.

“We were mistaken!” yelled a man from the crowd. His shout spurred many more to speak up.

“Forgive us for making such a commotion over being Team Rosa or Team Jenni!”

“I'll never fight with a comrade ever again!”

“From now on, I'm part of Team Lelesha!”

“Me too!”

“Same here!”

“Likewise!”

“Count me in!”

“We'll get along!” they all shouted together.

Uh, okay. Well, that takes care of that.

“I knew I could count on you, Lelesha. Even your skill in unifying troops is unparalleled.”

“You honor me, my lord, but I find it difficult to rejoice under such circumstances.”

I had nothing more to say to the bewildered Lelesha.



After parting ways with Lelesha, I headed off to the last spot I wanted

to observe: the Shtaalist temple in Khonkas. The building was far grander and more imposing than the mayoral residence. A mere glance was more than enough to inform anyone of just how many devotees of Shtaal resided in Runalog and how powerful their order was.

Inside, my soldiers were in the middle of a dismantlement operation. Indeed, statues of Shtaal and past saints were being broken down and stripped of their generous gold plating. The gold would be melted down and added to the coffers of the Army of the Night. The overseer of the operation, Rosa, walked up to me when she saw I had entered the temple.

“It feels like we’re inviting divine retribution,” she commented.

Rosa wasn’t a True Blood like me, but rather a Noble vampire. Exposure to the sun’s rays would burn her skin, but unlike Lessers or Normals, she could work in shady interiors during the day—not that that erased any qualms she might have about the job itself.

“I’m not the most spiritual of people, having been born in the imperial capital and all, but even I’m pretty hesitant about this,” she said. She also grumbled about the lengths she’d gone to in order to find soldiers who’d do the work and to ensure them financial compensation.

“Oh? The citizens of the imperial capital aren’t spiritual?” I asked, blatantly dodging the subject.

Rosa glared at me but politely answered my question. “Faiths of all varieties are forbidden within the empire. The only gods deemed viable for worship are Al Shion, who helped found the empire, and other deities that make up the imperial line. All other deities are considered evil gods. However, though they may not publicly admit it, not everyone thinks the emperor is a god. Those people are more or less without a religion and make up roughly half of the citizens of the capital.”

She spoke with a complicated expression both bitter and nostalgic. “After I was expelled from the capital, I was surprised by what I saw outside. I witnessed plenty of people worshipping Ramias, the Sun God; Hamarn, the Mother of the Land; and other gods whose reverence was supposedly prohibited. Monuments to these gods stood tall and out in the open like it was the most natural thing in the world, and the further into the countryside I went, the more devotees I discovered.”

Rosa paused for a moment before continuing. “However,” she said emphatically, “in Arkus, Her Ladyshi—*Countess Nastalia* had been enforcing the same restrictions on religion as in the capital. There wasn’t a single temple in the province, and the people weren’t very faithful either,

both of which rather helped me settle in.”

“Oh, how interesting,” I said with a sardonic smile. “Three hundred years ago, I succeeded in unifying the land but let its religions remain as they were.”

I had, however, stripped clergies of their religious authority and barred them from possessing excessive riches, as those were ultimately irrelevant to their worship. Just as we were now destroying such wretched vulgarities as statues made of pure gold, I had once carried out similar operations all across the continent. Clergy of all religions preached frugality. I had simply assisted them in making those words a reality. In that sense, perhaps I had inadvertently done them a favor.

“Time passed after my departure, and that Kalis imbecile came along and declared himself emperor as well as a living god,” I said. “The existence of other gods likely proved a hindrance in maintaining his authority. It’s typical for louts to bring others down instead of bettering themselves. That’s why he outlawed the worship of others.”

“Then why are other gods still being worshipped in the countryside?” Rosa asked.

“I imagine doing so was banned at one point, but that ban was later rescinded. Remember, Kalis was enough of a simpleton to restore nobility. He was a man who couldn’t maintain his authority unless he granted special privileges to his vassals. It stands to reason that Kalis would fail to suppress the religions of a land he could barely even rule.”

“But since the capital’s right under their nose, they’ve at least managed to maintain the ban, right?”

“I would assume so.”

“I see,” Rosa said with a satisfied nod. “Now that I think of it, I remember hearing that the previous heads of the Nastalia earldom had been competent rulers, which would explain why Arkus managed to remain the exception.” However, it seemed that she had a new question. “So, I get how the empire and humanity themselves affect where religion can be found, but do gods actually exist?”

“They do.”

“Then is this really a good idea?!” Rosa’s eyes bulged as she pointed to a statue of Shtaal having its head sawed off. “What if the god seeks retribution?!”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” I said, smiling wryly as I tried to calm Rosa down. “On numerous occasions, I’ve encountered and killed

gods that have appeared in our world. If divine retribution were possible, I would have long ago been reduced to a fountain of blood.”

“It’s possible to kill gods?! And you’ve done it?!”

While Rosa looked to the heavens in dismay, I casually explained the misnomer. “Gods are indeed beings beyond our sense of scope, but that’s exactly why they can’t enter our realm while maintaining their true size. Our world isn’t big enough to hold them.”

That’s why they tore off a part of themselves and manifested as a fragment of their soul, a state in which they were gods, but not in the full sense of the word. We magicians called them “demigods.”

“Furthermore, gods are immortal not as tangible beings akin to us, but rather as intangible beings similar to an ideal or concept. Thus, when manifesting in our realm, gods must take form in flesh, which is why demigods can be killed.”

In fact, Rosa had even seen me slay a demigod.

“The countess summoned that eternal champion, a deified form of my brother, remember? That was a demigod. It wasn’t the entirety of the god’s soul, but merely a portion of it, and because it was housed in flesh, I could kill it.”

The memory wasn’t a pleasant one, but in the name of educating my first descendant, I had suppressed my ill feelings while giving my explanation. Rosa wasn’t oblivious to my discomfort.

“Okay, I get it now,” she said so that I wouldn’t have to say more about my brother. Quickly, she changed the subject. “But that doesn’t explain a lack of divine retribution, does it? What’s the reason for that?”

She may be rude at times, but deep down she’s a kind girl.

Thanks to her, I calmed down somewhat. I answered her question in a relaxed voice. “To start, gods are neither as beneficent nor as fearsome as most people think.”

Three hundred years prior, this had been common knowledge for anyone versed in magic. Unlike clergymen and common folk, we magicians would accumulate knowledge and calmly analyze our world and its inhabitants.

“Gods are the inhabitants of the worlds known as heaven and hell. Fundamentally, they’re no different than the fairies of the fae realm and the demons of the underworld. Their sense of scale may differ from that of us diminutive humans, but they aren’t omnipotent, omniscient, sacred, or inviolable.”

That sense of scale was key. For instance, Rals, the god of lightning, could use their enormous power to interfere with our world and create thunderstorms on a whim. What Rals couldn't do was use that power with adequate precision to strike a specific individual or building. It was similar to how I could use fifteenth rung magic to butcher a dragon but would struggle to single out and incinerate a specific ant in an anthill. It was therefore impossible for a god to carry out divine retribution against a single individual. That's not quite what one would call omnipotent, now, was it?

"Heaven and hell are both just worlds beyond our own," Rosa mumbled. "Gods are just inhabitants of other worlds..."

"What's more, it seems that they nourish themselves by collecting our souls after we die. Just as we prefer different foods, gods prefer different souls; gods in heaven prefer souls of kind individuals, and those in hell prefer the souls of evildoers." I gazed at the decapitated statue. "If you want to go further, you might say our world is like their dining room table."

Three hundred years ago, I would often tease Princess Anna, the Azure Maiden at the time. I would tell her that her power to send any soul to heaven was just a means of seasoning Shtaal's meals. The devout princess would make quite a face as she desperately tried to fight back her indignation.

"I hear that souls that go to heaven do get to rest peacefully," I added.

Souls weren't actually devoured; they were merely added to a god's collection. Unlike heaven, souls that went to hell became the playthings of malicious gods and were tormented for all eternity.

"You say that like you've directly spoken with the dead."

"Because I have directly spoken with the dead."

By using necromancy to revive the dead, one could hear all sorts of tales of life after death. It made sense, did it not?

"Magicians really are absurd."

"I hope this means you've come to see the wonders of magic and why I strive to understand it to its greatest heights and depths."

"Well, I don't know about that," she said with true disinterest.

I paused for a moment.

W-Well, men and women do have their differences in values, like a boy failing to understand the appeal of playing with dolls. Everyone's experienced it once or twice. Surely this is no different... That must be it.

But I digress. Perhaps because I had spent that time talking to Rosa about gods, that night, I relived a very nostalgic memory in my dreams. It was a memory of my previous life, of when I had first killed a god.



I was the twenty-year-old king of Vastalask and had just conquered the twenty-seven provinces of the administrative district once known as the Origin Circuit. Our target was a metal demigod who had six arms and must have stood at eight meters tall. With those arms, the demigod wielded a sword, an axe, a spear, a hammer, a machete, and a shield. This was a fragment of the soul of Aslauda, god of steel and warfare.

With a scream that shook the heavens, the god let us know that they were no simple foe. The sword immediately cut through the air while the hammer split the foundations of the earth. Even the seven knights surrounding the demigod, who were among my best, were kept at bay. Aslauda pushed six knights back with the long shaft of the spear, but one knight was too slow and took a hit to their flank. Their body was folded into two. In fact, if not for the armor I'd made, the knight most likely would have been sliced in half by that single wild swing.

Shivers ran through the other knights. The war god's might and prowess had reminded them that they were mere humans. The wounded knight had managed to survive but couldn't get back on their feet. Without any mercy or remorse, Aslauda brought down the axe as though to crush a bug. The knight's death was all but certain until my brother, Al Shion, cut in.

"Oh, no you don't!"

With a great leap, Al, using a technique called Geitsk, swung his blade upward and sliced the demigod's arm, deflecting the axe away from the hobbling knight. Almost simultaneously, the brilliance of a healing miracle embraced the knight—the Azure Maiden, Princess Anna, had offered a prayer to Shtaal.

After being saved by Al and healed by Anna, the knight got to their feet.

"M-My thanks."

Because the two had been perfectly in sync, a knight had been ripped from the jaws of death. Four years had already passed since my brother married Princess Anna. They now lived happily together and moved as one even on the battlefield. Their heroics rallied the other knights.

“Are we just going to let Al do all the work?!”

“As long as Princess Anna is with us, Shtaal watches over us all!”

“Show no fear or trepidation! Let’s show what a knight can do!”

The knights, who had been intimidated by the strength of the god of steel and warfare, remembered their courage and charged.

“But why were mere humans pitted against a fragment of a god?” you might ask. It had all started when the remnants of a recent conquest of mine, the Rodokel Federation, joined hands with a neighboring nation to exact revenge. They had mobilized two hundred magicians to enact a ritual that involved the sacrifice of one thousand lives, including their own. This had resulted in the summoning of Aslauda, god of steel and warfare. The summoned god had manifested as a manic demigod bereft of any sense of self and was acting on instincts that told it to crush Vastalask.

I had chosen the Libock Plains as the battlefield in which to intercept Aslauda. On those plains, we didn’t need to worry about harming innocent bystanders, no matter how intense our battle with a divinity became.

Three days prior, we had set up camp in the center point of the grassy land and had prepared to slay the demigod, who had been approaching from the north. Our team consisted of twenty-three people in total. The reason I had elected not to bring an army was because the average soldier would fail to even scratch the demigod; doing so would have been needlessly sending thousands of men to their deaths. Slaying a demigod could be accomplished with a small number of exceptional knights and magicians. The vanguard consisted of sixteen warriors led by Al, and the rear guard was myself, Anna, and four other magicians.

One of us, a strikingly tall swordsman, was exhilarated. Without showing even a shadow of embarrassment, he shouted the most absurd lines.

“My soul’s a raging inferno! Even the body of a god of steel will melt by my flames!”

The guy’s name was Roltas. He had made a name for his family by becoming a knight and was also known as Albert, for he was second only to Al Shion. In his hands was Gwero, the Carmine Blade, a fine sword crafted by yours truly. As though responding to his vigor, flames burst from the tip of the blade.

“You’ve left your legs defenseless, Mister Divinity!”

Roltas combined his skills with the magic of his blade to deliver a vicious blow. With a technique called Gohs, he put his entire weight into

the sword to thrust at the demigod's kneecap. A shower of sparks blew about as Roltas dug his blade into the metal body of Aslauda. By gauging a deep wound in the knee, the knight succeeded in making the demigod stumble.

I had endowed the Carmine Blade with the ability to produce flames by draining the wielder's mana and life force. Roltas was utilizing that power to its maximum potential. No matter how much power the blade drew from him, Roltas didn't even flinch. That was because of his unique background—by his mother, he was half high troll.

Trolls were generally thought of as large, hairy brutes, but high trolls were a true noble class who enslaved normal trolls. Besides possessing an average height of three meters, they looked no different than humanoid species. However, like elves, high trolls were all extraordinarily beautiful. Their height led to a common misconception that they were a gargantuan race, but from a taxonomic standpoint, they were fae folk, just like elves.

Furthermore, high trolls were known for having the strength and life force to match their impressive physiques. With this noble blood flowing through him, Roltas cut a fine figure that stood at 190 centimeters tall. Thanks to his mother's genes, he could use the Carmine Blade for hours on end.

As I watched Roltas swing the blade about without showing any strain, I began to wonder if perhaps a stronger blade would better suit him. I could make something that demanded far more mana than Gwero and would put a strain even on Roltas. If I gave it the capability of adjusting between three stages of firepower, it could be adapted to any circumstance.

Hmm, it would be fitting for him to wield something harder to handle. I'll give it a name like "Brihne, the Iridescent Blade."

Precisely because I had so much faith in my comrades, I was able to watch with such idle thoughts. Roltas let out a thunderous yell and began finally giving the fight his all.

"BURNING IS MY SOOOUL!"

While desperately weaving between swings from Aslauda's battleaxe, hammer, and machete, Roltas had become all the more fired up by his dire circumstances. He was truly a brave among braves. Using a technique called Gohlye, he directly faced the demigod and swiped upward, parrying the oncoming machete. He wasn't relying on the blade I'd crafted; this was the result of his own strength. Roltas wasn't someone fond of flattery, but he was fortitude incarnate.

While Roltas was a very orthodox swordsman, Al might be considered something of a maverick. As soon as the enraged Aslauda focused his attacks on Roltas, Al seized the opportunity to dash at the demigod's right flank and strike. He was using Gohs, the same technique Roltas had used earlier.

While Al also put all of his weight into his attack, his was fundamentally different from that carried out by Roltas. Al's strike could be considered less bound to form, less restrained. He drove his blade into Aslauda's flank and dug a wound deeper and far more severe than what Roltas had achieved with the same technique.

Without a moment's delay, Al shifted into his next attack. Faster than the eye could see, he dashed behind the demigod's thigh and slashed. This was Hadan, a technique that shared the same principles as Hagan. Al was already a master of Hagan, so he could also execute Hadan with a near unmatched degree of perfection.

After being struck in the side, Aslauda focused on Al and tried to retaliate with a swing of the hammer. However, by that point, Al had already vanished and was finished slicing the back of the demigod's leg.

Aslauda cried out with even greater fury and attacked successively with their sword, axe, and spear, but Al had disappeared by the time the weapons had struck the ground. With three uses of Hadan, he countered the three incoming attacks.

Roltas and the other knights were holding their own against the six-armed giant. They dodged its attacks and valiantly counterattacked when they saw an opening. Al was ultimately doing the same thing, but what he was doing looked entirely different. He wasn't even dodging incoming attacks, but rather moving before they began, and he wasn't waiting for openings, but rather repeatedly striking at weak points.

Perhaps you could say his fighting was less about the use of his weapon and more about his use of space. Whatever it was, Al showed not a hint of desperation or struggle, but instead seemed at ease, as though this were just a game.

However, Al was serious. He always was. When he engaged in battle, it looked almost like a battle between a child and an adult. Needless to say, it was Al's opponents who took the role of the child, and that held true whether against renowned knights or a demigod. In the face of Al, a once-in-a-century swordsman, all other opponents were novices.

Al could refine even an elementary technique like Hadan into

something profound, something he could use to carve into a demigod of steel and warfare. Roltas may have been using more advanced techniques and a finer blade, but it was Al who succeeded in applying far more damage to the demigod.

The blade Al was wielding wasn't anything special. Sure, it was one of my creations, but it was still nothing more than a practice piece. The only aspect of the blade worth taking pride in was its durability. I suppose it was a better weapon than the average enchanted sword, but not by any significant degree.

Frankly, I was still struggling to decide what sort of enchanted sword would be suitable for a master like Al. My indecision was proof that I still had a long way to go in developing my forging magic and further proof that I was no genius, but simply a hard worker. As a caring older brother, I wanted to forge a masterpiece that I could be proud to present to Al, but I could only guess how long that might take.

Anyway, let's get back to the battle.

Thanks to Al and Roltas, who were attracting the greater part of Aslauda's attention, the other knights were able to attack with ease. Meanwhile, two notable women stood among the rear guard. One was Princess Anna, and the other was an elven magician named Sheiha. Anna would pray to Shtaal to bolster the defenses and heal wounds of the knights in the vanguard, while Sheiha would support them with fairies.

To list just a few of Sheiha's tricks: She would call upon wind fairies to briefly hasten knights as they attacked. She would also command earth fairies to soften the ground beneath the demigod and cause them to lose their footing. Similarly, ice fairies would freeze Aslauda's joints and slow the demigod's movements. It would be no exaggeration to suggest that when it came to commanding fairies, Sheiha was even more powerful than I was.

One of her most effective skills involved using a fairy to bend light and create an illusion that looked exactly like Al. It was highly unlikely that a being like Aslauda, who was made entirely of metal, would be able to see, but that didn't mean producing illusions was meaningless; Aslauda would still desperately swing at the mirages.

The demigod might have been without a sense of sight, but it could still grasp its surroundings by sensing other beings' mana. Thus, it would still fall for the fairy's tricks. Though it was only a demigod, it still had the sense of scale of a god; therefore, both Al and the illusion must have been

too small to properly distinguish. It was similar to how we might require a moment to distinguish a poisonous spider from a harmless one.

Sheiha had done an exemplary job using our opponent's size against them, which she couldn't have done without her broad understanding of magic. Elves were indeed skilled at commanding fairies, but unfortunately, that was the extent of their talents.

Traditionally, elves secluded themselves in forests and emphasized oral traditions while shunning written texts. As a result, their culture and structured knowledge developed slowly. Sheiha had been raised in Mashli Forest, a place I'd never heard of before, but had become fed up with her kin's way of life and had left her home.

Her days of vagrancy had ended after she'd met me. We had become well acquainted and explored the depths of magic together. Thereby, Sheiha had become a proper magician and not just a fairy summoner.

"Your Majesty, it's almost time," she said in her voice both lustrous and elegant. She glanced at me in a manner both provocative and playful. "Surely you don't plan to request more time after working us so hard."

Sheiha was not only a superb magician, but also a fine woman. I gave her an irreverent shrug and slowly drew from the mana that had been building up in my body. "You hardly need to ask."

While the knights had been risking their lives on the front lines and other magicians had been frantically supporting them, I had been watching from the rear. Mind you, this wasn't because I thought that, as king, I could simply provide moral support and watch for deserters; they had their roles and I had mine. In actuality, I had been using that time to focus on gathering as much mana as I possibly could. Sliver of a god or not, a transcendent of any kind was not easy prey.

The knights before me, with their exceptional skills and weapons, had repeatedly slashed Aslauda, but they could only cause shallow wounds—nothing close to a fatal blow. The problem was the metal Aslauda was made of. The being was, after all, the manifest form of a deity of steel. Their composition of something not of our world, something harder than adamantium and more flexible than orichalcum. No warrior, no matter their skill, could hope to kill such a being.

What was necessary to kill a foe like Aslauda was magic—transcendent magic suited for deicide. The knights had been tasked with buying enough time for me to muster the necessary mana.

"Now, let's finish this!"

I at last released all the energy built up inside my body, which had become like a blast furnace of magic. The entire area around us began to shine with a blinding light. A glowing magic circle of enormous size and complexity emerged.

Together, Sheiha and I had drawn the magic circle in advance. The Libock Plains had been the perfect choice for its one-kilometer diameter. Few could match the knowledge Sheiha and I had of magic circles, but this one was a large enough project to tax even us; that's why we'd camped out for three days.

Now, as for why the circle had been invisible until I'd imbued it with magic, we hadn't used ink or the blood of an animal, but rather pure water the Azure Maiden had personally consecrated. On top of keeping Aslauda busy, Al and the other knights had been tasked with slowly directing the demigod to the center of the circle. This was what Sheiha had been referring to when she'd said, "it's almost time."

All our precise work and strenuous preparations had been for the completion of this spell.

"Come, Aslauda! It's time for legend to become reality!"

I finished channeling every last drop of mana into the circle. Its glare became even more blinding, and the ground began to quake—enough to topple even a demigod! At that moment, on that very spot, the ground began to crack and cave in. The edges of the hole expanded from Aslauda's location all the way to the edges of the magic circle.

Grass and dirt tumbled away and disappeared beneath the surface of the water that emerged. Or should I say the surface of the *ocean*? Indeed, in the vast expanse of the Libock Plains, a small ocean had appeared in an instant. It was as though the ground inside the magic circle had been removed and replaced with water. This was Hyalankaldepsi, a spell of the twenty-second rung of the four greater branches of magic. If you mastered the arcane, even the contours of the land would bow to your will!

Having lost the ground beneath their feet, Aslauda began to sink. Al and the other knights were also cast adrift, but there was no need to worry about them. Sheiha and I had asked the water spirits to enchant their armor so it would float.

Aslauda, on the other hand, was not so fortunate. The metal demigod, who was neither a demigod of water nor capable of flight, floundered and sank to the depths of the abyss. After all, even gods had their limitations.

Although the ocean I had carved into existence was only a kilometer

wide, it was thousands of meters deep. The demigod's heavy frame sank and sank until Aslauda was finished off by the water pressure.

Thus, by combining our strengths, we succeeded in our first attempt at deicide.



“Goodness, now I’ve definitely invited the wrath of the heavens,” Anna mumbled after the battle.

We had returned to our camp and were sitting around a fire that Sheiha had started with the help of her fairies. It was the middle of the day; Anna and I had no need for the fire, but Al and the others who’d gone for a swim all needed to dry off. We had split into multiple groups. With me sat Al, Anna, Roltas, and Sheiha.

“That’s the cleric side of you speaking, isn’t it?” Al said, wringing out his shirt with his fit upper body exposed. “You must have had your reservations about killing a god, even if it wasn’t Shtaal.”

Anna hugged her knees disparagingly, making herself small. “I couldn’t ignore all this. Rationally speaking, I know that it’s my duty to quell a rampant god before they commit a massacre, but now the deed is done, I can’t help but feel guilty.”

How naive of her.

I turned to Anna, feeling somewhat exasperated. “A splinter of a resident of another world barged into ours so we simply sent them back where they came from. I find it extraordinarily pointless to develop needless feelings of reverence or guilt over what we did.”

“That’s enough from you, you insensitive sophist,” said my younger brother.

“Hey, Al, whose side are you on: that of your brother, who you’ve spent your life next to, or that of your wife of a mere four years?”

“Who else but the side of my beloved wife?”

“Oh, the horror! To marry is to unwittingly inter oneself in the graveyard of life and wear a smile the whole time! It’s a dullness not even a zombie could emulate.”

“Is that how your twisted mind interprets our love?”

“Sure, let’s leave it at that.”

I’m in a fine mood today, so I’ll let you off the hook.

With a snort, I pulled out the prize I’d stored in my pocket. It was a metal orb that fit in my palm. Just as steel was an improvement on iron,

this metal was an improvement on orichalcum. The orb was fairly valuable in and of itself, but its contents were of far more importance.

I had watched with my own eyes as Aslauda had sunk and eventually perished. I hadn't budged from my spot until I'd spotted a soul fragment escape from their metal body and ascend towards the heavens. With magic, I had cut a small section from the soul and extracted its mana, which I had stored in this small vessel made of high-grade orichalcum. My plan was to use the mana of the god to fuel the heart of a military golem. Just thinking of the possibilities pleased me to no end!

"Heh heh. Heh heh heh..."

"Brother..."

"He's wearing the devious look again."

Well, excuse me!

People had been plaguing me with remarks like that since my childhood. I could be thinking of something as benign as what I might have for dinner, only to be faced with accusations of connivery and devilry. It wasn't as though I'd asked to be born with a face like this.

"My liege and his brother do share the same face, but what's inside always shows through," said Roltas.

"The younger one has far more grace and charm. Puzzling, isn't it?" said Sheiha.

Why are you two betraying me too?! I lead a band of backstabbers.

Sheiha held out her arms like an idol of compassion. "Oh, do forgive me, Your Majesty. Come, rest against my bosom and recover your mood."

Roltas let out a long whistle. "Good for you, my liege!"

"I have no desire to embrace a damp woman," I said, shooting them an unamused look.

What a bunch of miscreants. They sure are at ease toying around with their superior. I suppose that's what happens when you come back from a near fatal battle with a god!

"Who would believe that you lot are heroes capable of felling a god?"

I'd said that sardonically, but Al and the others roared with laughter.

What a group they were. You really wouldn't think they'd just survived a fearsome battle. Perhaps that boldness was exactly what made them fit to be heroes whose tales would be passed down through the generations to come. Only Anna was without a smile.

"Oh, I've become a decidual saint! What a disgrace!" she lamented, sinking back into her gloom.

“You’re bringing that up again?” I asked with a bemused shrug.
“You’d do well to just get over it already.”

We had saved a kingdom and its people by killing that god, and—*heh heh heh*—I had obtained some superb materials for crafting a golem. By doing so, we’d killed two birds with one stone, yet she would spin that fortune into a tragedy. That certainly wasn’t the result those bastards from the Rodokel Federation had planned when they’d sent a raging god our way.

“Is this not a happy ending?” I asked.

“Yes, but that doesn’t change the fact that I partook in a heinous act for my own personal benefit.”

“If it’s not one thing, it’s the other.”

Priests, deacons, people of the clergy—they’re all like this, and yet I’m supposed to be the sophist.

“Ugh, the more I think about it, the more my head spins,” Anna moaned, swaying over to the side.

“Brother!”

“Ah, I got it.”

In place of her damp and disheveled husband, Anna was caught by me, her brother-in-law. *For goodness sake. Getting cozy with married women, never mind the one married to my own brother, is not to my taste.* I held the exhausted woman in my arms and sighed.

“I’m terribly sorry,” she said in a small voice as she leaned into me, “but I ask that you let me stay like this for just a bit longer.”

I wasn’t a cleric—heck, I wasn’t spiritual at all—so it wasn’t easy for me to understand her state of mind. Even so, I had my misgivings about a woman resting against a man other than her husband. Perhaps because we were siblings, Al didn’t seem particularly stricken with jealousy. Could that also be why Anna seemed so at ease? As if I’d know.

“Hurry up and dry off, Al. Then take over.”

“I believe you should be directing your request to our gracious campfire, brother.”

“Oh, spare me. And quit smiling like that.”

“I can’t help it. I’ve been hoping you two would start getting along. I want the three of us to spend more time together.”

“Hmph, you’d do better spending some time away from your brother,” I said.

“That makes two of us,” Al responded with a laugh.

Roltas and Sheiha joined in the conversation, and even I found my lips twisting into a smile. I couldn't deny that I enjoyed wasting time with this lot. It had been simple necessity that had brought us together on this occasion, but I found myself elated to be traveling with the familiar bunch for the first time in a while. Through many wars and conquests, Vastalask had expanded considerably and so had my followers, yet the four sitting with me around the campfire were the only ones I could truly be at ease with.

I found it quite sad that I would have to pack up the next day and return with all possible haste to the capital, where my duties as king awaited me. Until that time, however, I cherished each and every moment spent with them.

I tried to call out to Al.

“Hey—”

However, I was cut off by a sharp pain in my neck that awoke me from my dream.

Chapter 4: A Counterattack by Night

I woke atop a leather sofa. I was still in the mayoral residence of Khonkas, the current base of the Army of the Night. The room was arranged in a style typical for Vastalask: the half with the desk was reserved for administrative work, while the other half, with its table and wine cabinet, served as a scape for relaxing and receiving guests.

I was lying on the sofa in the latter portion of the room. Lately, I'd been seeing more dreams of my past life—more dreams featuring Princess Anna. Perhaps they were a sort of premonition. If I hadn't been interrupted, I likely would have relived the rest of that memory.

Yes, someone had assailed me while I'd been resting peacefully. A redheaded girl had snuck into my room, joined me on the narrow sofa, and, with a look of enthrallment, sunk her fangs into my neck and sucked my blood. It was Rosa.



“How very bold of you to pay me a late-night visit.”

With her attention entirely on my blood, Rosa hadn't noticed that I'd woken up. Startled by my voice, she hastily removed her fangs from my neck.

“It's not a late-night visit! I mean, just look outside. It's already morning, so it can't be a late-night visit!”

“That may very well have been the worst excuse I've ever heard.”

“Well, it's your fault I'm here. It's time for breakfast, but no matter how long we waited, you didn't show up.”

“I was up rather late last night,” I said, suppressing a yawn.

As a True Blood, the sun's rays posed no threat to me, but I was a vampire all the same. That meant I preferred to be active during the night and rest during the day. However, I was the leader of the Army of the Night; our ranks were almost entirely made up of normal folk, and I had little choice but to adapt to their sleep pattern (but we chose to battle at night so that I could fight at my full potential).

Even if I understood this rationally, my body wouldn't always listen and often guiled me into staying up late. That had been all the more the case last night, after Jenni had paid me a visit and offered me a taste of her blood. We had gotten rather excited during the whole thing, which had left me in a completely restless state after she'd left. I'd ended up visiting the office to bury myself in records of regional affairs. By the time I'd grown sleepy, dawn hadn't been far off, so I'd stayed in the office and slept on the couch. That was the reason for my current drowsiness and inability to stop yawning.

It was a mid-November morning. I wrapped my arms around Rosa's waist and savored her warmth.

“Are you saying you came in search of me due to my absence from the breakfast table?” I asked teasingly.

“That's right. It's not my problem if you go without breakfast, but I felt sorry for all the cooks waiting for you to show up.”

“So you found me and decided to partake in your own breakfast.”

“I did. That's what you get for sleeping in such a defenseless position.”

“What an extraordinary shift of blame.”

There was no way one could reasonably argue that Rosa was justified in sampling my blood without permission.

“You're the one who turned me into a vampire! Just let me have a little!”

“As I recall, I turned you into a vampire at your own request.”

“Never mind that!” Rosa cried. “My body thirsts for blood regardless of how I came to be a vampire!”

Her remark might have sounded alarming to some, but I understood how she felt. Even since I’d become a vampire, every time I had lain eyes on an attractive woman, I found myself wondering how her blood might taste. For simple nourishment, regular food will suffice, but my instincts drove my desire for blood. Just like Rosa had put it, my body thirsted for blood.

“In that case, Rosa, shouldn’t you find someone you can drink from on a more regular basis?”

“I...I’d rather not. I want your blood, but I still have my reservations about that. It’s not normal, and I feel like I’m doing something wrong.”

Just because Rosa had become a vampire already didn’t mean her heart would change as quickly. She was still yet to break free from the shell of her common sense.

“You drink my blood, so doesn’t this make us even?” Rosa asked.

So she can enjoy my blood without any guilt, I thought.

“A-And more than that...” she said, trailing off.

“More than that?”

She muddled her words, and even after some prodding, I couldn’t get an answer out of her. I noticed how red her ears had become and figured she must be too embarrassed to say whatever it was. I became needlessly curious and spoke up in a mean-spirited tone.

“I reserve my blood for women who don’t keep secrets from me.”

Rosa resigned to her fate and mumbled in a barely audible voice, “After all, there’s nobody whose blood tastes better than yours.”

Oho, how darling.

Rosa was a difficult one. She would still be curt and rude towards me, but when nobody else was around, she would be just a tad more honest.

“I’ve come clean, so may I have some?” she asked, looking up at me.

She really is adorable.

“All right, all right.”

I lifted my chin so as to better expose my neck and give her easier access. Rosa quickly leaned in and was happy to sink her fangs into my neck. The pain only lasted a second; thanks to her vampiric charm, any discomfort was quickly overwhelmed by pleasure. Unfortunately, the charm of a Noble vampire had little effect on a True Blood, and therefore,

my pleasure was less than extraordinary. It was a sensation comparable to light stimulation of the erogenous zones.

Rosa, however, seemed quite content as she sucked and lapped up my blood. She loosened her collar and brushed aside her red hair so as to expose her own nape. It seemed she meant to be nonchalant about it, but she was essentially telling me she wanted me to suck her blood. She clearly hadn't forgotten the dizzying pleasures a True Blood could bring about, but she couldn't just ask. There may not have been anyone around to see, but for a stubborn person like Rosa, this was a monumental display of affection.

Of course, I was more than happy to indulge her. Her blood had a refined taste like liquid roses, and I was very fond of it.

“Well, I don't mind if I do.”

I was just about to sink my fangs into Rosa's neck when it happened. I heard the crash of shattering glass. Rosa and I instantly froze up and were pulled out of our revelry. Rosa fixed her disheveled collar. The sweet atmosphere had vanished and so had our desire to continue.

“Sorry, but could I ask you to investigate?” I asked with a yawn.

“Hmph, what a way to treat someone!”

Rosa got up and seemed almost to be fleeing from me as she ran off to check out the commotion. As I lay on the couch, watching her go, I noticed her nape was still flushed.

She really is precious. That's another one of her charms.



A strange silence had fallen over the fortress city of Khonkas. It was only natural; a city that had once been home to twenty thousand people was now occupied by only the five thousand soldiers of the Army of the Night. The city's infrastructure was largely going unused, as the soldiers were living off supplies shipped in from Arkus Prefecture.

“My lord, I must request that you live in some degree of comfort,” Lelesha had said. “For you to suffer inconvenience would be a disservice to your servants, even if we are on the front lines.” For that reason, she had called forth cooks, tailors, maids, and other workers she had employed back in Arkus, and put them to work in the mayoral residence. There was no denying that the assembly was somewhat of a quick fix, but those appointed proved to be hard workers.

Forte had a terrific eye for potential employees. The head chef in

particular, who had once been the personal chef of Countess Nastalia, had been excellently chosen. However, when in a hurry to recruit staff, it was inevitable for there to be bad apples thrown into the mix.

“You there, stop at once,” Lelesha demanded. She was calling out to a recently hired maid. The maid had been cleaning Kai Lekius’s bedroom and had been leaving with an armful of bedsheets when Lelesha stopped her.

“What might be the problem, Miss Lelesha?” the maid asked timidly.

“That’s what I’d like to ask you,” Lelesha replied, her expression stern. “Now, tell me what it is you were doing in our lord’s bedroom.”

“I...I don’t understand what it is you’re upset about.”

“There’s no point in playing dumb. What is it you were planning to do with the strand of our lord’s hair that you have hidden in your breast pocket?”

The maid prostrated, her forehead nearly scraping the floor. “My deepest apologies,” she said as she began to desperately try to explain herself. “I once caught sight of Kai Lekius and became hopelessly smitten, but I understand that a servant harboring affections for their master would be improper. That’s why I at least wanted to console myself by decorating my room with a strand of his hair—”

“Did I not tell you that there’s no use in playing dumb?” Lelesha drew a knife she had concealed on her person and threw it at the maid.

In an instant, the maid’s expression shifted into one far more foreboding. With the click of her tongue, she sprung up from the floor and evaded the incoming knife. This wasn’t a movement an ordinary person was capable of, but a skill that required intense training. Lelesha, who would normally have utilized her steel threads, had tossed the knife with intention of forcing the maid to give herself away.

“If you tell us who sent you, we’ll permit you to leave with your life intact.”

Lelesha wasn’t going to bother asking why the maid was stealing a strand of hair. With the right knowledge, one could analyze the hair and discern the variety of vampire Kai Lekius was, and she imagined that was their goal.

“I’ll give you until the count of three to surrender.”

The spy disguised as a maid refused to accept defeat and began to plot her escape. “Unfortunately for you, all I need is my own two feet. I’ll see myself home!”

She broke a glass window, a valuable item in that day and age, and leaped from the second story hallway down to the garden below. It would have been easy for Lelesha to use her threads to restrain the spy, but there was no need.

“You think you can escape, infiltrator?”

“Gyah!”

The elven knight waiting in the garden caught the spy with ease. Lelesha jumped from the broken window and gracefully alighted in the garden.

“Well done, Dame Jenni.”

“I can hardly take any credit after you did the initial work,” the elf said, shaking her head as she held the spy against the ground. “However, I would like to know how you were able to accurately ascertain the identity of the spy. If there’s some special technique, I’d be delighted to know.”



Lelesha was more than happy to enlighten the diligent elf. “As long as you hold a deep love for Kai Lekius and always keep him in your thoughts, the ability will come to you in time. As your affections grow, you’ll learn to make distinctions. One can *smell* whether or not someone before you, such as this individual, holds the same love for Kai Lekius as you and I.”

Jenni had no response. Lelesha had taken the time to courteously answer her question, yet she stood there with a peculiar expression that seemed to suggest she wished she hadn’t asked.

Rosa, who must have heard the commotion, poked her head out the broken window. “The only one capable of such degeneracy is you, Lelesha,” she said.

Jenni, on the other hand, looked at Rosa with irritation. “Am I not correct in my assumption that *you* were the one recently clinging to His Majesty in an unseemly fashion while having your blood sucked?”

“Excuse me?! I would never do such a thing. Would you stop with the slanderous remarks?”

“Yet your clothes are quite disheveled, are they not?”

“What? Are you serious?”

“I was bluffing, Lecher Rosa.”

“JENNI!”

Exposed and humiliated, Rosa felt her face reddening. She tried to hide her shame with her anger.

“You two are such good friends,” Lelesha said, giggling.

“That elf isn’t my friend.”

“That harlot is no friend of mine.”

Lelesha found their synchronized objections extraordinarily amusing, but she decided to put the matter to bed before the two could offer further objections.

“If you two say so, then so it shall be.”

Lelesha wasn’t particularly concerned about the truth of their relationship. She could *smell* that both Rosa and Jenni greatly adored Kai Lekius, and that was all that mattered to her.

With the immediate issue taken care of, the interrogation was shelved for later and the prisoner confined for the time being. Lelesha had planned on directly and thoroughly questioning the spy, but since they showed no sign of talking, she chose to first report to Kai Lekius. Two knights accompanied her.

“We’ve had quite a number of spies,” Rosa remarked.

“Indeed,” said Jenni. “The number has increased significantly in the past month.”

By that point, countless amateurs had tried to sneak into the mayoral residence to eavesdrop, but there had also been those like the maid, who had infiltrated their ranks by becoming employees.

“Our conquering of Arkus was both a sudden shattering of a three-hundred-year period of peace and an outrageous act of spitting in the face of the empire. It was inevitable that the eyes of the continent would focus on us, and we’ll only find more of the land’s powers seeking us out.”

“We’ll have to be more cautious,” said Rosa.

“We’ll need more personnel we can trust,” said Jenni.

Lelesha agreed with both statements. The latter would be particularly important. It would be a mistake to think they should stop hiring servants because some might be spies in disguise. If Kai Lekius was to topple the empire and once again rule the land, he would need to expand both his military and his staff. Coming across the occasional unscrupulous character was inevitable.

If they were to be overly wary and limit the number of retainers, soldiers, and even servants welcomed into our ranks, they would significantly hinder the speed at which the Army of the Night might expand. If one in one hundred recruits was a spy, then the trick was not to fear the occasional infiltrator, but rather to discern and dispose of them without fail. That way, they would still gain ninety-nine new recruits.

In that regard, it was truly fortuitous that we managed to recruit two knights as reliable as Rosa and Jenni so early on, Lelesha thought. No matter the greatness of Kai Lekius, being blessed with good retainers relied on chance meetings, which put them at the mercy of fate. Her lord was certainly an excellent judge of character; he could find the best apple in a crate of a thousand. However, it was impossible to find an edible apple in a crate of nothing but rotten ones.

With renewed appreciation for their luck, Lelesha set off towards her liege. Rosa knew where he was: in the office that had recently belonged to the mayor. However, when they arrived, they found him snoozing on the sofa.

“Ugh, the nerve of this man!” Rosa exclaimed. “He sends me to look into the noise while he goes back to sleep?”

Her spiteful glare was of course directed towards Kai Lekius, but a

certain someone failed to realize that and let out a loud squeak. It was Mil, the adorable maid of ten years old. Kai Lekius hadn't been alone in the office.

"Please help me, Lelesha," she pleaded in a small, pitiful voice.

Kai Lekius, who was still asleep on the sofa, was holding her like one would a hug pillow. She must have come inside to clean but had been pulled in by the vampire. Out of fear that she might awaken her lord and out of guilt that she wasn't doing her job, Mil had been scrunched up in fear. To add to that, she was now quivering, thinking Rosa's anger was directed at her.

"You're fine as you are, Mil. What you're currently doing is far more important than any sort of cleaning. Carry on."

Having received Lelesha's approval, Mil relaxed somewhat.

"O-Okay, understood."

Lelesha had grown quite fond of the diligent and vigorous girl, and smiled pleasantly at her charming behavior. Meanwhile, Kai Lekius, whose behavior was far more brazen, seemed to notice their voices and awoke.

"So what was all the fuss about?" he asked while yawning.

"One of our maids was exposed as a spy. The situation has been handled, and I've come to report."

Trivial matters such as this weren't typically brought to her lord's attention. However, there were only about one hundred servants assigned to the mayoral residence at present, and Kai Lekius knew the names and faces of all of them. If Lelesha hadn't chosen to report on the captured spy, the disappearance of a maid would weigh on his mind and distract him from his duties.

"Be quick to replace her so as not to burden the other servants."

"Yes, my lord. I've already concerned myself with matters of recruitment, as what we have is yet insufficient to care for you."

Kai Lekius nodded with satisfaction. He had entrusted Lelesha with supervising all aspects of his personal needs.

"I plan for us to stay in this town for another month or so. I think I'll take that time to relax a little."

He buried his face in Mil's nape and savored the smell of the blood flowing beneath her skin.

"I sure hope things get moving soon," Rosa said, loosening her collar both suggestively and in a way that was supposed to have been nonchalant.

“Things are gonna be dull until then.”

“Things will change. Don’t doubt the judgment of our lord, Dame Rosa,” Jenni said with no intentions of flattery.

Smiling wryly, Kai Lekius beckoned the two of them over to him, and with Mil included, the four of them made merry. Lelesha found herself struck by the urge to join them but quickly decided against it and took her leave.

So why were they temporarily halting their invasion of Runalog Province and spending a month in Khonkas? Well, they were waiting for two things: a response to their demand that the Azure Maiden be handed over, and the results of their efforts to ensure the masses of Runalog knew of their demands.

If Earl Creyala handed over his daughter, then that would settle the issue. Kai Lekius could parade around with the Azure Maiden and use her to win the hearts of Runalog. If, on the other hand, the earl didn’t hand over his daughter, then that was fine too; the people of Runalog were sure to force their way into the castle and beseech their idol to slay the vampire. Should the earl continue to hide his daughter, the people would learn of the Azure Maiden’s frailty, and their faith in her would dissipate. Whatever the conclusion, Kai Lekius would have the upper hand, and that conclusion was a mere month away by his predictions.

If we were to attack now, no matter how swiftly, we’d just incite more mass suicides. Though Kai didn’t say this aloud, it was something he was determined to avoid.

Lelesha could empathize. Even someone like her, who regarded the vast majority of humans with the same lack of worth that she regarded crickets, had felt a distinct pain at the sight of the people jumping from the walls of Khonkas. It was hard to imagine that someone as passionate, someone as filled with pity for the common people as Kai Lekius wouldn’t have been moved by the scene, yet he carried himself as though he wasn’t concerned in the slightest. This was proof that his benevolence was far from an act. He was deeply aware that his invasion had pushed those people into a corner and felt he had no right to mourn their deaths. Thus, he had silently redrawn his plans for conquering Runalog, so as not to incite another tragedy. Such was the man that Lelesha had sworn fealty to.

That’s why I must be an attendant worthy of the absolute trust he places in me, she thought.

And so Lelesha had shaken off her longing and turned down the chance

to indulge in frolicking with her lord. Alone, she continued her patrols. She neither knew nor cared about Earl Creyala, so she couldn't say for certain whether or not he would hand over his daughter. However, she was certain of one thing: he would make an attempt on her lord's life before making that decision. Just as Arkus had hosted Rosa and Jenni, Runalog most certainly had its own knights of exceptional strength, who would be sent to assassinate Kai Lekius. For this very reason, Lelesha kept her guard up and remained alert.



Talia, divine knight of the order of Rals, and Saloi, arcanist of the imperial arcane academy, made for an odd combination. Three days had passed since they had departed the provincial capital, traveling on horseback beneath the winter sky.

They had arrived in the fortress city of Beit, the largest town in western Runalog, with a population of seventy thousand. The only settlements between Beit and Khonkas, the town illegally occupied by the Army of the Night, were a handful of small towns that primarily catered to travelers.

An eerie silence had fallen over the region ever since Kai Lekius had demanded the surrender of the Azure Maiden. If he were to resume his march through Runalog Province, his next objective would most likely be Beit. The city's residents were all on edge, and the few wandering the streets wore tense expressions. No doubt, many who feared the flames of war had already evacuated.

I'm sure anyone left in the castle must be panicking, Talia thought. She could imagine the distress of the lord and his retainers as they braced for the possibility of going to battle.

The city of Beit and its surrounding areas belonged to a Viscount Howen. The previous Viscount Howen had wed Earl Creyala's younger sister, so the young master, who had recently inherited the title of viscount, was an older cousin of Lady Fana. Talia had never met the man before, so she was accompanying Saloi in his visit to the castle. Word of their arrival had been sent ahead of time, allowing them to be granted an audience without delay.

The chamberlain escorted them to an audience chamber. It was a wide and extravagant room befitting the residence of a provincial ruler. There, Talia witnessed something she had not at all expected.

At the far end of the room sat the young master, intoxicated in the

middle of the day. The maids serving him were required to wear lascivious uniforms hardly different from smallclothes. This alone was enough to raise an eyebrow, but the truly upsetting scene was taking place in the very middle of the room.

In a wretched display, two young girls not even fifteen years old were bereft of any clothes and slashing at each other with knives. Their tearful expressions revealed they were being forced to fight against their will. As the girls were weak and not trained for combat, they could only make shallow wounds, preventing a swift conclusion. It was a dastardly show meant to make entertainment out of their prolonged suffering. The only member of the audience enjoying the disgusting display was the viscount himself.

Without thinking, Talia put herself between the two girls and stopped the fight.

“Your Lordship, what is the meaning of this?!”

“I should be asking you that, you priest!” the enraged viscount shouted, slurring his words. “These brats are being punished for their parents’ crimes! As viscount, I get to choose their punishment, so stay out of the way!”

“I know not their parent’s crimes, but to punish children for the parents’ misdeeds, and in such a crude manner, is something I cannot ignore.”

“Their parents?! Ha! Their parents are cowards who feared the vampire and suggested we abandon the castle or call for reinforcements. They suggested I humiliate myself, and for that, they’re scum who deserve to die!”

The viscount had punished his retainers for making a perfectly reasonable suggestion. Just who was supposed to be the scum in this situation? Viscount Howen couldn’t simply be written off as incompetent or indolent.

“Their families, who have long eaten out of our hand, are just as guilty,” the viscount continued to shout. “Yet in my supreme generosity, I plan to let the survivor of this fight go free!”

The man had spoken rotten words without a hint of shame. However, as per imperial law, lords had the freedom to do as they pleased to their subjects. Though it weighed on Talia’s conscience, no one present had the authority to punish him.

“Maybe so, but the heavens are watching! If you don’t change your

ways, you'll be punished."

"Idiot. I have nothing to fear from the heavens! Do you know who my cousin is? The Azure Maiden, Fana Creyala herself! She can guarantee I'll be sent to heaven, so I can do whatever I want!"

That's not what the powers of the Azure Maiden are for...

Talia began to tremble with anger. The devout knight felt her right hand balling into a fist when Saloi grabbed her arm from behind.

"We came to slay a vampire. Do not forget who our enemy is," he whispered.

"But I can't turn my back on these girls."

"Later, we can ensure that Viscount Howen changes his habits. A scolding from Earl Creyala might prove effective, and if that doesn't work, I can put in a word to His Imperial Majesty. Matters of a tyrannous nobility are viewed as disruptive to his reign."

"Very well. If you say so, Sir Saloi."

Talia fought back her anger and uncurled her fist, but she'd already decided she wouldn't abandon the girls.

"I'll be taking these two to the Ralsian temple," she said, grabbing the girls by their hands and pulling them along.

"Hold it, priest! You think I've forgiven you?"

"I beg your leniency, Your Lordship," Saloi said, stepping in on Talia's behalf. In a seamless voice, he voiced an opinion that he himself did not believe. "To oppose the order of Rals, and by extension the order of Shtaal, will invite nothing but headaches. Is it not in the nature of a noble to overlook a few girls and focus on great joys?"

Perhaps this was the sort of talent one could expect from an elite arcanist. Talia made sure to take note that Sir Saloi had a silver tongue.

With the bewildered girls in tow, they left the audience chamber. Lord Howen was still ranting and raving in protest, but he made no attempt to order his soldiers to go after them. The man had his pride to uphold, so while he continued to make a show of threats, he took heart to Saloi's suggestion and avoided any trouble with the divine knight.

"I'm terribly sorry, Sir Saloi," Talia said as they exited the castle. They had paid a visit in hope of hearing the latest information on the Army of the Night but had now lost their chance. Thus, Talia felt the need to apologize.

"Oh, think nothing of it. I seriously doubt we could have gained any useful information from a man like that."

Saloi laughed at the pointlessness of their errand, whereas Talia furrowed her brow; she just wasn't in the mood. *Lord Creyala's taught me not to hold high expectations of the nobility, but they really are nothing but bastards of the highest order*, she thought. The only respectable noble Talia knew of was Lady Fana.

Ideally, the religious authorities would guide the public authorities away from corruption, but that wasn't the reality of the situation. The order of Rals was small and held no sway among the nobility, while the order of Shtaal was just as corrupt and mingled with them freely.

O Rals, pray look upon us and lament. When thine anger reaches its crest, let the hammer of judgment fall upon all of Runalog.

Talia had done what any cleric would do and prayed to Rals, but then it occurred to her: the threat of the vampire was far greater than any impending divine intervention.

Oh, the irony.

The hollow feeling inside her wouldn't let her laugh, no matter how much she wanted to.

Though it was a small one, a Ralsian temple did exist in Beit. Talia and Saloi stopped by to entrust the two girls to the temple and ended up spending the night. They departed the next day and planned their trip so as to reach Khonkas after sunset.

"I would have liked to arrive by day and attack the vampire in his sleep."

In spite of the bouncing saddle below him, Saloi was speaking without biting his tongue. Talia had thought of arcanists as hermits who lived among bookshelves, but it made sense that an elite from the imperial academy would be adept at horse riding. Talia, of course, was accustomed to horses. Back when she'd been a warrior, her duties had often required her to rush to the aid of even a distant village.

"Kai Lekius has an army of five thousand at his command," Saloi continued, "and they'll get in our way. Our only choice is to infiltrate his abode under the veil of night." He was well aware that the night belonged to vampires. "I'll set fires in the surrounding area and draw the soldiers away. I ask that you, Dame Talia, use that opportunity to slay the vampire while they're putting out the flames."

"Will you be able to manage that by yourself?"

"That's what conjuration is for. I may not be one for direct combat, but I'm quite skilled at sabotage."

“Very well. Leave the vampire to me.”

They finalized their plans while on the road and shortly after arrived at the vampire’s lair—Khonkas. After waiting for darkness to fall, Saloi infiltrated the town. Soon, tongues of flame began to shoot up under the winter moon’s pale light.

Talia waited until she counted three fires before moving in. She passed by soldiers of the Army of the Night, but between their focus on the fires and the low visibility, nobody showed any concern over Talia’s presence. She had no trouble arriving at the mayoral residence, which she had good reason to believe was where the vampire could be found. The layout of the building was fresh in her mind. Saloi’s subordinates had managed to learn—in his words—“that much at least.” She no longer had room to hesitate.

Without stopping, Talia ran about the building in search of the vampire. She had planned on checking the office, parlor, living room, dining room, and bedroom, in that order, but that plan was cut short. Or perhaps she realized there was no need. The central atrium, which extended to the third floor, connected every part of the residence. On the landing of the grand staircase leading to the top stood a young man with an air of blasphemy.

It was the vampire.



As he glared at her appraisingly, an arrogant smile formed on his face. Malevolent fangs peeked out. It seemed he had somehow detected her and had been lying in wait. Talia made sure to confirm his identity.

“Are you the vampire who fraudulently claims the name of the wicked god, Kai Lekius?” she asked. She felt as though she’d seen his face somewhere before, but she couldn’t quite place where.

Talia received her answer not from the vampire, but from one of three ladies—his guards or perhaps his mistresses. A striking woman with blue hair and a bridal gown spoke in a sharp tone.

“You know his identity, yet you would dare stand in the presence of Kai Lekius? Kneel, impudent wretch!”

In addition, a red-headed knight and a blonde elf, both fully armed, were standing at the ready. Not one of the group struck Talia as an opponent of average capabilities.

It was four against one. Talia prepared herself for a tough fight.

Chapter 5: The Crimson Lotus and the Thunderbolt

I, Kai Lekius, spoke in a regal voice to the intruder at the bottom of the staircase.

“Since you’re brazen enough to waltz in here by yourself, I may as well ask your name. Whether you’re a brave spirit or a fool, I’ll grant you the honor of remembering you.”

The intruder didn’t get offended but answered in a mellow tone.

“I am Talia, divine knight of the order of Rals and servant of the Azure Maiden. If you’re so kind as to ask my name, perhaps you might also be interested in hearing a sermon. I’m confident that if you do, you’ll develop a reverence for the divine.”

“Oh?”

How bold. I like this one.

Taking a closer look, I noticed she was rather attractive. Her face wasn’t one that would stand out, but it had its own simple elegance. I also took an interest in her above average height, and her contours suggested she was of exceptional proportions beneath her armor. My throat tingled—being a vampire, I couldn’t help but wonder what her blood tasted like.

“I’ll have to pass on the tedious sermon, but I’d be delighted to talk over tea—or better yet, liquor. I can have Lelesha prepare something for us.”

“Thank you for the offer,” Talia said, raising her mace, “but if you have no interest in changing your ways, then I’ll have no choice but to give you a good spanking.”

Maces had long been a choice weapon among Ralsian ascetics, but hers was an exceptional piece of craftsmanship. Talia possessed strength befitting her notable height, so it was hard to imagine that a whack from her mace would at all compare to a simple spanking.

“Bwa ha ha! Not even my own mother punished me in such a manner!”

I had always assumed clerics and the like were a flavorless bunch, but Talia’s humor had made me laugh out loud. Rosa muttered something about how I “should stop because I was destroying the tension,” but I

didn't let her negativity get to me.

"My, the thought of being spanked is just too terrifying. Someone else should fight in my place," I said with a snicker.

Rosa and Lelesha looked at one another.

"Allow me!"

"Go right ahead, Dame Rosa," Lelesha responded. "However, I must remind you that vampires are quite weak to the intercessions used by those such as Talia."

"Lelesha is quite right," said Jenni. "Or have you forgotten you're a vampire now?"

"I know that, and no, I didn't forget I'm a vampire! But that's all the more reason for me to see how much of a challenge she might pose."

Lelesha nodded. "I see. That's not at all unreasonable."

"In that case, I'll be sure to gather up your remains, so hold nothing back."

"And why are you so certain that I'm going to lose?!" Rosa shouted.

Talia, bearing witness to their rambunctious exchange, furrowed her brow in anger. "Is it possible that I'm not being taken seriously?" She most likely wanted to know why we didn't all attack her.

Excuse us if we've offended you!

"It's not in my nature to gang up on a warrior who fights alone," I said. In addition, Rosa and Jenni both had their pride as knights. If I were to ignore that pride and order them to attack together, they would begin to doubt my capabilities as a leader. "If being underestimated is so offensive to you, then you can prove your strength and make us regret our conceit. Am I correct?"

"You are," Talia said, convinced. She prepared to take on Rosa, who was descending the staircase. Besides her mace, Talia also wielded a greatshield. From behind it, she began to recite a passage. "O Rals, righteous god of lightning, here stands your enemy. I pray for your thunderous punishment and pardonance of my insufficiency."

Although what she recited was called a "passage," fundamentally speaking, it was the same as an incantation used by magicians. In that regard, it was my interpretation that the intercessions used by clerics were nothing more than another branch of magic.

Talia was casting Kalagria on Rals, a spell from the eight rung of the conferment branch of magic. The most distinguishing aspect of this branch was that its invocations required faith in the divine and the blessing of

divinity, making it one of the few branches of magic I was incapable of using. Just as I borrowed the strength of demons and spirits, clerics borrowed the extraordinary power of gods. Talia seemed quite adept at making use of the powers of Rals; even three hundred years ago, there hadn't been many capable of using this spell. Although the empire had done its best to forbid all forms of magic, it seemed intercessions were beyond their reach.

Casting Kalagria on Rals triggered a broad and drastic increase in one's physical capabilities—particularly in regards to one's reflexes. Now, Talia's armor received divine protection, and her weapon became enchanted. Electricity coursed through her body and her armaments. She painted a figure both gallant and untouchable.

"It would seem divine knights live up to their reputation," Lelesha remarked.

"This one seems formidable, so do be careful, Dame Rosa," said Jenni.

Rosa showed no signs of fear as she drew her family heirloom—Brihne, the Iridescent Blade. "I am Rosa of House Rindelf, the greatest warrior of the Army of the Night!"

"A fair and honest duel, is it? It'll be just like they did back in the age of conflict," Talia said. Her tone was still mellow, but a shadow of tension had begun to form across her face. It was clear that she'd been thrown for a loop when her mission to exterminate a vampire had resulted in her agreeing to an honest duel.

"If you're familiar with the practice, then fight me with honor!" Rosa said.

"That's not at all something one would expect to hear from a creature known for egregious cowardice." Talia thought for a moment. "Very well; I accept your challenge. With Rals as my witness, I will fight with honor."

Rosa held out her blade, and Talia, obeying duel etiquette, extended her weapon and tapped it against Rosa's. The sword engulfed in magic flames and the mace charged with blessed lightning made a sharp *clink* when they touched. Then the two stepped back.

A vampire and a divine knight. An honest duel to determine a winner. What an extraordinary sight. I can't let myself miss even a moment!

With a tremendous war cry, Rosa used her superior speed to take the initiative. She performed Hagan to instantly close the gap and lunged. Talia instantly deflected the blow with her shield. Instead of utilizing its wide surface to block the blow head-on, she analyzed Rosa's attack and

held her shield at an angle so as to deflect the swing.

Brihne was one of my finest works; even if Talia's shield bore the blessing of Rals, a direct hit would have been enough to punch a hole through the surface.

"I'm not done yet!"

Rosa needed not even a moment to recover before striking again. The martial arts of that era had three hundred more years of refinement than those I had once known. Hagan, for instance, had evolved into a technique of successive strikes. However, because Rosa's attack had been deflected rather than dodged, her next swing was considerably slower.

With her enhanced perceptions, Talia didn't deflect the next attack, but rather blocked it head-on. She raised her mace and brought it down as Rosa dived forward. With a click of the tongue, Rosa used Hagan to dash to the side and evade the incoming mace. The weapon's momentum carried it into the granite floor, shattering the hard stone to form a web of cracks.

Hmm, it's a good thing Rosa chose to dodge that attack rather than trying to parry it. Even Brihne wouldn't be able to withstand such a blow. The blade may not bend or break, but it might suffer from minor distortion. That swing had enough force to sever Rosa's arm multiple times over. I have no doubt this will be a fatal duel.

"Well done, Lady Talia!"

"I'm afraid 'Lady' is a title far above my station. Just 'Talia' will do fine."

"To lower oneself is to also lower one's opponent, so just accept the courtesy!" Rosa yelled as she pounced. She was so fast, one could very easily fail to realize that she'd swung not once, but twice. She struck high and low with a technique called Ruen—which meant "dragon's jaws"—and to the left and right with Sauda—meaning "twin vipers."

The former, Ruen, was the attack during which Rosa proved most formidable. Talia first deflected the lower attack with her shield and then dodged the upper attack by shifting her torso. It was another excellent defensive maneuver, but Rosa wasn't finished. She shifted her weight and made a wide horizontal swing with Uzu, a technique likened to a vicious whirlpool.

Ruen already put one's speed to the test, but to seamlessly transition from that into another attack was even more challenging. Rosa had both a natural talent with a blade as well as skills developed by daily training;

even with her improved reflexes, Talia would be unable to evade the attack. It would have been impossible for her—or any human being, for that matter—to react in time to a sudden horizontal swipe while their attention was focused on the vertical axis. Without compound eyes or hearing as well as one’s sight, it would be difficult to defend against such an attack. Naturally, such an unpredictable attack had been part of Rosa’s plan.

The horizontal swipe cut into the divine knight’s sturdy armor and left a deep groove. If it hadn’t been for the blessing of Rals, the attack would have no doubt reached Talia’s flesh and left a serious wound.

And Rosa wasn’t done yet.

Using an eagle-like technique called Walg, she leaped, somersaulting in the air and bringing her blade down. Starting with Ruen, she had successfully completed a three-part combination attack in the heat of battle.

Extraordinary! She’s just like her ancestor Roltas!

“This is it!” Rosa declared as she swung her sword down.

Walg was a risky move; it was powerful but left the assailant defenseless. Normally, a technique with such a wide swing wasn’t advisable against another skilled fighter, but Talia had been staggered by the hit to her flank. The divine knight had been well trained and knew to use her frame and height to keep herself firmly rooted in place; however, Rosa’s combination attack had managed to uproot Talia’s footing.

That was why Rosa’s finishing swing should connect. She had planned this from the very beginning and was about to put a finish to the duel. And she would have, had Talia *only* been a first-class warrior.

Talia leaned back and intoned a simple passage.

“Hear me, Rals!”

In an instant, bolts of lightning shot from her body in every direction, electrifying the area around her. This was Rals Vehda, a spell of the fourth rung of the four greater branches of magic. There was nothing Rosa could do; hit with such a direct counterattack, she cried out as she was flung backwards.

This is it! This is what makes intercessions so obnoxious!

In physical combat—especially the fast-paced combat of first-class warriors—even I couldn’t manage to counter a fourth rung spell. Even the quickest invocations such as a mudra or hallowed tread would require time to perform. Clerics, however, could rely on their good old faith in the

divine to dubiously expedite their spell-casting.

I began to ponder. *Hmm. Perhaps I should find a god to place my faith in. Actually, scratch that. It's no use trying to become someone I'm not. I can only fool myself so much.*

Talia, meanwhile, had used her piety to pull herself out of a corner and onto the offensive. She instantly closed the gap between them and swung her mace. She had used Hazan, a technique based on the same principles as Hagan. Both techniques involved flying at someone like an arrow; however, Hazan was slower and could be performed with a blunt weapon.

Now it was Rosa's turn to be put in a tight spot. She grunted as she tried to soften her landing and then sprang back to her feet, all the while dodging Talia's mace by a hair's breadth. If Rosa hadn't dodged until after she'd seen Talia coming, it would have been too late. It was intuition that had told her to jump. This was another product of her natural aptitude as a warrior.

Even so, Rosa had only barely escaped death and was still far from safe.

"There's no escape!" Talia yelled, still using Hazan. Rosa dodged that attack too, but her movements lacked their usual finesse. Talia returned, swinging a third time, and this time Rosa was unable to evade the mace. The heavy blow grazed her left shoulder.

A single hit from the blessed mace was enough to shatter Rosa's pauldron. The strike went on to hit bone and, judging from her cry of agony, her shoulder may have been broken or fractured. But Rosa wasn't going down so easily. Unable to avoid the attack, she had accepted the hit and resolved to seize the opportunity to hit back. Immediately after taking the blow to her left shoulder, Rosa used just her right hand to deftly direct her sword past Talia's shield and thrust at her flank.

The burning blade pierced the divine knight's armor and seared her flesh. Now Talia couldn't move forward without Brihne burrowing deeper. With no other choice, Talia jumped back to put some space between her and Rosa. The two opponents now stood apart from one another, neither closing the distance.

"Very well done," Lelesha said, clapping. Coming from someone as misanthropic as her, this was a mind-blowing praise.

"If only I could fight such an extraordinary opponent in this day and age," Jenni grumbled. "Consider me jealous."

My thoughts exactly!

The fight had lasted not even three minutes, but I'd felt as though I'd been transported back to days gone by. As the duel had been one between knights, I could get away with being impressed, but had this been an arcane bout, I would have been unbearably envious.

Talia shrugged off our compliments and began to treat her wounds without delay.

"...Thank you, Rals," she said, finishing her prayer.

Not a moment later, her wounds were fully healed. No matter how shallow they were, she had still been stabbed and scorched by Brihne. Maybe not to the degree that Princess Anna had been adored, it seemed Talia was plenty beloved by her god.

"Not bad," Rosa said, still keeping her distance. Her shoulders heaved while she tried to maintain her bravado. It seemed I'd been right about her left shoulder being broken, because her left arm hung limply at her side. Talia had managed to heal herself with intercessions, but Rosa wasn't regenerating the way a vampire typically would. This was another side effect of the Rals Vehda that had shocked her earlier. As was the sun, spells that drew power from the gods were a vampire's worst enemy.

Being struck by the lightning of Rals had harmed Rosa more than it would a normal person; she wouldn't recover from her wounds and numbness easily. Rosa was a Noble vampire, so she was somewhat resilient, but her resilience was nothing close to that of a True Blood.

"However, I'm still going to come out on top," Rosa declared while wielding her sword with only one hand. This was merely more of her unmatched prowess, but I found a certain beauty in her complete refusal to submit. Moments like this one were the reason I had chosen Rosa to be my first descendant. I found myself taken with the fire in her eyes.

"Are you ready?" she asked as the flames gushing from her sword burned brighter than ever. She was pouring her mana into the blade, far more than any human could muster. The flames changed from red to blue, and then from blue to white, each shift in color making the fire that much stronger.

Mm, good. Very good, I thought.

In a prolonged battle, Rosa's weakness to intercessions put her at a disadvantage. I was quite impressed that she understood that and had decided to place all her hopes on one final strike. I was curious to see how Talia might respond to such a situation.

"I, too, would like to settle this quickly," she said. Her tone was as

mellow as always but brimmed with the same mettle as Rosa's. Talia raised her mace high into the air. "O Rals, lend unto me your hammer of judgment. Come forth and manifest justice."

As she recited a passage, Talia once again mustered as much mana as she could. A human's mana was limited, but that could be overcome by borrowing the mana of her god. As she channeled that mana into the steel tip of her mace, the weapon began to shine from the emanating lightning.

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Both warriors let out long, deep cries. The more mana they channeled, the thicker the tension became. The scent of that war-torn era long ago became even more distinct to me. Both Talia and Rosa were surrounded by distinct auras.

Which will prevail—the flaming sword or the hammer of judgment? I wondered.

Jenni and Lelesha looked on with bated breath. I couldn't help but feel excited. The result, however, would be hollow—or rather, unpredictable—as neither of the two warriors would be able to prove their might. As they both approached their limits, an incident occurred: Talia began to cough up blood, and the mana she had built up began to dissipate.

It was a conclusion both unexpected and unsatisfying.



How...? How could this happen now of all times?! Talia wondered, overcome with bewilderment as she continued to cough up blood. She stared down at her hand, which was now dyed red by the profuse substance. Unable to breathe properly, she felt the strength leave her body. She could no longer stand, much less wield her enormous mace and shield.

Talia fell to her knees, staining the white granite red.

Why?

Indeed, why was this happening to her? She had been coughing like this for the past week, but it had never been this intense. The last time she had felt this weak had been when she'd caught that lung disease four years ago.

Was I not cured by Lady Fana? Have I relapsed?

It wasn't a chronic disease, so she wondered if it was even possible to relapse after a full four years.

Never mind that. This is no time to be worrying about the cause.

Still on the floor, Talia desperately looked up, but her vision was

blurred by tears. She was in the midst of a battle. The only reason she was alive was because her opponent was a proud knight—more than that, Rosa was a kind soul who was looking at Talia with concern.

I'll grab my mace and get back up.

Talia gritted her teeth and stifled her coughs as she clutched the grip of her mace and tried to stand up. However, her arms wouldn't lift the weapon, and her legs wouldn't do as they were told.

I must protect Lady Fana.

She tried to muster her strength but only succeeded in coughing up more blood. Not only was the lead vampire still alive, but she hadn't slain even one of his guards.

Talia prayed, begged even, as she continued to cough. *Please, lend me your strength, Rals! Bestow unto me enough strength to get through this battle. I care not what happens once I've slain Kai Lekius and saved Lady Fana. Take even my life if you must.*

However, her prayer went unheard. Talia lost the strength to keep hold of her mace. It took everything she had to suppress her coughing. She still had the heart to fight, but her body was slowly giving out.

Just then, as she cried out desperately for Lady Fana, she heard the voice of a young man. "Let me take a look." Through her tear-blurred vision, she could see the distorted image of the vampire, Kai Lekius. At some point, he had crouched by her side and had begun to peer at her. "You won't be fighting in the shape you're in, and my knight is having incomplete combustion problems, so let me take a look."

The pity he treats me with...

Large tears began to streak down Talia's face, but she no longer cared. She was prepared to endure any hardship if it was to protect Lady Fana. If her foes wanted to put on a show of generosity, she would be happy to take them up on their offer.

"What..." she began. "What do you want me to do?"

"Open your mouth. I need to see your throat."

Kai Lekius gripped the tip of her chin and forced her to look up. Talia did as she was told and opened her mouth. She was still coughing, but the vampire showed not a hint of discomfort as he took a good look down her throat. His eyes were serious, almost frighteningly so.

"I see a mark of Namaria and over that a seal of Shtaal, but the seal is horribly deteriorated," he mumbled to himself. After that, the vampire began to ask her questions like some sort of physician. "How old is the

seal? Four years old? Five? I imagine there was a deadly lung disease going around.”

Talia nodded, surprised by the accuracy of his assumption.

“You used intercessions to treat the disease, but one or two in every fifty people remained afflicted, am I correct?”

“It was one in one hundred.”

“Oh, that’s not too shabby. It seems the Ralsians of Runalog had some exceptionally pious fellows in their ranks,” Kai Lekius said with a grin. He didn’t sound facetious but genuinely impressed. However, his expression took a dark turn. “Epidemics are the spawn of Namaria, a malevolent god of rot and disease. If they spy a town or village, they’ll aim their cursed breath at them on a whim.”

“Cursed?” Talia asked.

“Yes, their breath is a god’s curse—something fundamentally different from a naturally occurring disease. This is why not everyone affected can be cured via miracles. The more you’re to Namaria’s liking, the deeper the mark is engraved. May I assume that you, Talia, were one of those unlucky few who remained afflicted?”

Talia nodded. She had never heard of this malevolent god’s curses, but it was true that intercessions had failed to cure her ailment.

Kai Lekius pressed her further. “But someone faithful to Shtaal took the disease from you and unto themselves. Thereby, you were spared of the disease and were, until recently, allowed to live a healthy life. Am I wrong?”

“Excuse me?”

This time, Talia was unable to nod; she was taken aback by what she’d heard. Kai Lekius was unperturbed and continued to speak. “It would be someone near you: a high-ranking cleric who’s now prone to sickness.”

Talia found herself at a loss for words. It was clear, abundantly clear, who that person might be, but she didn’t want to recognize the truth. Lady Fana had once been an uncontrollable bundle of energy, but she had one day become so frail as to get a fever from a brush of the night wind. How long ago had that shift occurred? Hadn’t it been around the time Talia had caught the disease? Hadn’t it started after the night Lady Fana had spent nursing Talia?

One would hear all the time of sickly children who developed sturdier constitutions as they aged. Cases where the opposite occurred were rare but not nonexistent. *I’d assumed Lady Fana was one of those cases. The*

physician said so as well, she thought.

But the truth had been quite different: in order to save Talia, the Azure Maiden had used her powers to take the disease upon herself. The once energetic and playful Lady Fana had begun to spend the better part of her days in bed, holed up in her room. Four years had passed since then.

Who knows just how much joy she gave up on just to save me? The thought alone pained Talia so much, she thought her chest would split open. Tears spilled from her eyes.

“Put your sword away, Rosa. The duel’s on hold for now,” Kai Lekius said as he let go of Talia’s chin and stood up.

“You said it’s a curse, right? Can’t you just use one of your cursebreakers and let us get back to it?” Rosa asked in a tone unbecoming of a vassal.

“Don’t be foolish; even I would require at least two weeks to lift such a deep-set mark.”

The blue-haired lady grinned facetiously as she descended the staircase. “This Talia girl must be quite purehearted for Namaria to take such a liking to her.”

“Any being that favors victims of good character must make for an absolute nuisance,” said the elf, who followed her with an exasperated smile.

Once again, Kai Lekius’s lips twisted into a grin. “That’s true. After all, you’ve managed to catch my eye after only a single meeting,” he said to Talia. His smile was an alluring one only a vampire could be capable of. “I must warn you, though—something’s happened to whoever’s shouldering the curse for you.”

“What do you mean?” Talia asked.

“That seal of Shtaal is fading.”

That was why Talia’s ailment had suddenly returned after four years.

“It’s a sign that something unfortunate has happened—or is happening—to whomever placed the seal on you. Of course, whether or not you believe me is up to you.”

Talia hesitated for a moment. “I believe you,” she said. She felt no inclination to doubt his words, and it wasn’t just because she was persuaded by his assertions. Talia was all too aware of the fact that this grand vampire hadn’t sunk his fangs into someone who had come to kill him; she could see no reason why he would make the effort to lie to her.

Something’s happened to Lady Fana!

Talia became restless. Her heart pounded like a drum.

“If you want to go home, you’re free to do so,” Kai Lekius said in an arrogant tone before explaining that he wouldn’t have warned her otherwise.

“But why? Why are you doing all this?”

Who had ever heard of an assassin being cordially sent on their way? Even if the invitation was meant as a sort of insult, Talia found it a bit absurd.

“I said you caught my eye, didn’t I? If charity from a vampire bothers you that much, you can return the favor someday. Just a sip of your blood will be plenty.”

“Yet when we first met, you didn’t let me go home until after I let you drink my blood.”

“Don’t pout, Rosa. Didn’t I do that because I was so fixated on you?”

“I...I would hope so.”

“Who knew you were such an easy woman, Dame Rosa.”

“What was that, Jenni?!”

Rosa and the elf began a lively debate, and Talia was forced to realize she was no longer being treated as a foe. However, for now, she was grateful for that. Thanks to the short rest, her coughing subsided, and she managed to stand up.

“As long as you’re after the Azure Maiden, you shall remain my enemy. However, I promise that next we meet, I’ll offer you my blood before we do battle.”

“Make a promise with me too! I won’t be satisfied until we know which of us is stronger!”

“Very well. Next time, I shall challenge you directly.”

“And you’d better keep that promise! I can’t have you collapsing on me.”

Ah, so part of her is concerned for me.

What a kind soul Dame Rosa was. Talia would have to rethink her opinions on vampires. If they hadn’t been enemies, they certainly would have become friends. “Well then, I’ll take my leave.”

Feeling grateful, Talia bowed and headed off, still somewhat unsteady on her feet. No longer possessing the strength to carry her mace and shield, she had to leave them behind.



When Talia left the mayoral residence, the town was still bustling with soldiers putting out fires. However, there were no new fires being set; Saloi must have figured he had done enough and pulled back.

They had left their horses in the woods on the outskirts of the city, which was where Talia and Saloi had planned to meet up. She would have to inform him that the assassination attempt had failed and that they would need to draw up another plan, but Talia's primary concern was making sure Lady Fana was all right.

If Saloi was going to fixate on eliminating Kai Lekius, then Talia would return to the capital alone. Even if she had to tie her weakened body to her horse's saddle, she would make it home no matter what.

Talia limped down a dark road beneath the winter sky, the cold night wind nipping at her skin. The Army of the Night's troops were still busy fighting fires, so she didn't have to worry about running into any of them. That was why the shadow in her path couldn't have belonged to an enemy soldier. Rather, it must have been an ally.

"Where do you think you're going, Dame Talia—and with not a single severed head?" Saloi asked disdainfully. For some reason, he was blocking Talia's path.

Talia stopped and began to explain. "Please, listen to me, Sir Saloi..."

"Is this about the vampire? Or is it about your beloved Azure Maiden?" Saloi spoke in a persistent tone, one entirely unlike him.

"How do you—" Talia wanted to ask how he'd known she was going to bring up Lady Fana, but she was cut off.

"I'm not suited for direct combat, but I suppose I can defeat you in your current state."

Saloi drew three talismans and threw them. Likely by conjuration, all three talismans transformed into giant centipedes that simultaneously surrounded Talia. Their speed and frames, not to mention their size, suggested they were no trifling foes.

If she had been in top shape, perhaps she could have fought them off, but as she currently was, that was hard to imagine. Besides, she had left her mace and shield back at the mayoral residence.

"Why are you doing this? Do you know something about Lady Fana?" Talia couldn't resist asking.

Saloi, however, didn't respond and simply flashed her a meaningful grin. Then the centipedes closed in on Talia.

Chapter 6: The Azure Maiden and the Eternal Champion

Four days prior, the morning Talia departed the provincial capital.

Earl Creyala was in a fine mood. He had been able to entrust Talia and Saloi with removing that nasty thorn in his side, and as far as he was concerned, the problem was as good as solved. This was the typical flower-brained thinking of a typical noble who had inherited their title in a peaceful era.

“I’d say today’s breakfast tastes even better than usual!” he said while grinning from ear to ear.

At the opposite end of the long dining table sat Lady Fana. No matter how busy Lord Creyala was (playing around), he would always join his daughter for breakfast. He treasured this time of the day. Thanks to the large fireplace, the dining room stayed comfortably warm even in the midst of winter.

Lady Fana stopped eating to reply with a smile. “Yes, it’s very good, father.”

Her smile was clearly forced; in spite of what she’d said, she had barely touched her food.

“What’s the matter, Fana?” Lord Creyala asked, having found this strange. “Is there something that’s not to your liking?”

The heirs of nobility were raised without any discomfort. They became used to having their thoughts intuited and rarely learned the value of being considerate of others. Therefore, those such as Lord Creyala grew up to be insensitive. It didn’t occur to the earl that his beloved daughter had no appetite because she was concerned for Talia.

“I thought this chef was quite talented, but is their cooking not to your taste?” the earl asked, tilting his head. Just to check, he bit into a slice of salt crusted chicken—it was delicious. The taste was a sensation both complex and indescribable. The earl couldn’t begin to imagine how many different spices had been used.

At the beginning of the month, a new chef had been employed by the castle. They knew just about all there was to know about spices and made

use of them excellently. Lord Creyala had quickly become taken with their cooking.

Wasn't it just yesterday that Fana was ecstatic about the chef's cooking? thought the extraordinarily dense earl. In the end, he decided he wouldn't have the chef in question cook meals that Fana would be present for.

Lord Creyala called a servant over and ordered that Lady Fana's current dish be switched out for something else. Once the servant had exited the dining room, a young man appeared in their place. It was Saloi, who should have departed with Talia.

"Oh? Have you forgotten something?" Lord Creyala asked, thinking it odd that he would come back by himself.

"Actually, I've come to make a request of you," Saloi said with a well-fabricated smile.

"Oh? What might that be?"

"You see, Your Lordship, there are two things I'd like from you in order to slay Kai Lekius."

"Of course. No price is too great to protect Runalog. What is it you want?"

"The first thing would be this."

Saloi showed the earl a small box. It was an old antique elaborately adorned with silver and gold. Saloi's tone had been quite casual, but the earl almost jumped out of his seat when he saw the box.

"D-Do you understand what's in that box?!"

"But of course, Your Lordship. In this box are remains of one the heroes who founded Vastalask—the remains of Al Shion."

The eyes of the usually genial Lord Creyala bulged. "That's right! It's a treasure that was entrusted to my house by the first emperor, Emperor Kalis!"

Without permission, this arcanist had taken a treasure that had been in the possession of House Creyala for over two hundred years. It was Lord Creyala's understanding that these remains were a holy relic of the benevolent god, Al Shion. He had been told that if Runalog were in peril, he could pray for protection and a soul fragment Al Shion's would immediately manifest.

Frankly, the earl thought that was nonsense and nothing more than a tale meant to enhance the founding myth of the empire, but that didn't change the fact that it was a gift to his family from the first emperor. Lord

Creyala's father, the previous earl, had sternly warned him that to treat the remains poorly would be taken as an act of treason against the imperial throne.

"Return that at once!"

"I cannot do that, nor do I intend to. I have received the order from His Imperial Majesty that it be entrusted to me."

"Well then, say so from the start," said the earl, his anger subsiding. It wasn't in his nature to be confrontational, not to mention he was relieved to have such a major responsibility taken off his hands. "And what else was it you wished for?" he asked, a smile back on his face.

Saloi continued to smirk, but he didn't immediately answer. Instead, he directed a glance towards the other side of the dining table. It was a glance at Lady Fana, who had been sitting quietly like a doll, having been taught not to interfere in matters of public affairs. It was a glance at the earl's beloved daughter.

Lady Fana seemed quite surprised by the sudden attention, but Saloi ignored her and began his explanation. However, it was all gibberish to Lord Creyala, which was a product of his ignorance.

"The vampire, Kai Lekius, has already conquered Arkus Province. This means that even with the glorious power of an eternal champion, we failed to have him subdued. Therefore, it is my opinion that this vampire may very well be His Majesty Kai Lekius, the true lord and founder of our nation."

"My apologies, Sir Saloi. Might you explain so that I may understand?" Lord Creyala said with confusion.

Saloi gave no response to the earl's request; he simply maintained his smile and looked at the earl as though he were looking at an ape. "As such, I do not believe that simply wielding this holy relic as it is will be enough to defeat Kai Lekius. That would simply allow Runalog to fall to the same fate as Arkus."

"Yes, well, I don't fully understand, but we can't follow in the footsteps of Countess Nastalia. You said we can't use the relic 'as it is.' Does that mean there's something we can do to it?"

Lord Creyala figured this is what the second item would be for.

Saloi answered with a smile. "I would like to request the life of the Azure Maiden."

The abrupt statement bewildered the earl.

"What?! What do you...?!"

Lady Fana had also frozen up, but Saloi didn't let that stop him from continuing his explanation.

“Records show that the Azure Maiden of four generations prior, Princess Anna, was happily married to Al Shion. This means that as Princess Anna's reincarnation and bearer of the same soul, Lady Fana is synergetic with the soul of Al Shion. By binding their souls together, I can succeed in bringing forth an even stronger eternal champion.”

“That'll be quite enough from you!” the earl shouted as he stood up from his chair. He was feeling genuine rage far more intense than his earlier anger. “How could I offer up my dear daughter for such a dubious reason?!”

“But, Your Lordship, this, too, is also by order of His Imperial Majesty. If you don't comply, it will be considered an act of treason. Are you truly fine with that?”

Lord Creyala began to shout and cry, disheveling his hair. “Silence! Silence! Sileeeeeence!”

He loved Fana. He loved her from the bottom of his heart. There was gossip that he kept her close to him for her religious influence, but that was preposterous. The earl was apathetic to politics; he didn't care how valuable of a political tool she might be. He was simply a father who loved his only daughter.

“Someone come and remove this charlatan arcanist!”

“You would cast aside your duties as a noble of the empire in favor of your role as a father. Are you certain? If so, then I'll let you die for that love. You were a wonderful father.” Saloi sneered while removing a talisman from his breast pocket.

“Father, look out!”

As though she had regained her long lost vigor, Lady Fana jumped onto the dining table and sent dishes flying as she ran towards her father.

“Talia might not be here, but I'm still the Azure Maiden!” she yelled. Lady Fana began to focus her mana and offered a prayer to Shtaal for their blessing. However...

“It's no use,” Saloi said.

“What?! How could this happen?!”

True to Saloi's word, the miracle Lady Fana had prayed for completely failed to manifest. As the Azure Maiden, Lady Fana was able to receive the blessings of Shtaal without any training; this was the first time one of her intercessions had failed.

“There’s a type of mushroom particularly well-known for its magical properties,” Saloi informed her, now certain of his victory. “Continued consumption of morbowl mushrooms can drastically reduce one’s mana after just five days. However, its foul smell makes it hard to serve in ample portions. It seems my underlings did a fine job.”

“It couldn’t be...”

Shocked, Lord Creyala looked down at the dishes that had been scattered around by Lady Fana. What he had assumed to be novel delicacies filled with spices had actually been a means of making Lady Fana unwittingly consume the mushrooms. Their new chef had been working for Saloi!

“No matter how much Shtaal favors you, without mana, your voice won’t reach the heavens. If Shtaal cannot hear you, they won’t offer you their blessings.”

Saloi threw a talisman as though in offering to a departing soul. The talisman became a magic arrow that fatally pierced Lord Creyala’s heart.

“Father!”

“Fa...na...”

Fana cradled her dying father in her arms.

“I’ll give you time to say your goodbyes. Please, take as much time as you need.” Saloi’s words may have been merciful, but he spoke them with a sneer. Lord Creyala, however, was paying attention only to his beloved daughter.

“I’m sorry, Fana. You’re such a good girl, yet I couldn’t be a good father...”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I never felt that I was without your love and affection!”

However, Lord Creyala could no longer hear her. With the blood pouring from his wound, so went that which sustained his life. The earl would soon pass—far too soon for them to fully say their goodbyes. There was just one more thing he wanted to say to his daughter.

“There is one thing I managed to do for you that I can be proud of,” he said, summoning his remaining strength to pull his daughter closer. As his body rapidly grew colder, he tried to feel his daughter’s warmth. “Believe in Talia. She’ll protect you, no matter the cost.”

With the last breath in his lungs, the earl spoke his final words. He prayed that his daughter wouldn’t give up or abandon hope.

So passed a man who, even until the very end, could not become a true

noble of the empire.

“FATHER!”

Lady Fana’s cry echoed through the dining room where the father and daughter had once shared every morning.



Present day, on the outskirts of Khonkas, the base of Kai Lekius.

Saloi and his giant centipedes confronted Talia, who stood frozen as three sets of pincers closed in on her. Faced with such peril, the divine knight planned to intone the name of her god and defend herself with Rals Vehda.

No matter how badly she had been weakened, she wouldn’t falter. She was resolved to return to Lady Fana and continue to protect her. But the world was composed of something devoid of kindness, something like the grin of an evil god. Reality wasn’t so simple that a strong will alone was enough to let one get their way.

While being once again consumed by the disease, Talia couldn’t even call out to Rals. She couldn’t focus her mana. All that escaped her mouth was coughing and blood. She fell to one knee, her body not only devoid of mana, but also strength.

The three giant centipedes were about to viciously sink their poisonous pincers into Talia, but just before they could, a hot wind blew. In a haze of coughing and blood, Talia was for a moment unable to understand what had happened. The three centipedes had all been knocked back and set aflame. Just as quickly, they reverted to their original forms and were instantly burnt to ashes.

A dignified voice rang out beneath the moonlight.

“Well, that was all too easy!”

The world truly was no kind place, but that wasn’t enough to deter the kind knight Rosa.

Why did she save me? Talia wondered. She tried to ask, but her coughing stopped her. Instead, she asked with a glance, but Rosa looked the other way with a huff.

“It’s not like I was following you because I was worried whether or not you’d be able to make it home in your condition; nor did Jenni become exasperated and tell me I’m too soft; nor was I thrilled when Kai Lekius told me to do as I pleased, so don’t make any strange presumptions!”

So went her roundabout ramblings.

Talia, however, had another impression of Rosa. *Huh, what a straightforward individual she is.*

She briefly wondered why they had to be enemies. Their fates must have been the work of some evil god, and Talia couldn't help but resent them.

Meanwhile, Saloi, who had failed to finish off Talia, seemed quite irritated. "Who are you?" he asked.

"The foremost knight of Kai Lekius, Rosa of House Rindelf."

"And why are *you* coming to Talia's aid? Aren't you two supposed to be enemies?"

"I-It's not like that at all. Of the two enemies that stand before me, you are clearly the greater evil!"

"Oh, please..."

Following Rosa's fervent speech, Saloi's face twisted in rage, so much so that his features were apparent even in the dark of night.

"Very well, then! I cannot permit anyone to spit in the face of the empire, so I'll have to take you down too!"

Saloi drew three talismans and threw them. The talismans became giant centipedes that attacked Rosa and Talia.

Seeing this, Rosa dashed forward. "How trite of you!" she yelled with passion. The flaming blade of Brihne cut once, twice, three times, felling each centipede as she passed. It was now clear to Talia what Rosa was capable of when not hindered by the blessings of Rals. With ease, Rosa closed in on Saloi.

"Damn you!" he cried.

"No you don't!"

Saloi tried to draw more talismans, but Rosa severed his right arm with one fell swoop, proving just how much stronger she was.

"It would appear I won't be getting any further," Saloi said, sounding awfully calm for someone who'd just lost an arm. Normally, one would be screaming and writhing in agony.

Talia soon understood why Saloi had remained so calm: the Saloi before them disappeared in an instant, leaving behind a single talisman lazily drifting to the ground.

So that wasn't the real Saloi traveling with me, she thought. It must have been some sort of familiar or avatar created through conjuration.

"Well, that's a letdown," Rosa said with spite as she ground the talisman underfoot. She returned to Talia's side and asked her, "Why were

you being attacked all of a sudden? Who was that guy?”

Talia loosened her bent posture and steadied her breathing. “His name is Saloi. He’s from the imperial arcane academy.”

“The arcane academy! That would explain the fancy talismans!”

“It was also by his request that I came to Khonkas.”

Talia then gave Rosa a brief explanation of the circumstances.

“Hmm, sounds like you’ve been duped.”

“So it would seem. I’m sure he also has something to do with whatever’s happened to Lady Fana.” The timing was too convenient for any other explanation. “Slaying the vampire was just a pretext. As the Azure Maiden’s personal guard, I was in the way, so Saloi must have schemed to have me separated from Lady Fana.”

Talia clenched her fist in anger and began to cough again. Rosa noticed this and said with clear empathy, “Even if you return, you can’t do anything in your condition.”

Talia couldn’t think of anything to say in response. Rosa was right; the divine knight had been completely helpless in the face of the attack just minutes before. It would be wrong to think she would somehow recover by the time she made it back to the capital. If Saloi had gotten his hands on Lady Fana, Talia would be unable to help her.

“But I can still get help. I can go to Lord Creyala, or the Ralsian temple, or the Shtaalist temple. If it’s to save Lady Fana—the Azure Maiden—there’s sure to be someone who’ll help.”

“You think so? If that guy’s from the arcane academy, then doesn’t that mean he’s acting on orders from the emperor? I’m not sure anyone will want to oppose that.”

Again, Talia briefly found herself at a loss for words. The corrupt order of Shtaal would probably sell out to the empire even if the Azure Maiden’s life was at stake. Lord Creyala, however, would likely defy even the emperor in order to protect his daughter, but he was unreliable and had no retainers who would follow him.

With those options eliminated, all that remained was seeking aid from the order of Rals. However, the Ralsians were lacking in influence and numbers; they would be no match if the Shtaalists and nobility joined forces with Saloi. The situation was overwhelmingly dire.

A heavy silence fell over the dark road. The heat of battle faded, and the oppressive cold of winter crept in. Talia remained crouched down on the ground, unable to muster the strength to stand back up. She would just

have to crawl—but to where? She didn't know. She couldn't see the point. Yet, as though driven forward by instinct, Talia began to crawl through the dirt.

“Hey,” Rosa said, unable to bear the silence and the sight. “There's a way to restore your strength, but it's an absolutely terrible one and not something you want to resort to unless you really, reeeeeeally have no better options.”

Still gripping the dirt, Talia stopped moving. She looked up at Rosa with wide eyes. “Please, tell me more.”

She was fine if it was awful. She was fine with the last resort. She cared not for the consequences if only she could save Lady Fana.



“We've succeeded in quelling the fires.”

“Yes, good work.”

I, Kai Lekius, was speaking with Jenni, who was kneeling before me on the third-floor balcony of the mayoral residence. The fires, likely an act of arson by one of Talia's associates, had all been put out. Even compared to other elves, Jenni was an excellent magician; she had called upon her water fairies and extinguished the fires with no trouble.

While she had been taking care of things, I had had a sofa moved to the balcony and had been savoring a fine spirit while enjoying the view of the flames and the moon. The cold night air was of no bother to a True Blood. That was one of the more elegant things about us.

The hardworking knight, finding any duty to be an honor, did not blame her liege for his indolence. She did, however, seem to want a reward, so I beckoned for her to join me on the couch. By sucking her blood, I would enjoy a taste like no other while she would experience the dizzying pleasure.

“W-Well then, I don't mind if I do,” Jenni said.

“Don't be shy. All good deeds deserve a reward; that's part of my motto. In fact, I don't mind if you ask more from me.”

“I won't stoop to the same levels of shamelessness as Dame Rosa.”

“I see. Well, that sort of discretion is another one of your charming points.”

“You honor me.”

Jenni was maintaining her same stiff register, but she wore an expression radiant with joy. I pulled her slender body close to me,

preparing to sink my fangs into her neck. Resting against my chest, Jenni waited anxiously, her cheeks burning red, but in the end, I was forced to wait—

“There’s something we need to discuss!”

—because Rosa barged in.

“What in blazes is it, Dame Rosa?” Jenni asked in a murderous tone, still resting in my arms. It was clear there would be hell to pay if Rosa had interrupted Jenni’s reward for no good reason.

“I’ve brought a guest. Don’t be surprised when you see who it is,” Rosa said. She then disappeared into the residence and shortly after returned to the balcony. On her back was a knight taller than she was.

“What are you doing, Dame Rosa? That woman plans to take the life of His Majesty.” Jenni’s murderous intent grew stronger, making it clear that Rosa had better have a good explanation for this. “To a degree, I understand why you would help her, but I myself have not forgiven her.”

“Lady Rosa’s not to blame. I asked her to bring me here,” Talia replied, seemingly on the verge of death. She stood uneasily and then knelt before me. “Please, lend an ear to my request.”

“Very well.” I separated myself from Jenni and got into a more comfortable position to listen to the knight. Talia spoke in a courteous tone as one might before the king of a foreign land.

“I would like to request that you lend me your abundant strength so that I might save the lady I serve, Lady Fana Creyala, the Azure Maiden, from an arcanist’s plot.”

“Oh? And what exactly is it that you want me to do?”

“I would request that you spare me a drop of your blood.”

“Bwa ha!” I laughed in spite of myself. I couldn’t help it—how often did I get to hear something so delightful? “A Ralsian Cleric wants to become one of my descendants—a vampire, in other words.”

A corrupt old monk might be one thing, but I don’t think I’d ever heard of a pious disciple asking such a thing.

“I see. With a vampire’s regenerative abilities, you could instantly overcome that disease that’s eating away at you. Then you could return to the Azure Maiden with all possible haste.”

I assumed Rosa or someone else had suggested this to her, but she seemed serious nevertheless.

“Still, I’m afraid I’m quite selective when it comes to choosing my descendants,” I continued. “You see, if too many people were to gain

powers like mine, handling them would become quite an ordeal. Tell me, what do I stand to gain from granting you power? The Azure Maiden is but a stranger to me, so what happens to her is none of my concern. If she were to disappear, then I could resume my invasion of Runalog.”

Lelesha had informed me that even in the current era, magic was monopolized and conferred in secrecy by the imperial arcane academy. Therefore, I had an idea as to what they might want with the Azure Maiden. I did like to think I knew a thing or two about magic, after all. And it just so happened that their plot was somewhat convenient to me.

“Or, Talia, could it be that you would be willing to hand the Azure Maiden over to me after you save her?” I asked jokingly, but I knew she wouldn’t agree to such a deal.

“I am devoted to the protection of Lady Fana,” she said, shaking her head. “If you were to try to take her, I would be obligated to intervene, even if I did become your descendant.”

Jenni seemed rather upset by Talia’s words, but I found myself laughing heartily. Her tone had been flat, but I took that as a sign of her boldness. “Ha ha ha! Biting the hand that fed you! How daring!”

She’s not bad, is she? I thought. I figured there was more to the divine knight’s request; she didn’t strike me as an ingrate. As it turned out, I was right.

“However, I won’t ask that you help me for free,” she said. “As long as Lady Fana lives, I shall remain her knight. But I swear on my honor as a knight that once she passes, I shall devote the remainder of my life in your service.”

“Are you sure about this? The Azure Maiden will live perhaps another thirty or fifty years, but vampires are all but immortal. However long she lives, you will probably last more than ten times that. Doesn’t that seem a high price to pay to protect the Azure Maiden?”

“It does not. I’ve already accepted the consequences.”

“For a cleric, this is the equivalent of selling your soul to a devil.”

“I’ve accepted that as well.”

“Very well, then!” I got up from the sofa and extended my right hand to Talia. “I wholly accept your commitment.”

Channeling magic to the tip of my index finger, I pricked a hole in my skin.

“Look up and open your mouth.”

“I’ll never forget this debt. Even if I live thousands of years, I shall

remember until I draw my last breath.”

Talia lowered her head in reverence before doing as I'd told her. I let a drop of blood fall onto her expectant tongue, and at that moment, my second descendant was born.



I feel so light! Talia thought as she sprinted down the dark road. It was faster for her to run than travel by a horse, and fatigue had become a foreign concept to her, for she had become a Noble vampire!

She felt her new strength all the more strongly because not too long ago her lungs had ached and her body had felt as if it had been made of lead. Now her feet kicked against the ground, propelling her forward. The wind grazed her cheeks as she ran at an unbelievable speed. She felt hot, almost as if she could feel the blood coursing through her body, while her heart pounded like a drum. But most of all she didn't feel as if she would have to stop anytime soon.

It was all so wonderful. She never could have experienced these things as a normal human. Talia had cast aside her human body as a last resort to save Lady Fana, but she couldn't help enjoying herself.

Does that make me a failure as a cleric? she wondered. She felt repentant but didn't stop moving. *Please, Lady Fana, stay safe until I arrive.*

It was a straight road to the provincial capital. Under the cold winter sky, bathed in moonlight, Talia ran with a burning intensity.

By day, Talia lay low in cheap inns while waiting for the sun to pass, and by night, she tore down the deserted streets. The original journey to Khonkas had taken four days, but the return trip had taken her only two.

It was late at night when Talia reached the provincial capital. Anticipating an attack from Saloi, she took caution as she approached the castle, but all that awaited her in her home of six years was silence. There were no servants on night shifts. There were no guards patrolling the grounds. There wasn't a single person in sight. The entrance and halls were completely unlit, which created an oppressive atmosphere. If Talia hadn't been a vampire and therefore able to see in the dark, she might have found herself overwhelmed.

Searching the area, she began to shout. “Lady Fana! Lord Creyala! Anybody?!”

She couldn't worry about what would happen if Saloi found her;

Talia's first priority was to confirm Lady Fana and the others were safe. Making haste, she began checking all the likely spots within the large castle.

Suddenly, she sensed a group of people at the end of the hall. It seemed that they had also heard Talia. Ten fully armored men holding candles came forward.

"I thought that might be you, Dame Talia!" said the figure at the head of the group. Talia was only marginally acquainted with the young man, so it was a moment before she remembered his name.

"Is that you, Sir Camion? What are you doing here?" she asked, running up to him.

Around the same time Talia had been appointed as Lady Fana's guard, Sir Camion, at only eighteen years of age, had been granted knighthood by Lord Creyala. As Talia recalled, he was a discerning and honest individual who had been stationed somewhere along the provincial border.

"Indeed. I recently returned from Fort Mark."

"So you encountered the Army of the Night?"

"Yes, and by the leniency of Kai Lekius, we were able to escape with our lives."

Talia could see in Camion's expression that it was an embarrassing memory for him, but he didn't try to hide it. Three days prior, he had led the soldiers along the provincial roads, allowing many to return home, before arriving at the provincial capital where they had reported to Lord Creyala. They must have just missed Talia as she departed to slay the vampire.

"Then do you know what happened here? Are His Lordship and Lady Fana safe?"

"Well, by order of His Imperial Majesty, House Creyala has been stripped of its title."

"I beg your pardon!" Talia hadn't expected this at all.

"I've been investigating, and though I haven't witnessed anything with my own eyes, I think I can explain," Camion said.

It had all started four days prior. A man named Saloi from the imperial arcane academy had appeared at a feast hosted by Lord Creyala. With him, he had carried a written decree from the emperor himself. Lord Creyala was to be removed from his post as head of Runalog, as he had plotted to overthrow the emperor.

The sudden news had created quite a stir, but no one would be so bold

as to defy the word of the emperor. As per Saloi's orders, all nobles present at the feast had returned to their domains. Furthermore, Saloi had announced that Lord Creyala had already been executed and that any soldiers, knights, and servants who had served him were dismissed from the castle. Then Saloi had taken his leave, taking Lady Fana with him.

The more Talia heard, the more she realized how out of control the situation had become, and she felt panic rise up inside her.

"Personally, I'm not convinced," Camion added. "If His Lordship really had been planning treason, then even the lowliest servants would have been captured and interrogated over what they might know."

Talia nodded in agreement.

Camion continued. "The other authorities in Runalog were also ignorant of such plans, and it's unfeasible that Lady Fana wouldn't have been executed alongside His Lordship. Most importantly, it's unfeasible that someone as harmless as Lord Creyala would plot to do such a thing!"

That was why Camion and the others had embarked on their own investigation while waiting for Talia to return to the castle.

"We quickly pieced together that you'd left the capital on a secret task, and figured this must have been a ploy by Saloi to separate you from Lady Fana. We knew that you'd be wise enough to catch on to this and so decided to wait here for your return."

Camion's reasonable explanation made perfect sense to Talia. In fact, she thought he was the wise one in this situation.

"We've investigated the whereabouts of Lady Fana, but there's not much we can do on our own. Let's rescue her, Dame Talia."

Lord Creyala had made a very smart decision in granting this young man knighthood.



Currently, Saloi was in Mesetmaya, the second largest municipality of the Viscount Fulyun's territory in eastern Runalog. In fact, prior to his first engagement with Earl Creyala, Saloi had first visited Fulyun and secured his cooperation with an imperial mandate.

Mesetmaya was rather well populated and developed for an otherwise unremarkable rural town. In the square, Saloi had ordered construction of an altar for a magic ritual, leaving behind an avatar of himself that had hired workers and directed the project. The ritual would only be carried out once, so the altar had been quickly thrown together and then hidden

from view behind some large curtains. Only soldiers loaned to Saloi by the viscount were permitted to enter the square. Finally, once his preparations were complete, Saloi had abducted Lady Fana.

Lady Fana was now in a deep, deep slumber, enshrined in a glass orb atop the altar. The orb was filled with ether that Saloi had synthesized, so she slept curled up like a child in the womb. Her complexion was pale, and her cheeks were sunken, but this wasn't due to malnutrition. Rather, a lengthy ritual to completely sever her soul from her flesh was being conducted.

Saloi, the ritualist, if you will, had been watching over the progress without stopping to eat or rest. The deepening blue of the ether informed him that the separation was proceeding smoothly; however, the extraction of Lady Fana's soul was only one of the ritual's two objectives. There was another being within the glass orb, or rather, another divinity. A warrior in heavy armor lovingly cradled Lady Fana in his arms. It was a soul fragment of Al Shion's.

In Saloi's right hand was a holy relic: Al Shion's eighth thoracic vertebra. By drawing upon the relic's mana, Saloi could conduct a ritual involving a god—something normally impossible for a human being.

The extracted portion of the soul of the Azure Maiden was merging with the soul of Al Shion. The goal was to fuse their souls completely and thereby manifest an even stronger Eternal Champion.

By this point, half of Lady Fana's soul had been extracted and seamlessly conjoined with that of Al Shion. This meant that Saloi could cut off Lady Fana's breathing and cut short the ritual, and still see a fine increase in Al Shion's divine might. Even so, after so much planning and preparation, Saloi wanted to fuse the entirety of the Azure Maiden's soul and bring about the Eternal Champion's full potential. Saloi couldn't bear the thought of being defeated by Kai Lekius because he had been half-hearted in his efforts. He was no fool, nor was it at all in his nature to rush things.

"Hmm, I imagine this should only take another couple of days," he said to himself.

Once her soul was fully extracted, Lady Fana would die.

Saloi nonetheless began counting down the days and then smiled with satisfaction.

The sun sank beneath the mountains to the west. It was the third night

to fall since Saloi had arrived in Mesetmaya. The soldiers who had been patrolling outside the square passed under the curtain and began to light bonfires.

The captain of the guard approached Saloi. “Hey, boss, should I perhaps bring you some dinner?” the captain asked, hoping to curry favor with the arcanist.

“That’s quite all right. Didn’t I already tell you? Until the ritual is complete, I don’t plan on eating or sleeping.”

“But, boss, that can’t be good for you.”

“Oh, leave me be. If you want me to put in a good word to the viscount on your behalf, I require your unquestioning obedience, not your unnecessary concern.”

Hunger and drowsiness were nothing to Saloi. Not even the frigid night wind bothered him.

“Yes, boss.”

The strong yet simpleminded captain left with dissatisfaction. He wore an expression one would never see on the face of someone more suave.

If possible, I’d like to never see a face like that again, Saloi thought as heaved a sigh. But once more that night, Saloi found himself looking upon the captain’s visage.

“What is it now?” he asked the soldiers before him.

“Fires, and they’re starting all over town,” the captain said through heavy breaths. There was panic in his voice.

Saloi briefly remained silent. He had a bad feeling about this. The scenario closely resembled the diversionary tactic his avatar had employed in Khonkas.

“Put them out immediately. Mobilize the civilians as well,” he ordered.

“Yes, boss.”

“But make sure the town square stays guarded. I have a feeling some scoundrels will take advantage of the commotion and try to sneak in.”

“Understood.”

The soldiers must have sensed the danger in the air, for they swiftly obeyed Saloi without question. Bad feelings are often warranted. Setting diversionary fires was a standard tactic and not at all uncommon, but he couldn’t help but feel these fires were being set with a vengeance.

His intuition proved correct.

From just outside of the town square came a series of soldiers’ screams. Despite this, he didn’t hear any sounds of struggle. The attacker was

clearly quite skilled.

Saloi clicked his tongue and looked in the direction of the screams. From under the curtain the assailant emerged. Just as he'd suspected, there was only one assailant, and it was the very person he had expected.

Even when her eyes were wide with vigor, her elegant face maintained its demure impression. In her right hand was a mace and in her left hand was a greatshield. She stood tall and wore imposing armor. Skilled with both weapons and intercessions, she was unmatched by any other divine knights in Runalog.

"I didn't expect you to find me so quickly, Dame Talia," Saloi said with a shrug.

"There are many loyal to Lord Creyala," Talia answered as she approached the arcanist.

I wasn't under the impression that Lord Creyala was especially popular or endowed with competent retainers, Saloi thought. But it was most likely retainers of House Creyala who were setting the fires. They were creating a diversion so Talia could sneak in on her own—which was the exact same tactic Saloi had employed in Khonkas. The irony of the situation was not lost on him.

"Hand over Lady Fana!" Talia demanded.

Saloi recalled that when she had fought his avatar outside Khonkas, she had been terribly weakened. Perhaps she had already recovered. He looked at Talia closely, and that's when he noticed.

"That air of blasphemy..." he said. "Have you, an honorable divine knight of the order of Rals, become a vampire? Even if it was in the name of saving Lady Fana, you have sold your soul to Kai Lekius!"

What desperation! What hilarity! Saloi thought, unable to keep a smirk off his face.

Unperturbed by Saloi, Talia took a step closer. "If I have such a thing as pride, it will come from protecting Lady Fana."

The two were roughly one hundred meters apart.

With his left hand, Saloi drew two talismans. *She may have become a descendant of Kai Lekius, but he isn't at her side. Things would be different if he were here, but I think I'll be fine if it's just you, Talia.* With his right hand, Saloi still gripped the holy relic. He drew upon its abundant mana, channeled it into the talismans, and then threw them at Talia.

The talismans seemed to transform midair as they called forth Ifrit, king of flames, and Hraesvelger, the king of the tempestuous realm. They

separated so as to strike at Talia with a pincerlike maneuver. Talia recited a passage known as Kalagria On Rals.

“O Rals, righteous god of lightning, here stands your enemy. Thus, I pray for your thunderous punishment and pardonance of my insufficiency.”

“Oh, so even after stooping to the level of a vampire, you can still receive the blessings of Rals?”

Saloi found it hard to believe, but Talia was enacting a miracle. The god’s lightning crackled around Talia and her armaments, but the bolts were an unholy black and burned her skin.

“What a peculiar sight! Between you and the Azure Maiden, I’m surrounded by the blessed!” Saloi said, his face twisting into a grin. He was quite pleased that he had witnessed something so satisfying to his intellectual curiosity.

Indeed, Saloi thought himself in a position worth smiling over. Under normal circumstances, he stood no chance at besting Talia in a head-on match. Though he was a properly trained magician and an elite of the imperial arcane academy, his talents leaned towards intelligence gathering. This is why he had plotted to keep Talia so far away from him and his plans. But now, Saloi held a holy relic of Al Shion, and the deity’s soul was beside him.

Saloi harbored a form of fanaticism for the Vastalask Empire. He revered the grand state that had ruled the continent for three hundred years. It was a sort of faith, or so to speak.

Just as Talia was able to receive the blessings of Rals, Saloi could borrow the mana of Al Shion via the relic. With such extraordinary mana and two talismans, Saloi had summoned Ifrit and Hraesvelger by simultaneously casting two eighth-rung spells.

“Even the strongest divine knight in Runalog should be no match for this!”

Saloi was certain of his victory. However...

“Hear me, Rals!”

As Talia intoned the name of her god, and jet-black bolts of lightning, a variant of Rals Vehda, shot from her. The lightning caused the summoned beings to falter, and Talia’s mace slammed into the side of Ifrit’s head. With a body of flames, Ifrit should have been immune to physical attacks, but the cursed mace sent the summoned being flying back.

Saloi froze with fear, his grin stuck to his face. “How...”

Completely defying his expectations, Talia dispatched the other summoned being with ease. With each violent swing of her mace, bolts of black lightning struck out. The scorching flames of Ifrit and the fierce winds of Hraesvelger were both deflected in their entirety by Talia's greatshield.

It was a natural result; after all, Talia was now a Noble vampire. She was far stronger than any normal human being and even Kalagria On Rals was far more effective when cast in her new form. However, as a creature of the night, Talia responded negatively to the blessings of a god. As long as she continued to receive the aid of Rals, her body would keep being scorched.

The intense pain Talia was facing was enough to make a grown man cry out, but the divine knight endured it. In fact, she was quite relieved that she wasn't receiving a greater punishment for her betrayal of Rals. She had sold her soul to Kai Lekius, but that didn't change that she was a cleric at heart. Virtuosity is not something easily lost.

Be it from her resolution or her sheer devotion, the sight sent a shiver down Saloi's spine. That sight was enough to overwhelm a man whose only reverence had been born of a dependency on the might of his empire. He continued to watch as Talia's mace crushed Ifrit and as Hraesvelger was incinerated.



“Do you have any more cheap tricks?” Talia asked, her ire now focused on Saloi. Though he still had plenty of offensive talismans, he had already used his most powerful. He had thought summoning Ifrit and Hraesvelger would have meant certain victory. Since Talia had dealt with those two with ease, he could no longer do anything that amounted to more than buying time.

Well, this isn't good.

Saloi hesitated. He still held the relic in his right hand. If he were to end Lady Fana's life and prematurely finish the ritual, he could awaken the Eternal Champion. Talia certainly couldn't defeat the guardian deity.

But was that really a wise decision? He couldn't help but wonder. It was quite possible that doing so would result in the summoning of a guardian deity not powerful enough to defeat Kai Lekius. Talia was merely an obstacle on the path to his final goal; to throw the plan into disarray in order to defeat her would be putting the cart before the horse.

Bogged down by uncertainty, Saloi was unable to make a decision. He only deliberated for a few seconds, but that hesitation proved to be fatal.

“O Rals, lend unto me your hammer of judgment. Come forth and manifest justice.”

Finishing her recitation, Talia charged, her mace now brimming with powerful lightning. Still far from her target, she fired a shot at Saloi. A bolt of black lightning streaked through the air, heading straight for his right arm. The extraordinary blast ripped the arm clean off, depriving him of both the appendage and the relic in its grip.

“Damn it!”

Saloi looked back, but it was too late—he had already lost his control over the ritual. Inside the glass orb, a dramatic change was occurring: the blue ether was becoming noticeably transparent. This was evidence that Lady Fana's soul was rapidly returning to her flesh.

“How ridiculous,” Saloi muttered, stunned by the sight. He had spent two whole days extracting her soul; it made no sense that it wasn't taking the same amount of time for the soul to return.

A series of cracks shot through in the glass, and suddenly, the orb shattered. A wave of transparent ether overflowed from the inside.

“What in the world is happening?!” Saloi cried. It was more of an exclamation than a question, but, as though answering him, the eyes of Al Shion lit up from beneath his helmet. Gallantly holding the sleeping lady in his arms, the Eternal Champion rose to its feet and cast Saloi a piercing

glare.

“Eek!”

So this was the will of a god! Saloi couldn't help but fall to his knees in the face of such might. However, after only a glance, Al Shion lost interest in Saloi and instead turned to face Talia.

“Stop! Please stop! Stop, I beg you!” Saloi pleaded, but his efforts were to no avail. Al Shion walked up to Talia, and for a moment, a glance was exchanged between god and vampire. Then, as though handing off fragile goods, Al Shion carefully entrusted the Azure Maiden to Talia.

The divine knight dropped her mace and shield and gently accepted Lady Fana into her arms. “Lady Fana, I'm so glad you're all right.”

With an expression displaying a vast array of emotions, she rubbed her cheek against the little lady's.

Witnessing the exchange, Saloi became increasingly bewildered. “Preposterous, unbelievable...”

He understood that since he had lost the holy relic, the guardian deity would move of its own accord. However, it should have taken the extracted portion of Lady Fana's soul and fused with it. Fettered by rites, Al Shion had been deprived of his humanity and become a divinity who only fought for the empire. There was no way he would have let an opportunity to strengthen himself slip.

In reality, however, the guardian deity had done the opposite and used its own power to return the girl's soul. There was no other possible explanation for how rapidly Lady Fana's soul had returned to its flesh. Not only that, but the guardian deity had entrusted Lady Fana to Talia, an enemy of the empire.

“Ugh, damn it, damn it, damn it. The plan's gone to hell!” Saloi grumbled, as he rushed to at least recover the holy relic.

Talia, meanwhile, looked to the sky and began to shout. “We have succeeded in thwarting the ritual! Lady Fana has been secured!”

Just who in the world might she be calling to? Saloi wondered. He immediately received his answer. Just as Saloi retrieved the holy relic with his left hand, he heard it, loud and thundering.

Bwa ha ha...

Mwa ha ha ha.

Mwa ha ha ha ha ha ha!

As the laughter continued, a black mass erupted from Talia's moonlit shadow. Bats. A swarm of innumerable bats. They converged and seemed

to meld together as they formed a single silhouette. Responding to their descendant's call, a True Blood had transcended space and appeared at their side.

It was Kai Lekius.



“You seemed surprised when Al returned the Azure Maiden,” I, Kai Lekius, said, lecturing Saloi or whatever his name was. “Is it really beyond you? You modern-day magicians style yourselves as such, but you really don't amount to much, do you? Al loved the Azure Maiden from the bottom of his heart. Regardless of any of the filthy rites you've used to fetter him, it would have been his wish—my *brother's* wish—that the Azure Maiden go on without him.”

In truth, this was more of a scolding than a lecture.

“You called Al Shion your brother,” Saloi murmured with a peculiar expression on his face. “Then you *are* the true ruler, the first monarch of Vastalask.”

“Indeed,” I said with a nod. It seemed Saloi knew a little bit of history. “I am Kai Lekius, reborn three hundred years later as a True Blood.”

A sardonic smile formed on his lips. “Well then, it seems those three hundred years made you a kind fellow. You were once feared as the merciless ‘Sanguinary King’ and the ‘Wicked King.’ I find it quite difficult to understand how you might let your emotions get the better of you and offer your aid in the rescue of the Azure Maiden,” he said mockingly.

“Now, now, since the day I was born, I've not once been in short supply of mercy or benevolence. If that's not recorded in the history books, then it's no doubt because that buffoon of an emperor grew jealous of me and twisted some historian's writing arm.”

To be fair, Saloi wasn't entirely off the mark. It was true that I had once been called those things, and I could be merciless at times. However, it wasn't necessarily my enemies that I showed no mercy to, but rather people that I didn't care for—people, for instance, like Saloi!

“Just as with Countess Nastalia, I spare no forgiveness for those who desecrate the soul of my brother.”

“I should be the one talking about forgiveness. I can't permit your continued existence if you've chosen to rebel against the empire.” Saloi gripped the relic in his left hand and began an incantation. “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!”

They were the words of a rite meant to fetter my dear brother’s soul for all of eternity. Just hearing them was enough to irritate me. The hollow shell of Al immediately looked my way, now recognizing me as an foe. From behind his helmet, his eyes glowed brightly.

“Stay back, Talia. I don’t need any help. Protect the one dear to you.”

My warning made little difference, for Al was completely focused on me, the enemy of the empire. Without offering so much as another glance to Talia and the Azure Maiden, Al came at me.

Clad in the divine armor, Velsarius, he drew the holy blade Kainis from the scabbard at his hip. Both were masterpieces I had forged for him three hundred years prior. To add to that was the swordsmanship of a man who had once been lauded as the strongest warrior in an era of conflict.

I may have acquired the powers of a True Blood, but I was still only a magician; it wouldn’t be easy for me to fight him up close. Back in Arkus, when Nastalia had summoned Al, I’d had quite a tough time fending him off, but I wasn’t a man who fell for the same trick twice.

Unlike in Arkus, when I had been without any prior knowledge, I had come prepared this time. I drew a talisman and threw it at Al.

Unlike other forms of invocation, talismans had to be prepared in advance, but preprepared talismans allowed for elaborate spells to be cast in an instant. For this specific talisman, I had imbued upon it a spell from the tenth rung of the summoning branch of magic. From the faraway Abyssal Palace, an enormous military golem was transferred. With all six of its arms, the golem impeded Al’s advance.

The golem before us was seven meters tall and made entirely of orichalcum. Such a creation was so extravagant, even as a ruler of a continent, I had only been able to create one. Its silhouette was both like and unlike that of a human, for it had six arms and no head. Its claws were sharper than even the finest sword, and its fists could hit with a force surpassing battering rams.

This golem was God of Warfare, one of the twelve magic gods. I had crafted it to excel in melee combat and to be my stalwart barricade so that I could focus on my magic. That was why it was relatively small compared to God of Flame and God of Wind, who both stood at fifteen meters tall. In addition, where you would usually expect to find a neck and head was a

seat. Sitting atop the golem and looking the very image of the king of all that was unholy, I spoke to the Eternal Champion.

“Now then, dregs of Al, are you prepared to fight your own shadow?”

God of Warfare roared and charged at Al. Using all six of its arms, it slashed with its claws and swung its fists like a raging tempest. Anyone less skilled than Al would have been unable to evade the attacks and immediately bled. However, Kainis, being a righteous weapon that could cut through mana itself, proved to be a thorn in my side.

The holy blade neutralized any magic defenses with which God of Warfare had been fortified. However, no metal in the world was stronger than orichalcum—the material that this golem was composed of. By taking Al’s hits at an angle (rather than head-on) and deflecting them, God of Warfare managed to overcome Al’s terrific strikes.

This golem had brawn but wasn’t lacking in brains; it boasted a fine understanding of martial arts. During its development, I had frequently had the golem engage in mock battles with Al to learn his techniques. This is what I’d meant when I had asked Al if he was ready to fight his own shadow.

“Now, the real Al could learn his opponent’s habits and act upon that knowledge even in the midst of battle!”

But this Eternal Champion wasn’t the real Al. It was a fixed being frozen in time for all eternity, no longer capable of growth. I wouldn’t call it a forgery, but when comparing it to the real Al, “dregs” felt a very appropriate word.

Saloi failed to understand, analyze, or surmise the situation and trembled as though in the grips of a nightmare. “Why...? Why can’t Al Shion handle something as simple as a golem?”

I roared with laughter as God of Warfare slammed a fist into Al as though trying to further dishearten Saloi. With a single swing from its trunk-like arm, the Eternal Champion was blown backwards like a scrap of paper. Velsarius hindered anything fundamentally intended to harm its wearer, so I imagine Al remained unscathed, but the blow created a gap in time in which *we* were able to prepare a spell.

“*Connect.*”

As I incanted the key word, a spiritual line connected my mana to God of Warfare. Stored within the heart of the golem was the vast mana of Aslauda, the god I had slain three hundred years ago. What was normally the source of locomotion for a massive body of orichalcum was now

serving as an external pool of mana. By combining the mana of man and machine, I prepared a spell of grand proportions.

“When, when, when does it burn bright? My dominion spreads like wildfire, unstoppable and unmatched.”

I performed an incantation in tandem with a mudra. A complex arrangement of fingers finished the spell. However, it wasn't just *my* fingers—God of Warfare used all six of their arms to form a complex seal impossible for a human being. Anything less would have been insufficient to perform a spell of the nineteenth rung.

This was Dinastabrasla, an erudition of the four greater branches of magic.

Once the golem finished its seal, an intense beam of light shot out from the tip of its six arms. The enormous spear of luminescence engulfed Al and continued on to pierce both Saloi and the altar. The winter air around us heated up, becoming as hot as that of a midsummer's day. All that remained was a steaming trail that had been gouged out of the ground, extending all the way to the edge of the town square.

Living up to its reputation, Velsarius had allowed Al to endure the attack, though he was worse for wear. Even so, Saloi and the holy relic in his hand had been obliterated, which had been my goal all along.

Al's soul, having lost its anchor to the material realm, returned to the realm of spirits without requiring any further action on my part. He faded away in a bubble of light. Unlike back in Arkus, there was no need for me to use any sort of deicidal magic.

The solution had been efficient, just as I liked it.

Indeed, efficiency is preferable. It hurts, you see. I understand that that thing isn't the real Al, but that doesn't mean I want to keep killing him.



With a gentle look in her eyes, Talia watched over Lady Fana as she slept soundly in her bed. The mayoral residence of Mesetmaya had been seized, and she had brought the young lady to the parlor.

The town mayor and the soldiers of Viscount Fulyun had surrendered the moment Saloi had been defeated. The young knight Camion and his men had taken it upon themselves to see to the prisoners, put out the fires, and take care of any other postbattle matters. This allowed Talia to focus all of her attention on Lady Fana.

Between that and him leading her to the altar, Talia couldn't thank Camion enough. She also once again thanked Rals that Lady Fana was okay and prayed that the little lady's health would recover smoothly from her poor nourishment.

For a vampire, praying to a god was accompanied by no small amount of pain, but Talia was determined to help Lady Fana. Even so, her efforts seemed to pay off, for Lady Fana soon opened her eyes.

"Where am I?" she asked, confused by the sight of the unfamiliar ceiling.

"It's quite a tale, so I'll tell you in detail another time. For now, please rest," Talia said in an easy tone as she pulled the blanket back over the lady's shoulders.

"If you say so. I know I'm safe if you're by my side, Talia."

Lady Fana nodded obediently and once again closed her eyes. Talia's heart ached when she considered what must be going through the girl's mind. She saw small tears welling up at the corners of Lady Fana's closed eyes. The young lady had just lost her kind father, Lord Creyala, at the hands of the cruel Saloi. To hear that she felt safe at her side weighed heavily on Talia. She swore to forevermore stay at her lady's side and support her.

Together, the two of them offered up a silent prayer for Lord Creyala. Talia couldn't be sure how long they maintained their silence, but Lady Fana was the first to break it.

"You know, Talia, until you came to save me, I was dreaming the whole time. I saw someone I loved long ago."

Talia remembered the sight of the armored warrior holding Lady Fana in his arms. "I have no doubt that was because the divine Al Shion was protecting you."

"You knew that was Al Shion?"

"I did. Now, don't be surprised, but I've learned a few things from Kai Lekius."

"Did you just say Kai Lekius?!"

Lady Fana's eyes burst wide open while she lay in her bed. Perhaps Talia had been asking too much when she had said not to be surprised. She admitted it was a fairly shocking statement as she began her explanation.

Her tale began right after she had received the blood of Kai Lekius and transformed into a vampire. On the balcony of the mayoral residence of

Khonkas, Talia knelt before the True Blood who sat upon a sofa. Talia stood up and confirmed that her body was free of its ailments and its vigor restored.

“Now then, I must be going so that I may save Lady Fana,” she said.

She had more than enough strength in her to rush to the aid of the Azure Maiden, and she planned to settle matters herself. She didn’t think she should ask anything more of Kai Lekius, for he considered Lady Fana to be a stranger.

However, as she left, a gleeful voice called out to her.

“Just one moment, young lady. As the saying goes: ‘haste makes waste.’”

Talia turned around to see the blue-haired beauty standing behind her. She hadn’t been there before.

“You may have heard my lord refer to the Azure Maiden as a stranger, but that couldn’t be further from the truth. After all, his dear brother had once been wed to the daughter of Shtaal. Though it was the Azure Maiden of a few generations prior, they share a soul, do they not?”

“It’s poor etiquette to eavesdrop, Lelesha,” Kai Lekius said with a sullen face.

“And you, my lord, can be too stubborn for your own good,” Lelesha said, boldly offering her opinion on the matter. “The truth is that you’re actually worried for the Azure Maiden, is it not? Why not cooperate with Dame Talia in a more direct manner?”

Kai Lekius shook his head, seemingly to admit defeat. “As much as I’d like to, it won’t do for me to personally be at the Azure Maiden’s side.”

And so the vampire began to explain why. Being the founder of magic, Kai Lekius had already surmised what Saloi was planning. He had realized that Saloi would entirely rely on the Eternal Champion and would use the soul of the Azure Maiden to ensure his victory.

“It will take time for him to extract the entirety of the Azure Maiden’s soul. Talia, if you were to leave now, you would more likely than not make it in time to save her. If I were to go, then Saloi would respond like a cornered animal and cut the ritual short in order to awaken Al. If that were to happen, there would be no saving the Azure Maiden.”

Therefore, Talia would be on her own until Lady Fana was rescued. Of course, rescuing Lady Fana herself had been Talia’s plan from the start, so she had no objections. But there was one thing she had to be sure of.

“You said that I can make it in time?”

“Not even I know everything, so I’ll make no guarantees,” the vampire said. “But I’ll tell you my thoughts. In winning over the Azure Maiden of his time, Al brushed aside my own warnings and cut through a mountain’s worth of obstacles. His love for her was genuine. If Saloi tries to fuse the Azure Maiden’s soul with Al’s, Al will do everything he can to prevent it.”

This supposition would later prove accurate.

Furthermore, he made a recommendation.

“In fact, if a small bit of his soul fuses with the Azure Maiden’s, her soul will become a tad sturdier. That may very well cure the affliction she’s been shouldering for you.”

Talia finished her tale.

“I certainly feel as though I’ve regained some of my old strength,” said Lady Fana as she stared at the palms of her hands. “And my cough seems to have disappeared.” She placed a hand on her chest and flashed a mischievous smile. “In fact, I think I want to run around outside, just like I used to.”

With tears in her eyes, Talia nodded repeatedly. “Yes, yes, you’re right. Horse riding, ballroom dancing... You’ll be able to partake in all the joys you once had to give up on.”

“And will you accompany me?”

“But of course.”

“Will you be my dance partner too? You’d have to learn all the steps.”

“Pardon? That’s...” Talia’s voice trailed off. “Well, if I must. I’ll put this tall frame of mine to use.”

If the alternative was entrusting Lady Fana with one of those good-for-nothing noble hooligans, then it would be far better for her to be the lady’s dance partner.

“While you’re at it, will you also do me the honor of becoming my husband?”

“I’m afraid I must protest that!”

“But with father gone, it’s imperative that I find a husband who might take ownership of House Creyala.”

Under imperial law, it was perfectly acceptable for women to succeed ownership of a house, but Lady Fana was aware she lacked political finesse and had calmly come to the conclusion that a partner would be necessary.

“I understand how you may feel, but please don’t rush the matter. I

know you had your heart set on Al Shion, and I don't want you to force yourself into any engagements.”

Lady Fana began to think. “Hmm. Perhaps when the time comes, I should just offer up Runalog to Kai Lekius.”

Talia found the idea unprecedented but also practical. After Saloi had done such terrible things by order of the emperor, it would be impossible for them to maintain their loyalty to the imperial throne. At least, it would be for Talia.

“Strike while the iron's hot, Talia. Now, will you arrange for me to meet with Kai Lekius?”

“As you wish. I'll inform him of your waking as well as your request.”

As Talia recalled, Kai Lekius would still be lounging about in one of the nearby living rooms. She gave a bow and hurried off to find him.

“Wait! Um, about what we just said, you were mistaken on one point, Talia.”

“Oh, and what point would that be?”

“It would be incorrect to say I've got my heart set on Al Shion.”

Talia was caught entirely off guard by those unexpected words.

Then who was she talking about when she spoke of a beloved person from a previous life? What drove her to find marriage so distasteful? Talia's brain was already failing to keep up, and then she was hit by another bombshell.

“Therefore, when we hand over Runalog Province, I, too, would like to ask a favor of Kai Lekius. Would you support me on that point? And do be casual about it.”

“Excuse me?!”

Talia was befuddled. Just what had happened to the young lady? Could this be a result of her strengthened soul? *Is it just my imagination, or is she suddenly acting like a more experienced woman than me?* Talia wondered, though she didn't want to believe it.

The sound of logs crackling in the fireplace echoed throughout the room.

After Talia had gone, Lady Fana quietly rested in her bed and awaited *his* visit. She was awaiting the man she had met with so many times in her dreams. Other memories of her previous lives were vague, but she distinctly remembered *him*.

He had been the prince of a neighboring county, and when she had first

met him, she had been known as “Princess Anna,” age fourteen. It had been love at first sight. Even now, her love hadn’t cooled or faded one bit.

However, there had been too many obstacles between them, and in the end, she had failed to win his affections. After all, she had borne the indignity of him making it abundantly clear that he had not a speck of interest in her.

“Back then, I was unable to make him look my way. Ultimately, he’s not someone you can keep all to yourself. I’m sure if I had simply leaped into his arms and offered him my love, he would have changed his mind. After all, it worked for that magic doll.”

Thus, in this life, she would have her way.

Lady Fana found her train of thought interrupted by Talia knocking on the door. When she called for her to come in, the knight entered, still wearing a perplexed expression. After her came the man on Lady Fana’s mind.

Oh, I can remember so clearly now, she thought.

He had the same boyish visage as that of when they had first met. However, she had also quite liked the rugged appearance he had developed later on; that was the face she had drawn and decorated her room with. Even so, she found it wonderful that he looked the same as he had the day they’d met.

As she thought, he came up to the side of her bed and looked at her scrutinizingly.

“How mysterious,” he said with fascination. “I knew you had the same soul as Princess Anna, but to think that your facial features, your hair color, even your eye color would be the same. I suppose I can no longer harbor any doubts about the legends of the reincarnating Azure Maiden.”

He stared her down without reservation, but Lady Fana didn’t find it discomforting. Previously, Kai Lekius had never shown such interest in Princess Anna. This gave her hope that things might be different this time, which meant they would first have to start over as strangers.

“Please, accept my apologies. I’ve reincarnated, so my memories are terribly sparse and vague,” she said, fibbing as she sat up in bed. Lady Fana put on a smile and greeted the man before her. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Kai Lekius. I’m Lady Fana, daughter of the late Earl Creyala.”

“Ah, that’s right. It doesn’t feel like a first meeting for me, but I suppose I’m being rude. My name’s Kai Lekius. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“I’ve heard so much about you from Talia. Words can’t describe how thankful I am for your assistance in protecting me from the plots of the imperial arcane academy.”

“I didn’t do anything of note; it was Talia who did all the heavy lifting.”

“Hee hee, I suppose so. I was just joking with Talia that I would have certainly fallen for her had she been a gentleman.”

Lady Fana let out another small giggle while paying no mind to Talia, whose face was yet to lose its look of bewilderment. Once her laughter had subsided, the lady looked directly into Kai Lekius’s eyes.

“No matter how you put it, you did play a role in saving me from dire straits.”

With one big leap, Lady Fana dived forward and wrapped her arms around him tightly. She was no longer a woman who was letting herself be indulged by her brother-in-law. Now, she was a girl in love.



Epilogue

It was around mid-November when news of the death of Earl Creyala began to circulate throughout Runalog Province. A week after that, four more pieces of unexpected news made themselves known.

The first: it was officially declared that Lord Creyala's death had been the product of a plot by the imperial arcane academy and the imperial throne.

The second: Lady Fana announced that she would not take a husband and that she herself would succeed her father's position.

The third: Lady Fana proclaimed that Runalog Province would henceforth secede from the empire.

The fourth: Runalog Province would instead ally itself with the Army of the Night and become part of the same region as and share a military with Arkus Province. For this, she requested the understanding and cooperation of the other noble houses of Runalog.

Needless to say, these tidings traveled to the city of Beit and soon reached the ears of Viscount Howen. The young lord, a cousin of Lady Fana, had taken the title just last year and was prone to both foolishness and cruelty.

"She must be joking. This is ridiculous!" he shrieked after hearing the news from an old retainer. "She's gonna get us all killed by opposing the empire! Any day now, thousands, maybe millions, of soldiers are gonna come and turn Runalog into rubble. I always thought she was an idiot, but now my cousin's done something unbelievable!"

The viscount was a self-obsessed man who didn't fear the gods, but not even he had once thought of opposing the empire.

"Yes, Your Lordship, but it would seem the people of Runalog are all in favor of the Azure Maiden's decision..."

"Who cares about the opinions of a bunch of rabble who can't tell their faith from reality? What are the other noble houses saying?!"

"Well, from my investigations, I would conclude that a majority fear the religious influence of the Azure Maiden and are visiting the provincial capital so as to swear their loyalty."

"Idiots, every single one of them!"

The viscount vented his anger by kicking at the nearby maids. After having his fill of abusing the prostrated women begging for mercy, the viscount spoke again, his shoulders heaving.

“I’m not going to cast my lot with those lunatics, and I’m sure it’s not just me. We’ll unite everyone who agrees, coordinate an attack on Lady Fana, and bring her head to the emperor as proof of our loyalty. It’s the only way for Runalog to survive!”

The viscount had just been running his mouth, but he soon began to consider that he was actually on to something. Lady Fana was Earl Creyala’s only heir. Who was to become ruler of Runalog if she were to pass away? Through years of political marriages, the various houses of Runalog had all developed some relation to House Creyala. However, Lord Howen was certain he would have a good claim as head, for his mother was the younger sister of the late Lord Creyala.

Therefore, if he eliminated Lady Fana, no one would be likely to complain if he took rulership of the province. He had no doubt that the imperial throne would recognize his claim.

“All right, issue a proclamation! Let it be known that anyone dissatisfied with Lady Fana should come to me! I’ll take it upon myself to ensure that we finish Lady Fana and her fellow traitors, and return Runalog to its proper course!”

These grand remarks did a fine job improving the viscount’s mood. In his mind’s eye, he could already envision the bright future that lay before him. It delighted him to imagine everyone in Runalog, commoners and nobles alike, bowing to him and licking his boots.

“So how did it come to this?!” Lord Howen screamed, red in the face. His voice echoed in vain through the eerily quiet chamber. The many retainers, soldiers, maids, and other servants who had served his family over multiple generations were nowhere to be found. They had fled like rats escaping a sinking ship.

Because no one was around to watch the fires, the cold of winter had taken hold of the castle. Meanwhile, outside, the citizens of Beit had grown violent and were forcing their way inside. Beneath the moonlight, they held torches and threw them at the castle in attempts to start a fire. The once placid people had risen up in the name of the Azure Maiden. Lord Howen was sure she’d done something to incite this.

The end of November was approaching. One week had passed since the

viscount had made his call to arms and declared war on Lady Fana.

“Somebody...! Somebody explain to me what’s happening!”

An old retainer showed his face upon hearing the cries of his lord. This man, who had so long served House Howen, was now the only other person left in the castle. With a look of acceptance on his face, he answered the viscount’s question.

“I did everything in my limited capacity, but it seems I was not up to the task. Lady Fana carries enormous influence. Nevertheless, this is where we’ve ended up. We were hasty in our attempts to rally support, much more so in slaying Lady Fana. We should have allied ourselves with the imperial throne and requested aid before declaring war on the Azure Maiden.”

“Then say so from the start! Why did you stay quiet?! Do I need to tell you what your duties are as one of my retainers?!”

The old man didn’t respond. Lord Howen lambasted him, but he simply wore a look of resignation and remained silent.

Why had this man kept his words to himself? Only Lord Howen was oblivious to the reason. Just recently, when faced with the possibility of an invasion by the Army of the Night, a group of knights had made the incredibly reasonable suggestion that they abandon Beit, retreat, and request reinforcements from other houses. The viscount had called those knights cowards and had them put to death. Even the families of these knights had been punished; the tyrannical viscount had forced their daughters to fight to the death in the nude. If the old retainer had suggested that they rely on the empire rather than suddenly go on the offensive, Lord Howen would have certainly ignored the idea and had him punished too. If that had happened, then who would have drafted the calls to arms and negotiated with the other houses? His only thread of hope had been that they might find themselves with allies, and in the end, he had lost even that.

The foolish young viscount became enraged and kicked the old retainer. “You useless old clod!”

The retainer made no attempt to evade the kicks and simply let it happen. He had long ago come to terms with the idea that he would serve House Howen until the very end; at this point, he cared not if he was abused like this.

Now, the old retainer’s acceptance of reality was not something to be spoken of in glorious terms. Per the nobility system, authority was decided

by birthright with no consideration given to competence, and the people were brainwashed into thinking there was beauty in obeying even a tyrant. This scene was simply a microcosm of that greater injustice, but there was one man who rejected and scorned the system.

“Very good, very good. Grinding you to dust wouldn’t be satisfying if you were any different. You’ll make a fine example.”

The sudden voice drew the viscount’s attention away from the old man.

“Wh-Who’s there?! Quit hiding and come out!”

“I’m doing nothing of the sort. It’s no fault of mine if you can’t find me.”

The sound of footsteps began to accompany the scornful laughter. The bold footfalls grew closer, and there, under the moonlight streaming in through the window, stood the shimmering figure of an audacious young man.

“Who the heck are you?!”

“Kai Lekius,” he said as though introductions were beneath him. As he spoke, he curled his lips into a grin, and two fangs peeked out.

“A vampire?!”

Even Lord Howen could piece together that this was the Army of the Night’s leader, the one who had deceived Lady Fana.

“Someone, bring me a sword! I’ll exterminate this fool myself for sauntering into my castle!”

“So I’m the fool here? Let me enlighten you on two points.”

“Huh?!”

The viscount, who had never even been scolded by his parents, trembled with anger at being insulted by a vampire.

“Point one: there is no longer anyone in this castle who might bring you a sword. I take it nobody needs to point out that the viscount’s new clothes aren’t there at all?”

“S-Silence! Siiilence!”

“Point two: not even I am so prone to whimsy as to cross swords with you. Now, turn around. Your opponent’s waiting behind you.”

With a sneer, the vampire lazily pointed towards the space behind the viscount. Lord Howen’s first reaction was to assume it was a feint, but that was incorrect; he heard footsteps behind him. Or perhaps footsteps wasn’t the right word. It was an eerie sound like that of something thick and long slithering along the ground.

“Damn it, what could it be?!”

The viscount gave into fear and turned around. It was then that he saw it. He saw a monster with a top half like that of a beautiful woman and a bottom half like that of a large serpent. It was a lamia.

“This is Natalya Nastalia, the former countess of Arkus. You’re both nobles, so I’m sure you’ll get along fine. That said, she’s currently a servant of mine, and— Oh, it seems as though she wants you to join my ranks.”

As the lamia struck, the viscount screamed.

“AAAGH!”

His blood was drained entirely from his body, and Lord Howen became a Lesser vampire, devoid of free will. He would make a good example of what happened to nobles who opposed Kai Lekius. It would be the first time in his idiotic life that he would be of any use to anybody.



After that sordid affair, everyone in Runalog decided to unite under the banner of Lady Fana. This meant that I, Kai Lekius, had succeeded in placing Runalog Province under my indirect rule.

Just as I had done in Arkus, in the near future, I would dissolve all noble houses, appropriate any useful retainers, and give them work based on their aptitude.

Well, it’s all easier said than done, I thought.

I was lying in the king-sized bed in the chambers prepared for me in the castle of House Creyala. Joining me atop the bed were two things even I had some trouble accepting the reality of: Talia and Lady Fana. The two of them both wore scanty nightclothes.

Somewhat embarrassed, Talia tried to cover up her voluptuous figure, whereas Fana showed no qualms about flaunting her young body. I had tried to kick them out, but instead they had forced their way in with these arousing attires.

I had one question.

“Tell me, Talia, our promise was that you wouldn’t need to serve me so long as Fana was alive. Is it really fine that I drink your blood?”

The sudden question seemed to surprise Talia.

“It is,” she said after some hesitation. “When Lady Fana swore fealty to you, I became your vassal. If it is my blood you thirst for, you need only to ask from here on out.”

I was quite curious as to the taste of her blood, so I couldn’t say I

wasn't pleased to hear this.

"So then, why are you joining us, Fana?"

Did she also plan on letting me suck her blood? Was I going to be able to compare tastes? It seemed a preposterous proposition, seeing as I was sure that doing so would invite the wrath of her protector, Talia.

"As I have become a vampire, I will need to drink blood in order to survive. However, I would feel guilty if I were to drink just anybody's blood," she finally answered while fidgeting.

"Hm, I see."

That same sense of guilt prevented Rosa from drinking anyone else's blood but my own. I assumed this meant that Talia wanted to drink my blood in a sort of give-and-take fashion, but it seemed that wasn't the case.

"With her permission, I will enjoy the privilege of imbibing Lady Fana's blood."

Talia still seemed apologetic over the circumstances, but at least she wouldn't be racked with guilt if it was drinking the blood of someone close to her.

"I understand the situation, but you've yet to explain why Fana's here."

A vampire's bloodsucking was an arousing experience. As a Noble vampire, the experience wouldn't be the same as that of a True Blood, but Talia's drinking would leave Lady Fana looking very debauched. That's why I had imagined the two would want to do it in private.

It was Fana who answered.

"It's one of the conditions by which I'm letting Talia drink my blood. It would be unfair if I were the only one to look so unseemly, you see. So it was my idea that it wouldn't be so embarrassing if everyone were to be in the same position."

"So I'm to suck Talia's blood, and Talia will suck your blood?"

What sort of situation is this?!

"Since you're here, Kai, I see no reason why you can't partake in my blood as well."

How corrupt the youth of today have become.

I couldn't help but sigh. Even so, I figured I may as well enjoy the circumstances for what they were. It felt somewhat immoral to lay my hands on (the woman who shared the same soul as) my sister-in-law, but I thought some simple blood-drinking wouldn't disturb Al's resting soul. There was also the fact that Fana had said she had no memories of her previous incarnations, so I didn't see any need to have reservations. Being

a man capable of quick decisive action, I pulled Talia in with my right hand and Fana with my left.

“Well then, shall we start with you, Talia?”

“Very well,” she said. “Please, do be gentle.”

The twenty-year old maiden was red in the face, unaware that that line would only excite a man further. I ravenously sunk my fangs into her neck and sucked loudly.

The flavor of her blood was exhilarating. Just like Talia’s disposition, it was sweet, or rather, saccharine. At the same time, my taste buds were struck by a tingling like electricity coursing across my tongue.

It was too much. I couldn’t stop. I briefly became lost in a trance while savoring the flavor. All the while, Talia seemed to be enduring the novel sensation. She didn’t want to let out any sounds of pleasure in front of Fana, so she kept a hand desperately held over her mouth.

“No need to hold it in,” Fana teased.

Though Talia was usually very mellow, Fana’s words seemed to irk her.

“Now it’s Lady Fana’s turn,” Talia said to me, making eye contact as I removed my fangs from her nape.

I nodded. *I see. Very well.*

Talia and I both simultaneously sunk our fangs into Fana’s dainty neck. Suddenly, Fana found herself wracked with a wave of ecstasy. An inarticulate cry escaped her slender throat. This was, of course, not a cry of pain but a moan of pleasure, and there was a hint of smugness in Talia’s expression.

Meanwhile, I was preoccupied with the taste of Fana’s blood. It was an immaculate flavor; even the taste of the clear spring water from a plateau couldn’t compare. I looked over and saw that Talia had become intoxicated with the sensation.

“V-Very devious, you two,” Fana said in protest while she withstood the pleasure. “Kai, please, turn me into a vampire! I won’t be satisfied until I’ve taken vengeance on Talia.”

“I’m afraid it’s my policy to be very strict about who I turn into a vampire,” I said as I separated my fangs from her neck. “For the time being, I have no intentions of making a third.”

“Of all the nerve!”

Even though she wasn’t a vampire, Fana began to lightly nibble at my skin while Talia continued to drink her blood. With elation, I began to

once again drink Talia's blood and thereby create a strange circle on the bed.

Fana removed her mouth from my shoulder and began to laugh rapturously. "When you sit down and try it, it's not too bad—three people making merry together in one bed, that is." She smiled a lascivious smile that made me worry for her future.

"Indeed."

While I was somewhat exasperated, Talia was growing increasingly bashful, but Fana didn't mind. The daughter of the god of reincarnation began to suck on my index finger. Talia noticed this and, like a knight kissing the hand of a princess, sunk her fangs into the back of Fana's hand. I brought my fangs down into the nape of Talia and drank up.

Our bizarre blood circle remained as such until the break of dawn.

Afterword

Once again, thank you all so much for your readership. My name is Fukue Matsuyama. This time around, I enjoyed the novel experience of writing out a plot beforehand and working with an editor.

Up until now, I would upload works to the site *Shousetsuka ni Naro*, and those would be noticed by editors, receive awards, and be published. However, writing a novel that went straight to publishing was a first for me. As such, the process of writing out a plot beforehand, something that's probably typical for professional writers, was not typical for me. I would be delighted if the fun of the process correlated to the book's quality and that you were all satisfied with volume two.

My editor, Kohara-sensei, kindly helped me through the unfamiliar process of writing out a plot, and Genyaky-sensei once again provided wonderful illustrations. Talia's hairstyle is right up my alley, and God of Warfare's design left me speechless. Then there's all the readers who have supported me. It was thanks to all of the people above that this book was completed, and I'd like to thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

I eagerly await the possibility that we might meet again in volume three.

Matsue Fukuyama











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