

Prologue: A Search for Truth

What is truth?

I have struggled with this question for as long as I can remember. We Durais have delved for so long in the murky shadows of history that the painstaking search for the nuggets of truth hidden in the mire of politics and power comes to us as instinct. We know better than to trust official stories and uplifting legends designed to keep men docile. We know better than to trust what all children know.

After all, all children of Ivalice know the story of Delita Heiral—the young commoner raised among Beoulves, who rescued Princess Ovelia from the clutches of Prince Larg. A talented warrior brought up by one of the realm's most noble families, until he turned against their wickedness and heresy to rise through the ranks of the Nanten. He won the respect of soldiers, knights, nobles and commoners alike and, in the end, won the heart of the Queen. So did King Delita the Virtuous lead Ivalice into its golden age. My ancestor, Olan Durai, stood at his side. Until Olan tried to tell the true story of his age, and was burned at the stake as a heretic.

Olan's story says much of Delita Heiral, true—though the portrait he paints is not always a flattering one. But his story has greater truths than that. It speaks of the Lions who almost laid Ivalice low to sate their ambitions. It tells of the shadows that unleashed the tide of bloodshed upon Ivalice for their own black purposes. And it tells of the men and women who took up the thankless task of stemming that tide.

One name stands out in this other story. A disgraced cadet who fled his noble family in shame. A mercenary who fought his way through Ivalice until his soul was so stained by heresy that none would absolve him. He was a bastard beloved by his father and made heir to their proud name as surely as siblings. By the time the war was over, he and his three siblings would be dead, reaping the grim fruit sown by the bastard Ramza Beoulve's blasphemy.

This is the story the Glabados Church wishes you to know. This is the story they cling to, because the truth would reveal the blood and folly that stain their hands. This is the lie that must be exposed.

I search for truth because I must know my history. I search for truth because I am in need of ideals worth aspiring to. We all long for paragons who inspire us. We must dig through the mire if we are to find the nuggets worth polishing and treasuring.

So I ask you again; what is the truth?

What is the truth behind revolutionaries willing to sell their souls to see the world made as they'd once dreamed it?

What is the truth of earnest knights forced to abandon their dearest principles by the grinding necessities of reality?

What is the truth behind downtrodden prodigies who bend their intellects to the cause of equality?

What is the truth behind lovers of battle who see that love tainted by the depredations of those who command violence from afar to sate their vile needs?

What is the truth behind noble men who see their fealty traded for power and their names cursed by betrayal?

What is the truth of children turned to murderers by malice and misshapen gratitude, searching for meaning among the dead?

What is the truth of desperate men giving anything to see order restored to a world gone mad?

What is the truth behind these Zodiac Braves?

There are many who do not want these questions answered. These powerful shadows shine lights on select moments of history so we will not think to look beyond them. When the finger points, who looks at the fingertip?

I have done my best to answer these heavy questions, but I can go no further. Not without the aid of the brave and the bold and the true. Not without the help of those who can soldier on in the face of all the wretchedness this world. If these Zodiac Braves can teach us anything, it is that our causes are never truly hopeless. So long as we remember that in our quest for truth, we are never alone.

So, please. Won't you join me on a search for the truth?

-Alazlam Durai, scholar of Ivalician history

Part One: The Rulers and the Ruled

Chapter 1: The Death of Heroes

The 50 Years' War devastated Ivalice. Constant warfare of such scale would have strained the nation on its own, but a nation at war is not a nation in stasis. Every corner of Ivalice trembled from the effort, as barons and counts and dukes and kings were forced to make promises they could not keep in order to get troops and funds and supplies. Plague and disease killed commoners and kings alike. Ivalice should, by all rights, have lost this war. That fair peace terms were signed is often credited to the fearsome reputation of a single man: the Heavenly Knight, Balbanes Beoulve.

-Alazlam Durai, "Larger Consequences of the 50 Years' War"

Not so soon.

It couldn't happen so soon. It couldn't. The Choking Plague was deadly, but it was at the very least a known quantity. The healers knew how it progressed, they knew how to treat it, and the Beoulves could afford healers of royal caliber. So why, why, why...?

It couldn't happen to his father. It simply couldn't.

Ramza Beoulve rushed up the stairs, his blonde hair damp with sweat, his green eyes wide and frenzied, perfect mirror of his whirling thoughts. Delita was a step behind, taciturn as he had been since plague had taken his own parents. In spite of his silence, Ramza felt the faintest comfort from his presence. Delita would not offer him any words of support, but no one else could grasp how Ramza was feeling at this moment.

His feet made almost no noise upon the lush carpet, as he rushed past closed doors to his father's bedroom at the far wing of the manor. The door was open just a crack, and he could hear voices within.

"Father!" Ramza cried, shoving the door open.

His father was not alone. Dycedarg, Alma, and a Church Healer were with him. The Healer had a shepherd's crook out, pulsing with a faint light that crawled between subtle runes etched into the wood. Ramza's father, skin ashen with illness and silver hair limp with sweat, turned in his bed to face him. He started to smile, then trailed off in a fit of coughing.

"You forget yourself, Ramza!" barked Dycedarg, and Ramza fell back, his face flushing with shame. Dycedarg's dark eyes glared at Ramza out of the confines of his narrow face. His dark blonde hair, usually coiffed expertly, was rigid with grease. He placed a tin cup against Balbanes' lips. Balbanes sipped, then winced, trailing off into coughing once again. His father breathed in a rattling

wheeze.

“Why isn't this working!” hissed Dycedarg, glaring at the Healer in his robes of red and white.

The Healer shook his head. “The Ydoran records tell us that the Choking Plague was not easily healed even in their age,” he said. “We have done all we can.”

“That can't be true!” shouted Alma, huddled at the foot of the bed, clutching at her father's hand. Her hair, as bright gold as Ramza's, was as wild as her green eyes.

“It can,” the Healer said. “It is.”

“Then leave us,” Dycedarg said.

The Healer inclined his head and left the room. Dycedarg turned his attention back to his father. “Can I get you something for the pain?” he asked.

“N...” started Balbanes, and trailed off in another fit of awful coughing.

“Alright,” Dycedarg said. “Alright.” He looked back towards Ramza and gestured for him to come closer. Ramza approached tentatively, feeling as clumsy and graceless as he always did besides Dycedarg's effortless ease and authority.

“I'm sorry,” Ramza said, looking between Dycedarg and Balbanes.

“I know,” Dycedarg said. “Me too.”

Ramza reached out and took his father's hand. The three of them sat together, clutching at the father they loved, in a room silent save for the rattling breaths of his slow dying.

Ramza looked to the door, unsure what else to do. Delita stood there, dark red hair straight and kept cut in a squire's bowl, his simple clothes still faintly dirty with cleaning grease. He did not look at anyone in the room. After a moment, Ramza saw Teta enter behind him, and put her hand on his shoulder. Her hair was the same dark red as her brother's, but where Delita's eyes were so dark as to be almost black hers were a most striking shade of blue. Delita reached up and rested his hand on hers.

Plague had taken so much from them: Delita's parents, Dycedarg and Zalbaag's mother, Ramza and Alma's. Now it would take Balbanes, too.

Thunderous steps sounded from the hallway. Delita and Teta turned and parted ways as Zalbaag swept into the room. In sharp contrast to everyone else, Zalbaag looked regal. His black armor gleamed in the lights from the walls, and his dark blonde hair and tight, jaw-hugging beard were trim. He flung off his blue cloak and it fluttered to the ground. There, the crest of House Beoulve: the White Lion, with the intercrossed swords before it.

“Move,” Zalbaag shouted, shouldering Ramza aside and kneeling besides his father. Ramza stumbled, came to stop at his father's feet so the whole tableau was laid out before him.

“Wh...” Balbanes started, and trailed off in a rattling breath. He turned his head towards

Zalbaag, and his eyes opened, and suddenly his father was not a weak dying man, suddenly he was Balbanes Beoulve, the Heavenly Knight. “What news,” he said, in a whisper that carried sudden strength. “Of the war?”

“The Coprse Brigade arrived in time,” Zalbaag said. “With their reinforcements, the Marquis punched a hole in the Ordallian lines. We have retaken Limberry.”

“And Zeltennia?” whispered Balbanes.

“Cid led a joint force of Hokuten and Nanten,” Zalbaag said. “The Ordallians could not break the walls.”

“Ha!” gasped Balbanes. “They dreamed of beating the Thunder God!”

“We have just had word from Ambassador Lennario,” Zalbaag continued. “The Ordallians have agreed to your terms.”

A graceful smile lightened Balbanes' face. “Ah, thank you, God!” he breathed. “This war dies with m-” he broke off in a fit of terrible coughing, and suddenly the illusion of strength was gone, and he was just an old man dying in his room.

“Father,” Zalbaag whispered, clinging to Balbanes' hand. Ramza had never seen that look of weakness in his brother's eyes.

Alma sobbed, and Balbanes gently tugged his hand out of her grip and cupped her chin. “No tears. Send me off...with a smile?”

Alma tried, her thin pale lips twitching, but it only seemed to make her cry harder.

“Ah, my dear Alma,” Balbanes sighed “You are...the image...of your mother. You care...too much. The world...will not...be easy.” He took a moment to catch his breath. “But you...are stronger even...than your brothers. You will-” He descended into a fit of rattling coughs, and he pulled his hand away from Alma to cover his mouth. Alma fell away, crying, and Ramza wrapped a protective arm around her, feeling the warmth of his sister, feeling his own weakness and insufficiency before her tears.

“T-time,” Balbanes coughed. “T-time...at last.” Balbanes gestured vaguely to the side of the bed. Puzzled, Zalbaag dropped down to the floor, and gasped. His trembling hands pulled out two sheathed swords: one a broad bastard sword, one a shorter one-handed blade. He looked between his siblings, his eyes wide. He placed the blades at his father's side.

Balbanes took a steadying breath and looked up at Dycedarg. “To you, my son,” he said. “I give the sword Service. Remember that we Beoulves are born to serve the good of all Ivalice. To protect our King. To protect...” He stopped, drawing several rattling breaths. “To protect all the weak of Ivalice. To fight for their sake, never for our own.”

“Yes, father,” Dycedarg said. He reached down and took the smaller sword. He drew it from its sheathe, studied the shining silver blade, glowing faintly from the runes that ran across the pommel and all the way up to its sharp point.

“And to you, Zalbaag,” Balbanes continued. “I give the sword Justice. Remember always that Justice cares naught for class, or birth, or power. The just must always hold the guilty accountable for their misdeeds, from the lowest commoner...to the highest...” He closed his eyes, his breath rasping on his throat and in his lips. “Without justice...there can be...no Ivalice.”

“Yes, father,” Zalbaag said, taking the bastard sword from his side, his hands still trembling.

From the foot of the bed, Ramza watched his elder brothers carrying the legacy of their house, and felt a peculiar sense of relief. He envied them, as always—so proud, so confident, so comfortable with the mantle of their father's name. But now they bore an even heavier weight, and Ramza was glad he did not have to.

“Remember...also,” Balbanes said, moving his hands so one rested atop Zalbaag's hand and the other took Dycedarg's wrist. “Remember that I l...love you both.” He seemed to be choking on this last, but managed to force the words out. “But I love them, too.” He turned his smiling face towards Ramza and Alma. “My blood...courses through...all of you. Love...each other. L...look out for...”

His eyes closed, and his breathing softened, though it still rattled faintly in his throat.

“Of course,” Zalbaag said. He rose from his father's side, crossed towards Ramza and Alma, and embraced them both. “I am sorry,” he whispered into Ramza's ear.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” Ramza replied, wrapping his other arm around his brother.

“Where is...Delita?” Balbanes whispered.

“Here, my Lord,” Delita said, stepping in from the hall. Teta hesitated behind him.

Balbanes chuckled, though it turned into a rasping struggle. His face reddened, his eyes hardened into a glare. “There!” he gasped. “Not...yet!”

“Father!” Dycedarg said, offering him the cup again, but Balbanes waved it away impatiently.

“Come!” Balbanes said, his voice ragged but firm. Delita hesitated, then approached with Teta tentative behind them.

“S-s-sergeant Roger,” wheezed Balbanes. “You h-have been...training with him?”

Delita shook his head. “I just...I want to learn how to help you,” he said, his voice shaky. He looked around the room. “To help the Beoulves.”

“We would be...so lucky,” Balbanes said, smiling. “He s-says you are...gifted.”

Delita shook his head again. “I'm not,” he said.

“I h-hope you are being m-modest,” Balbanes replied. “I...have arranged...” He closed his

eyes, struggled for breath. "You will join Ramza...in Gariland."

Ramza rose at once. Delita took a step back in surprise, and Dycedarg and Zalbaag gasped.

"You're serious?" Dycedarg said.

Balbanes managed to chuckle. "The headmaster...you should have seen his..." He struggled for breath, his eyes bulging slightly in his head. He grabbed for Delita's hand, and glared fiercely into his eyes. "You are...capable," he said. "Y-you can...s-serve Ivalice. You and T-teta both." He pried his hand from Delita and reached for Teta. "Y-you may j-j-j-" he broke off in another bleak fit of weak coughs. "Alma," he said. "If you w-will."

Teta managed a clumsy curtsy. "Of course, my lord."

"Good. Good."

Balbanes eyes closed again, Delita looked around the room, clearly lost. Dycedarg set his cup down and extended a hand to Delita. "I look forward to seeing what you can accomplish," Dycedarg said.

Delita looked at the hand and at once fell to one knee. "My lord-" he started.

"Oh, rise!" Dycedarg exclaimed, hauling Delita upright. "We may have to stand on ceremony out there, but not in here."

He offered his hand again. Delita took it gratefully.

Teta crossed over to them, hugging Zalbaag and then wrapping an arm around Alma.

"Ramza...?" Balbane's voice was a whisper.

"Father," Ramza said, rising from where his place with Alma and Zalbaag and moving to his father's side. Delita clasped his shoulder, and Ramza nodded at him. His head was still whirling and wild, barely able to make sense of all he was seeing. All his father's preparations to...

To die.

He took his father's hand, and stared into his face. Balbanes' eyes were still closed.

"I'm here, father," he said.

There was a long silence. Just rattling breaths. Dycedarg sighed, moved to the corner of the room, and refilled the cup from a glass bottle.

"Ramza...?" Balbanes said again, his eyes opening into slits.

Ramza tightened his grip on his father's hand.

"Our swords," Balbanes said. "Are Justice and Service. Ever have we seen...that Ivalice..." He trailed off, his eyes closing again. Ramza felt his jaw clench. How could his father be made to seem so weak? So frail?

"From the lowest beggar," whispered Balbanes. "To the highest king. We serve all. We serve

with mercy. We serve...with honor. With...justice.”

His grip tightened on Ramza's hand. “Your brothers...hold the swords. But remem...member. What they mean. You...show them. What it means...to be a Beoulve.”

Ramza clutched his father's hand as tightly as he could. Slowly, the others returned. Dycedarg put the cup to his father's lips, and Balbanes drank of it gratefully. Alma strokes Balbanes' brow, and Zalbaag moved to the opposite side of the bed. They listened in silence to Balbanes' rattling breaths.

They listened in silence until Balbanes Beoulve, the finest knight beneath Heaven, breathed no more.

Chapter 2: Gariland's Finest

Gariland has been a city of education since the days of the Ydoran Empire. When Ivalice was a rebellious frontier squirming beneath Ydoran boots, Gariland served as a frontier academy, a place where young men and women could get a proper Ydoran education even in the midst of barbarism. Even after the Fall, it retained many of the techniques and secrets of the Ydorans. Gariland has always been surrounded by powerful neighbors but rulers have all stripes know to value its neutrality. How else to guarantee the quality of its students? Whether they be healers, mages, scholars, or soldiers, a Gariland education is a mark of respect and talent throughout Ivalice. I see no reason this should ever cease to be the case.

-Alazlam Durai, "Commencement Speech to the University of Gariland"

Metal *clashed* and *clanged*. Blunt iron blurred, parried, and slashed. A moment later, a red-headed young man hit the dusty earth, his sword slipping from his numb fingers.

"And that is the fourth match to Cadet Heiral," said Master Instructor Bodan Daravon, glancing from the fallen cadet to Delita, standing stout and confident a few feet from his fallen opponent. Delita bowed with a little flourish from his training sword, spurring aggravated mumbling from the senior cadets scattered around the borders of the dusty rectangular training ground.

Delita stepped forward and extended one leather-armored arm, offering a helping hand to the fallen cadet. The cadet spat to one side and scrabbled to his feet, refusing to look at Delita.

"Cadet Madoc," Daravon said, calm and reasonable. "Conduct unbecoming a cadet is grounds for a demerit. Please treat your opponent with the dignity becoming your station."

Madoc stiffened, glared at Daravon, then turned around and grasped Delita's hand as though he trying to crush it. Delita smiled and tightened his hand in turn. Madoc flinched, jerked his hand away, and stomped into the crowd of cadets.

"And who," Daravon began. "Wants the honor of being Cadet Heiral's fifth opponent?"

Ugly murmurs from the crowd, but no one stepped forward to volunteer themselves. Daravon's thick eyebrows arched above his wild beard. "Shall I select someone for the honor?" he asked.

"No need," called a brash voice. A figure stepped out of the crowd. He was tall and gangly, his tan face pocked and pitted with acne. His light brown hair was a little greasy and wild, but he was grinning confidently beneath a prominent cliff of a nose. He carried a full-size training sword in each hand.

"Wulfie," Daravon said, with a slight smile.

“Dad!” Beowulf shouted, glaring at Daravon as snickers rippled through the senior cadets.

“Don't call me that!”

“If I recall,” Daravon continued, unperturbed. “You are supposed to be in Instructor Collins' seminar on supply line management.”

Beowulf scowled. “You don't need supply lines on the *front* lines.”

“You do, actually,” Daravon replied. “Which you would probably understand better if you had taken the course. Besides, even if I were inclined to overlook your truancy—for which, by the way, you will be assigned to latrine duty-”

“Dad!” Beowulf shouted, as chuckles sounded from all around.

“-you are not a member of the senior class, and cannot participate,” Daravon finished. He looked around, then said, “But perhaps Cadet Beoulve can take your place.”

Ramza sighed from his place near the rear of the group, near the chocobo stables. He pulled his hand from the neck of the bird he'd been petting, and stepped forwards. “Sir?” he said.

“Are you up to the task, Cadet?” asked Daravon.

“Doubtful, sir,” Ramza said.

“A most appalling lack of confidence,” Daravon grunted.

“But a most acute ability to recognize a pattern, sir.”

Daravon's lips twitched into a half-smile. “Try your hand at breaking it, Cadet.”

“Yes, sir,” Ramza said, taking one of the sheathed training swords at Daravon's feet and drawing it.

“Good luck,” muttered Beowulf.

“Thanks,” Ramza said, facing Delita. His golden hair had grown out considerably in the two years since he'd joined the Academy, and he kept it tied back in a ponytail, an imitation of his father's. Where Delita was wearing leather armor wherever possible, Ramza wore a blue tunic with leather guards at his shins, forearms, and chest. He was rather proud of the greaves on his forearms: he had crafted them himself in their leatherworking course, and carefully concealed ridges of light metal. They were heavier than they looked, as many of his classmates had learned, both in trying them on and in fighting him.

“Begin,” Daravon said, and Delita dashed towards Ramza.

Ramza was by no means a poor swordsman, but anyone watching could see that Delita was the better of the two. There was a spark and fluidity to his movements. In slashing, his sword was graceful, a dancer's sweeping hand, not the clumsy club some of their fellow cadets tried to make of it. In stabbing, the sword had the delicacy and precision of a needle threading through clothes. It was all

Ramza could do to fend the blade off.

And when Ramza tried to disrupt Delita, and take the offensive, Delita seemed hardly to notice. He seemed to move with Ramza, not exactly anticipating his movements but responding with such ease that he never seemed off-guard. Ramza was driven across the dusty training ground, back towards the lines of their fellow cadets. Delita got faster and faster with every step, until the dull training blade was a grey blur and Ramza's parries had been reduced to so much desperate flailing.

A twisting slash, and Ramza's blade flew from his hand.

Delita smiled slightly, his guard lowering a fraction of an inch. Then his eyes flashed wide, because Ramza was lunging towards him, and he tried to twist his blade so strike Ramza and Ramza swung his greave in front of it, caught the blunt sword along the metallic edge of his leather gauntlet. The blade caught firm (though Ramza felt the impact echoing up to his shoulder, making his bone feel hollow), and Ramza grabbed Delita around the wrist, and twisted the blade from his grip.

With the sword, Delita was a terror: without it, he was almost clumsy, fumbling as he tried to keep Ramza's striking hands off of him. Ramza danced circles around him, slipped around him and grasped Delita beneath the shoulders and behind the head. He wrestled him to the ground, pinned him so he was gasping against the dust.

"Yield!" Delita grated. "Y-yield!"

Ramza rose, grinning and shaking out his numb arms. Delita laughed in turn, pushed himself up from the dust and hugged his friend. "Cheating bastard!" he shouted.

"True and true!" Ramza said.

"Hey!" shouted Cadet Madoc from the crowd, and Ramza and Delita turned to face him. "He *did* cheat!"

"Did he?" Daravon inquired, turning slightly.

Madoc glared between them. "He was disarmed!" he growled "Ramza lost!"

"I see," Daravon said. "So all battles are lost the moment you lose a single weapon. Is this correct?"

Cadet Madoc flushed. "That's not-"

"Cadet Beoulve's maneuver would likely have been suicide against a proper blade, at least without Ydoran materials in his greaves," Daravon continued, turning a dismissive glance towards Ramza. Ramza's momentary triumphant warmth faded to dim embers. "But we were not fighting with proper blades. Ramza understood the rules of combat: you are not truly defeated until your enemy has broken your means to fight. And sword or no, Delita did not defeat Ramza."

"I wish!" Delita said, laughing.

“Well, perhaps next time,” Daravon said. “Now, I am interested to see how long a streak our young Beoulve can manage. Particularly given his brother Zalbaag set the last record. So...”

He trailed off and looked over the students' heads, frowning slightly. A man had appeared at the far end of the training grounds: a man in a sky-blue cloak. With every chance flutter of the ambient wind, a vague white emblem showed on his back. The White Lion of the Hokuten.

“But we shall have to wait until next time,” Daraon said. “For now, return to your rooms.” His eyes flickered to Beowulf. “Or to class, as the case may be.”

“Sure thing, Dad,” Beowulf said. The cadets ringing Delita and Ramza began to scatter, and Daravon moved towards the knight. Ramza and Delita remained where they were standing.

“You think Zal sent him?” Delita asked.

“Who else?” Ramza said.

“Could be Dycedarg.”

“He's not Knight-Commander anymore.”

“Yeah, that'll slow him down,” Delita said. “Dycedarg always worries about red tape.”

“Can we leave?” Beowulf asked, eyes flickering between his friends and his father's back.

“You do eventually have to go to class, Beowulf,” Ramza said.

“We'll see.”

The three of them headed inside, winding their way through wooden hallways as they made for for Ramza and Delita's shared dorm room.

“Hokuten, though,” Ramza said. “Strange, isn't it? All the Orders are supposed to keep out of Gariland, except for emergencies.”

“Well,” Delita said. “You could call the Death Corps an emergency.”

Ramza glanced at his friend. Delita was not looking at anything in particular: his eyes had that far-off glaze they got when he was thinking intently. “You think it qualifies?”

“Don't you?” Delita asked. “How many soldiers have been discharged from the Hokuten ranks? How many remain to keep the peace? Never mind that any soldier who feels jilted by their discharge can now sign on with Wiegraf's rebels.”

“He's right,” Beowulf said. “Another convoy got hit last night on the way to Igros. No survivors.”

“Interesting,” Delita said. “How many is that now?”

“Three, I think,” Beowulf said. “About one a week.”

Delita said nothing for a little while. Ramza continued to study his friend, but said absently to Beowulf, “You worried about Reis?”

Beowulf chuckled. "Nah. She's tougher than I am."

"That's not exactly difficult," Delita said, still not looking at either of them. They reached their small dorm room, with cots against each small and a large desk they could share against a stately window. Delita took the chair: Ramza took a seat at the foot of his bed, while Beowulf flopped down on Delita's.

"Delita," Ramza said. "What are you thinking?"

"The Corps' attacks seem regular, don't they?" Delita asked. "Like they're looking for someone. Hitting convoys between here and Igros..."

"Yes?" Ramza prompted.

"Well, the Hokuten can't handle the Corps by themselves," Delita said. "That's obvious. And all the other kingdoms have their own problems to deal with. Unrest abounds. I doubt Barinten will send his Khamja, and Goltanna's not going to authorize the Nanten to aid Larg, even if Larg would let Nanten into Gallione."

"Are things really that bad between them?" Ramza asked.

"You haven't heard?" Delita said, glancing at Ramza. "They had an argument at Orinus' birthday, after the King collapsed."

"Why?" Ramza asked.

"No one's sure. But it is interesting how everyone who stands before the Queen seems to take ill, isn't it?"

"They do?" Beowulf said.

"Do you pay any attention to politics, Wulfie?" Delita asked.

Beowulf flushed. "Don't have to be a prick about it, Del."

Delita chuckled. "Bit of history for you, Wulfie. Right after Prince Ondoria married Baroness Louveria, old King Denamda took ill. It was right after he'd fought the Romandans, and their whole kingdom was riddled with plague, so no one thought anything of it. But there are rumors..."

"They're just that, Del," Ramza said. "Rumors."

Delita sighed. "You're always so trusting, Ramza."

Ramza shook his head and said, "Go on, Del."

"Well, there's one part of Ivalice that's doing alright," Delita continued. "And it's the last place the Corpse Bridge saw action, before they were discharged without pay."

"That isn't right," Ramza said.

"No, it isn't," Delita agreed. "But we don't have enough gil for every problem, Ramza. Either the soldiers get paid, or the orphanages get cleared out, or we can't pay our share of the reparations and

Ordallia could invade again. It's all bad choices.”

Ramza sighed. “Yes. I know.”

He did, though he loathed the notion of it. It made his skin itch. How could men fight for their country and find themselves treated so cruelly? Worse still: how could treating men so cruelly be the righteous choice? And when treated so cruelly, how could such men turn to such awful savagery? Exactly how many convoys had been killed? How many men and women of every station? How did you resolve such a knotty problem?

He was glad such responsibilities were not his. Zalbaag and Dycedarg seemed far better able to solve such problems.

“One place,” Ramza said, to distract himself from his worried thoughts. “Wait. Limberry?”

Delita nodded. The pieces clicked together in Ramza's head. Limberry, yes. Low population, a practical wasteland, abutting neatly against the deserts and mountains that protected Bethla Garrison, perpetual battleground for Ivalice and Ordallia. But every piece of arable land was fertile in the extreme, and it had a habit of producing powerful warriors. The invasion of Limberry was a relatively-recent event in the 50 Years' War, and the Marquis and the Corpse Brigade had driven back the Ordallian army on their own. Under Elmdor's leadership, their forces were strong yet.

“Yes,” Ramza said. “Yes, I...that makes sense.”

“But if we are to provide a compelling illusion of strength,” Delita continued. “We'll need reinforcements, won't we?”

Ramza studied Delita. “What do you mean?”

Delita smiled slightly. There was a knock upon their door, and Ramza turned where he sat to find Daravon standing in the doorway, glaring at his son. Ramza and Delita rose to their feet at once: Beowulf did not rise from his sprawling languor on Delita's bed.

“Wulfie,” Daravon said.

Beowulf cocked his head back on his neck. “Hey, Dad,” he said.

“Two days of latrine duty,” Daravon said.

“Whatever,” Beowulf said.

“Instructor,” Delita said, bowing slightly. “What can we do for you?”

A weak smile fuddled its way through Darvon's silver beard. “For me?” Daravon said.

“Nothing. For Ivalice...”

“Yes sir?” Ramza prompted.

“There will be no exit exams for the Senior Cadets this year,” Daravon said. “Per the request of Queen Louveria and with the full support of King Ondoria and Prince Larg, the Senior Cadets will

execute their exit exams in the form of active duty in support of the Hokuten against the Death Corps.”

Reinforcements? Ramza's head swiveled to stare at Delita.

“Is something the matter, Cadet Beoulve?” Daravon asked.

“Sir,” Ramza said, flushing in embarrassment as he turned back to face his Instructor. “No, sir.”

“Good,” Daravon said. “Per the request of Knight-Commander Zalbaag, you and Cadet Heiral will be acting as guards at Igros, to free up some much-needed manpower for operations across Gallione. You will guarantee the safety of the townspeople and the Prince. Do you understand your mission?”

“Yes sir,” Delita and Ramza said together.

“Good,” Daravon said. “You leave tomorrow.” He paused, then added, “You are two of the finest cadets to serve at this Academy in some time. I look forward to your matriculation, and to what you will accomplish in the future.”

Ramza felt his cheeks aching up into a smile. A similar bewildered joy was on Delita's face. Daravon smiled in turn, and left the room.

“What about me!” Beowulf shouted at his father's departing back, but got no answer.

Ramza turned to face Delita. Their smiles slowly faded.

“Reinforcements,” Ramza said.

“Right,” Delita said. “Seems like the Marquis is coming to visit after all.”

Chapter 3: Death Upon the Plains

The 50 Years' War was too expansive a conflict not to have far-reaching consequences. Ivalice saw three very different kings take the reins of power. Romanda and Ordallia, too, saw their leadership and armies broken, reshuffled, and reordered. These consequences stretched far beyond the war itself, but Ivalice in particular paid a high price. In order to retain its territory and stave off further war, Ivalice was required to pay reparations to Ordallia for violating the Zelmonian peace. Each province paid their share, however they had to. For this reason was the Corpse Brigade discharged, minus a full year's backpay delayed in good faith for the sake of Ivalice. For this reason did the nobility of Ivalice travel incognito, lacking the resources to move in force and keep the peace among a rebellious and resentful populace.

-Alazlam Durai, "Larger Consequences of the 50 Years' War"

The tentative golden light of a new dawn found Ramza and Delita in the stables on the training ground, checking their bags and examining their chocobos. The birds were stock beasts, well-trained but of poor breeding, and the stable staff of the academy were not particularly good. Still, they seemed friendly enough, nuzzling their orange beaks against Ramza's hand and preening a little as they cleaned their dirty brown feathers.

They both knew how to ride, both from their time on the Manor and in the Academy, but neither were especially good riders and anyways the birds were not really for them. The only reason they were even allowed to take them was to reinforce the riding garrison at Igros.

It was admittedly nice to have the option—otherwise they were looking at finding some convoy or caravan to get to Igros, or walking and turning a two-day ride into a week-long slog across the Mandalia Plains. A hard place at the best of times: monsters of all kind roamed its rolling hills, and now the Death Corps raided as it willed.

Well. If they ran into danger, they wouldn't be defenseless.

Ramza fingered the hilt of the sword on his waist, tracing the lion engraved just beneath the crossguard. Zalbaag had given it to him on the day he came to the Academy, and while Cadets were not allowed to use real swords without the permission of their Instructors, it had been a source of no small envy among their fellow cadets. The blade was not of the special Ydoran craft that made Justice and Service so formidable, but it was a good blade nevertheless, custom-ordered from an up-and-coming blacksmith at Igros. Its twin was on Delita's hip.

“How long's it been since we were home?” Delita asked.

“Since Ajora's Festival, I think,” Ramza said.

“Back in Virgo?” Delita said. “Where does the time go?”

Ramza shrugged, stroking his bird along its long neck. It cooed softly, nuzzling against him. There was a strange musty smell to the birds, like a forest after rainfall, rich and earthy. Not unpleasant, but hard to ignore.

“It'll be good to see Teta again,” Delita said.

“How's Igros treating her?” Ramza asked.

“Well, I think,” Delita said. “I get the sense her classmates are less bitchy than ours.”

“That wouldn't be hard,” Ramza said. He paused, then looked at Delita. “I'm sorry about Madoc.”

Delita shrugged. “It's fine, Ramza.”

It wasn't, though, was it? From the first day, the other Cadets had treated Delita cruelly, sabotaging his stuff at every opportunity—giving him the bow with the broken string, the lance with the broken haft. The fact that Delita excelled at his studies only seemed to provoke them further.

Well. Water under the bridge, right? They were all heading out now, on official duty. One step closer to knighthood. One step closer to...

To what? Ramza knew he would never surpass his brothers. How could he? Dycedarg was Larg's right hand, and Zalbaag had taken up their father's mantle as commander of the Hokuten. Before they had held these positions, they had already been impressive: they still told stories about Zalbaag at the Academy, and Dycedarg was considered one of the foremost diplomatic minds in all Ivalice, brokering peace behind the scenes while Father and Zalbaag fought on the front lines. What did Ramza have to offer the Beoulve name, next to them?

He ran his hands along the coarse feathers of the chocobo again, then slipped his fingers through its reins and led it gently from its pen. Delita did the same, and the two young men walked through the training ground, staring at the old wooden expanse of the Gariland Military Academy, two stories spreading through hallways and lecture halls.

“Well, look on the bright side,” Ramza said. “We don't have any final exams.”

Delita smiled. “No,” he said. “Just the threat of death.”

“A step up in the world,” Ramza said.

As they left the stables, a third chocobo rose to meet them. Where theirs were stock beasts barely fit to ride, this was a sleek racing bird, with lilac feathers, a lithe body, and a falcon's curving beak. On its back, looking even more gangly and ungraceful by comparison to his mount, was Beowulf

Daravon.

“Come to see us off?” Delita called.

“If you mean, 'to come with you,' then yes,” Beowulf said. He had a sword sheathed on either hip, and a bag packed along the bird's side.

“What?” Ramza said, staring at the younger man. “Absolutely not.”

“I wasn't asking your permission,” Beowulf said.

“Beowulf, you're not a senior cadet.”

“Oh, of course,” Beowulf said, rolling his eyes. “Such a world of difference between 15 and 16.”

“There's a world of difference between a cadet and a senior cadet,” Ramza said.

“Look,” Beowulf said. “I'm going to Igros. You can either take me with you, or get left in the dust when I single-handedly slay the Death Corps.”

“And score with Reis?” Delita ventured.

“*That* goes without saying.”

“Beowulf-” Ramza started.

“Ramza,” Delita said. “We can't catch him on that bird, so if we go report him to Daravon he goes to Igros by himself and gets gangmurdered by everyone he meets. If we take him with us, we can at least make sure he doesn't die.”

“I think you mean: I can make sure *you* don't die,” Beowulf said.

Ramza bit his lower lip. He couldn't let Beowulf ride out alone. And, if he was being completely honest, he didn't mind the idea of traveling with him. Beowulf was gregarious and his confidence was infectious.

Still. He didn't like the idea of angering the Instructor.

“Please tell me you at least left a note,” Ramza said.

“Yeah, yeah,” Beowulf said. “Let's get out of here.”

He turned smartly on his chocobo and set it on a trot towards the west. Delita and Ramza shrugged, slid up onto their own birds, and followed.

Gariland was itself a thriving town, but the Academies tended to occupy its fringes—the Military Academy to the south, the Magic Academy to the east, the University to the north. It was a pain for anyone attempting major studies at multiple schools (Dycedarg had once complained about this after one-too-many glasses of wine), but it also provided relative privacy to its students and teachers, while still giving them the opportunity to go into town. So the cadets' road did not take them into the town, though from their hilly path along its outskirts they could see its sprawling buildings of

wood and brick.

They followed a precarious path over and between hills, winding its way slowly into the gentle rolling slopes of the Mandalia Plains. Soon Gariland and its academies were behind them, and they were following the broad Ydoran road that led between Igros and Gariland at an easy pace. Wind rustled through the tall grass on every side, bringing with it a rich green smell of earth and growing things.

“So guard duty?” Beowulf said.

“That's the assignment,” Delita replied.

“Sounds boring.”

“It's Igros, at least,” Delita said.

Beowulf shook his head. “I'll have to find something better to do.”

“You're not on assignment, Wulfie.” Delita glanced at Ramza with a sly smile. “Actually, I think this technically counts as desertion. Right, Ramza?”

“Oh, it might,” Ramza agreed. “I think we're looking at at least a month of latrine duty. Probably more.”

Beowulf smiled in turn. “I get to see Reis.” His face was annoyingly smug.

The day passed at a leisurely pace. They stopped only for their own private latrines, eating dried fruit and meat straight from their bags without dismounting their birds. They passed commoners walking the roads on foot, and merchant caravans traveling to and from Igros and Gariland, usually driving their carts pulled by two birds. Once, towards afternoon, they had to pull to the side of the road as a small squad of Hokuten rode north and west, azure cloaks flaring back behind them to display Larg's white lion.

“Wonder where they're headed,” Ramza said.

“We're supposed to reinforce Igros,” Delita said. “I imagine those are some of the men we'll be relieving, so they can hunt the Corps.”

A rather handsome man with rugged features and well-kempt dark hair glared at them imperiously from atop his mount. “Stand aside!” he shouted.

“Yes, sir,” Ramza said, guiding his bird back.

“Not like we were already off the road,” Delita muttered.

They waited until the Hokuten were well out of sight, then followed along.

As dusk painted the plains orange, the cadets left the smooth Ydoran road and walked their birds through the grass, heading to a low hilltop.

“You're setting up the tents!” Ramza shouted towards Beowulf

“Yeah, yeah...”

As Beowulf dug through their bags, Razma pulled a post with a hole in one end from his bag, and sank it into the ground. After wiggling it to make sure it was secure, he led each bird back to it, and tied them to the post. Truth be told it wouldn't actually *stop* a chocobo from bolting, but it might slow them down enough for whoever was on watch to catch them.

A low, reedy sound rose up from behind him, not unlike a duck's call. Ramza glanced over his shoulder, smiling slightly: Delita had a blade of grass pressed against his mouth.

“I knew you couldn't resist,” Ramza said, finishing his knot and striding to Delita's side.

“Have you forgotten how?” Delita asked, offering Ramza another blade of grass. Ramza plucked it from his fingers, pressed it against his mouth, and listened to the high chirping sound it made as it vibrated against his lips. He breathed deep of the rich green scent, fresh and alive.

It brought to mind memories of a better time. Of Balbanes, leading them off the Beoulve estate to the Plains, teaching Ramza, Delita, Alma, and Teta how to play their grass flutes, while Zalbaag and Dycedarg laughed and drank.

“I still sound like a songbird,” Ramza said.

“Or a bird of prey.”

Ramza snorted. “As if.”

Delita shook his head. “Some Beoulve you are,” he said.

Ramza felt his heart twist in his chest. “I know,” he said.

Delita sighed and grabbed Ramza's shoulder. “We're on the road to Igros,” he said. “We're heading for active duty. Even your brothers didn't start so early.”

Ramza shrugged. Delita could say what he wanted: Ramza knew that guard duty was not the same thing as the mighty achievements of Dycedarg and Zalbaag.

“Well, if you're gonna be like that,” grunted Delita. “You can take first watch.”

“My pleasure,” Ramza said.

The night passed by easily enough: the cadets ate from their stores and huddled up without stoking a fire. If the Corps was raiding the roads, they didn't want to draw any attention to themselves. Ramza woke Beowulf at moonrise and settled upon his bedroll. He was saddlesore, his thighs aching and chafed, his mind still strange.

He did not know when, exactly, he fell asleep. But he must have, or else the mighty *crash* would not have woken him.

He jerked upright, blinking blearily in every direction, picking out shadows in the pre-dawn twilight. Beowulf was already rising from the ground, throwing his swordbelt around his waist.

“Delita!” Beowulf shouted.

“Quiet!” hissed Delita, on his belly at the edge of the hill, eyes to the north.

Beowulf crouched down beside him. Ramza grabbed his sword and crawled to join them.

“What is it?” Ramza said.

“Don't know,” Delita said. “I thought I saw a caravan, but then...”

He fell silent, as they heard the sounds. Screams and shouts made thin and reedy by distance.

They moved without thinking, untying their birds and hurtling down the hill, leaving their bags and bedrolls behind them. As dawn gradually lightened the sky in every direction, they saw the first body, dressed in ragged leathers and metal. On his shoulder was painted a crude skull with a cracked crown atop its head.

“The Corps,” whispered Ramza.

Another shout from up ahead.

“Hurry!” Delita said, cracking his reins so his chocobo picked up the pace.

They crested a low rise and found a bloody scene painted in front of them. A blood-smeared caravan lay on its side, one of its chocobos dead, the other still whimpering faintly with its left leg twisted into splinters of bone beneath it. Dead men ringed the caravan, some in colorful clothes, some in armor, some in the ragged garb of the Corps.

And beyond them, a small cordon of men in ragged gear surrounded a rocky outcropping, atop which Ramza could just make out a bloody human figure.

“The Marquis?” Ramza whispered.

“Maybe,” Delita said. “Maybe not. But whoever he is, we've got to rescue him.”

Ramza counted the men below. “There are ten of them, Delita,” he whispered.

“Three apiece,” Beowulf said. He stroked his bird's neck. “Violet here could probably handle the spare.” The bird gave a low chirp, as though agreeing with him.

“These are soldiers,” Ramza said, shaking his head. “We should...find someone. The Hokuten, or-”

“There's no one but us,” Delita said.

Right. No one but Ramza, and ten men against three was not the kind of work a cadet did. That was a work for heroes and knights, for Beoules who had earned the name.

He closed his eyes, as bile crawled up his throat and the blood in his veins itched and birds of dread fluttered in his stomach.

He remembered his father's hand on his. He remembered his father's words in his ears. Justice and Service.

He shook his bird's reins, and rode forwards.

“Ramza?” Delita started.

“MEN AND WOMEN OF THE DEATH CORPS!” Ramza cried, and his voice sounded so dreadfully high and young in his ears, but he rode on at a stately pace, as though unafraid. The small cordon of soldiers turned as one to face him, drawing blades and knocking arrows.

Oh. Ramza hadn't seen the bows.

He continued his slow advance. He heard the tread of taloned feet upon the grass, and did not need to look to know Delita and Beowulf were following his lead. How ghastly, that: to think he was leading his confident friends. He felt a strange surge of gratitude that they should follow him when he was so afraid.

“I am Ramza Beoulve, son of Balbanes!” he shouted, guilt cracking at his ribs as he hid behind his father's name, but a ripple of trepidation spread visibly through the soldiers in front of him. Weapons lowered a fraction of an inch.

“Lay down your weapons,” Ramza said. “And surrender to our care. I give you my word as a Beoulve: no man who lays down his arms will be harmed.”

He came to a stop some ten feet from the soldiers. His eyes flicked past them to the bloody figure on the rocky outcropping—a young man, straw-blond hair caked with blood, wearing heavy clothes of blue with armored plates of polished orange metal, one arrow sticking from his thigh and another from his shoulder. He had a quiver near his feet and a bow in his hand: Ramza noted that at the base of the outcropping was a bandit with an arrow in his throat.

“I never heard of no Ramza Beoulve,” sneered a man holding a bow near the front of the group.

“But you have heard of Balbanes,” Delita said, sidling his chocobo forwards. “You've heard of Dycedarg, and Zalbaag. If he's half the man they are, do any of you think you can take him?”

Silence, tense and taut as their bowstrings. The bloody young man on his stone outcropping watched Ramza through eyes slitted with puffy bruises.

“Beoulve!” growled the man at the front. He shifted—to raise his bow, or lower it, Ramza was never sure. The man on the rock drew, faster than Ramza would have believed possible. An arrow flew, and buried itself in the man's neck.

The man screamed, and fired his own arrow. It flew, swift and true, into Ramza's chocobo. The bird collapsed with a desperate squawk, spilling Ramza out into the dust.

Shouts rose up from every man and woman. Ramza struggled to pull his legs out from the great weight of his bird, found strong hands hauling him upright by his shoulders. The clang of real metal—of lethal blades that could cut you open and leave you bleeding and dying—echoed through the pink

dawn of the Plains.

“Are you alright!” Delita roared, as he pulled Ramza upright.

“Fine!” Ramza shouted. He drew his sword, and Delita did the same. They turned to face the Corps. Beowulf was already past them, both swords drawn, both swords bloody, Violet unharmed even after tearing a hole straight through their ranks. Another archer—a statuesque woman near the rear of the group, closest to Beowulf—took aim. The young man atop the rock fired again, and his arrow buried itself into her left breast. She screamed and sank to the ground, clutching at the wound.

Ramza had no time left for thoughts or doubts. He charged, with Delita at his side. On the opposite side of the crowd, Beowulf wheeled back around.

Ramza and Delita swung, and found blades raised against them. The man in front of Ramza slashed with frenzy. For a moment, icy terror filled every inch of Ramza, as he imagined what that sword might do to him, imagined his guts spilling out onto the Plains as he died an ignoble-

But then his fear faded, because for all his fury his opponent was so dreadfully slow. It seemed as though Ramza could see every swing of the blade before it had happened. He was so clumsy, his movements so telegraphed, that Ramza barely needed to parry. Instead he ducked, dodged, wove from side to side, letting the man exhaust himself, swinging slower and slower with every passing moment.

At last, Ramza lifted his sword, caught the impact of his enemy's blade with a rattling *clang* he could feel all the way up his arm, reverberating down from elbow to fingertips. Ramza kept his blade between them, swung beneath the man's guard and struck his pommel against the man's wrist, dropping the sword from his numb fingers. The man raised wild eyes to Ramza's face.

A slick sound, like leather being cut. A strange, salty smell, as something flecked against Ramza's face. Ramza stared at the arrowhead protruding from the man's cheekbone, reached up to feel the man's blood against his face.

The man collapsed into the grass. Ramza stared down at him, unaware of anything besides the dead man for several long seconds.

He looked up, feeling hollow as wet blood slid down his face. He looked up to the young man on the rocky outcropping, his quiver empty now, his bow still clutched between white-knuckled hands. Ramza shook his head without really knowing why, saw Delita standing over another man with a steady red drip on the edge of his blade as he stared down at the fallen figure. Ramza saw Violet's bulk above him, and Beowulf upon the bird's back. The dead littered the grass.

What remained of the Corps—just five of them, two supporting the woman who had taken an arrow to the chest—were stumbling up into the slopes.

“Do we pursue?” Beowulf asked. His voice seemed terribly far away.

Delita looked up from the man dead at his feet. His face was white, his lips slightly open.

Ramza swallowed, tried to find words, failed.

“No,” Delita croaked.

Ramza shook his head. “No,” he agreed.

Beowulf nodded. “Alright,” he said.

Ramza moved past them, clambered up the outcropping, dropped his sword into the grass and ran a soothing hand across the young man's head. “Any other wounds?” he asked.

The man's slitted eyes opened, glinting with tears. “Please...” he whispered. He had a deep, rasping voice, and his words were colored by a gentle Limberry brogue. “H...h-help.”

“I am,” Ramza said. “Where does it hurt?”

“N...not m-me,” the young man said. “T-the...the Marquis...”

Vague memories of Delita's words yesterday (a lifetime ago) passed through Ramza's mind. Vague memories of why the Corps was out in force, and why they had been on the road to Igros, before...

Ramza touched the dead man's blood on his face with his fingertips.

“The Marquis,” Ramza whispered.

“They...took...” the young man groaned and his eyes fluttered closed.

They took him? What exactly had Ramza stumbled into?

Time for that later. This man was hurt. This man who might well have saved Ramza's life by killing the man whose blood was now on Ramza's face.

“Delita!” Ramza shouted. “Beowulf!”

He waved them over, looked for the best way to help the young man down. To save a life, in this place where so many had lost theirs.

Chapter 4: Kill or Be Killed

Students often have trouble reconciling the ramshackle Hokuten who barely bested the Death Corps with the efficient war machine that fought the Nanten to a stalemate during the War of the Lions. What these men and women lack is a personal perspective towards history. Imagine yourself two years ago. Imagine yourself two years before that. See the marked differences that develop: in lifestyle, friendships, personality, romance, discipline. Multiply that difference by a hundred thousand. All history is personal: all that changes is the weight of those interactions. The complex web of need, indifference, desperation, and ambition that underlies all of history is the life story of a countless multitude writ large.

-Alazlam Durai, "The Hokuten: From Ydoran Militia to Illustrious Army"

"I don't want to leave you," Beowulf said, from atop Violet's back.

"I don't want to get left," Ramza said. "But you're the best rider, and Violet trusts you. The sooner the Hokuten know of this, the sooner you get us help, and the sooner we can find the Marquis."

"Get us help," Delita added, as he finished securing the young Limberrian they'd rescued to the back of his bird. "Fast."

Beowulf nodded, then rattled Violet's reins and plunged off, foregoing the road entirely and plunging northeast, through rocky outcroppings and over rolling hills as he sprinted for Igros.

"Should we follow him?" Ramza said. "Or take the road?"

Delita shrugged, finishing a knot and standing away from the bird. "This was a big raid," Delita said. "I doubt we'll get hit by bandits again. Still, it's a risk."

"But we won't get to Igros fast enough on foot," Ramza said.

"We won't get there fast enough at all if Beowulf doesn't get help," Delita said.

Ramza hesitated, then grabbed one of the saddlebags and slung it across his shoulders. Opposite him, Delita did the same. They left two other bags on the hill: they were slow enough already. Adding more weight would reduce them to an intolerable crawl.

Ramza headed down to the road. Delita followed, leading his chocobo.

For a little while, they were silent. The Plains were sunny and gorgeous, thick with the rich scent of grass and the dusty musk of animals on the wind. The Plains felt alive, and lovelier than Ramza had ever seen them.

How could so many have died, on a day like this? How could his face still be sticky with a dead man's blood?

The fingers of his right hand, still tingling from the fierce blow of the dead rebel, touched the pommel of his blade. He looked at its twin on Delita's hip, and remembered how his friend had looked, standing over the man he'd killed.

"His wounds look good," Delita said, staring straight ahead.

"Yeah?" Ramza said. "I had to use most of our salve."

"Well, he's the only survivor," Delita said. "We need him alive."

Right. Alive.

"Delita," Ramza said.

Delita glanced at him. Ramza swallowed against the dryness of his throat, and said, "Are you...are you alright?"

Delita shrugged. "No wounds," Delita said. "That's a miracle unto itself, eh?"

"That's not what I meant," Ramza said.

Delita seemed to stumble. "I know," he said.

Silence again. The two of them walked on, but Ramza couldn't tear his eyes away from Delita.

"It was us or them, Ramza," Delita said. "That's...this is what we trained for."

Trained for. Right. Honed their skills at the Gariland Military Academy, where so many other heroes had been trained, learned the art and craft of war, learned to fight, to manage, to command and to serve. He had gained all the tools he might ever need for justice and service, and what did he do with them? Kill men and women whose only crime was rebelling against a broken oath.

Men and women who had slaughtered the Marquis' guard, and taken the man himself. Delita was right, wasn't he? Whatever the Corps' grievances, it did not justify their evil. And what was a Beoulve, if not a man who delivered justice to the guilty?

"Of course," Ramza said. "But are *you* alright?"

Delita shook his head. "No," he said.

Ramza crossed to his friend and put a hand on his shoulder. "There wasn't another way," Ramza said. There wasn't, was there? The fight had started, blades had slashed and arrows had flown. It was us or them, kill or be killed. And if Ramza's hands were clean, it was only because he had been spared that burden.

He looked up at the young man on Delita's bird, thought grimly of the kind and stalwart chocobo he'd left dead on the Plains. They had fished the arrows from the squire's thigh and arm and bandaged them tightly, using most of their healing salve to treat his wounds. Delita had the cadet's bow slung over his shoulder.

"You did what you had to," Ramza said.

"I know," Delita said. "Doesn't make it easier."

The man atop the chocobo groaned, eyelids fluttering. He shuddered against his bindings, and Ramza and Delita stopped the bird. Ramza placed a hand on the man's shoulders.

"Easy," Ramza said. "Easy. We've bound you so you're stable, alright?"

The man growled, struggling so the bird stumbled beneath him. "You common whoresons!" he swore, with a booming, surprisingly deep voice that reduced his Limberry brogue to a mild whisper. "You miserable bastards, I'll-" His eyes scrunched closed, as though fighting a migraine. "Wait. You-"

He opened his eyes again, a disjointed look of embarrassment flitting across his battered face.

"I-sorry," he said. "I thought...I forgot-"

"You're fine," Delita said. "You took quite a beating."

"I...yeah," the man said.

Ramza and Delita exchanged glances. Delita jerked his head back down the road towards Igros, and Ramza nodded. "We have to keep moving," Ramza said. "Can you handle that?"

"Yes," the young man said. Delita pulled at the reins, and they set off again. Ramza stayed by the man's side.

"You..." The man's words were a little slurred with confusion, his eyes searching Ramza's face. "Did you...you told those fuckers you were a Beoulve?"

Ramza nodded. "I am," he said. "Ramza Beoulve."

"Ah, thank God!" moaned the man. "A little blessing in all this madness. You can save the Marquis."

Ramza shook his head. "I doubt it," Ramza said. "I'm just a cadet."

"A cadet?" the man said.

"Not even graduated," Ramza said. "They had us coming to reinforce the Igros garrison."

"Igros..." The man chuckled, and it sounded almost like a sob. "Still going to Igros."

Ramza did not like that look of misery and pain on the man's face. "Your name?" he asked, trying to lead the other man away from his black thoughts.

"Argus," the young man said absently. "Argus Thadolfas."

Delita's head craned slightly. "Thadolfas?" Delita repeated.

A strange look crossed Argus' face, terror and shame trying to bug out through his bruise-slitted eyes. "I..." he started. "Yes."

"Is something wrong?" Ramza said, eyes flickering between them.

"Nothing," Delita said. "It's nice to meet you, Argus. I'm Delita."

Argus said nothing. His face relaxed ever so slightly. "Delita," he whispered. "Thank you."

Ramza thought he could hear tears in Argus' voice.

Ramza could sense larger things moving somewhere just beyond his awareness, but chose to stay silent rather than ask his questions. Argus and Delita had been through enough today.

"Can we trust the Hokuten?" whispered Argus, after several minutes had passed.

"Absolutely," Ramza said at once. How could there be any doubt in the knightly order his father had led, that his brothers still led?

"The men who took the Marquis," Argus said. "They wore Hokuten cloaks."

Ramza and Delita stopped again, staring at the man. Ramza wondered if his head injuries were making him delusional.

"That's how they took us by surprise," Argus said. "Whole troop of them on chocobos, riding up saying they had an urgent message for the Marquis. Then they-" he broke off, his voice thick.

"Trampled me while I was trying to get close. Killed everyone but the Marquis."

"The men we fought weren't wearing Hokuten crests," Delita said.

"They came after," Argus said. "The ones in cloaks, they...they dragged the Marquis from the carriage."

"He was alive?" Ramza said.

Argus nodded vigorously, then groaned in pain. "Yes," he grunted. "He was. I saw him moving."

"And the men we fought?" Delita prompted.

"Came from the hills. Spoke with the Hokuten. Started killing the survivors. The men with the birds, they...took the Marquis back east, the way we'd come. I managed to...to get where you found me, before they realized I wasn't dead. They were...they were trying to..."

"I know," Ramza said, patting the man's forehead soothingly. "I know."

They resumed their march, but they were much slower now. Argus had lapsed into a dazed silence, and Ramza and Delita led the chocobo and spoke in hushed voices.

"It has to be that Hokuten unit we saw yesterday," Ramza said.

"Agreed," Delita said. "But how?"

"Surely someone could craft fake cloaks," Ramza said.

Delita shook his head. "Thirty authentic cloaks on such short notice?" he asked. "I doubt it. And we'd have seen more wear and tear if they'd been taken from corpses." He was silent for a time, then added, "It could be worse than that."

"How?" Ramza asked.

"They could actually be Hokuten."

Ramza stopped walking and stared aghast at Delita. "Impossible."

"Is it?" Delita asked. "The Hokuten aren't perfect, Ramza. Thirty men from a common background who fought beside the Brigade might be convinced--"

"My brothers wouldn't allow it," Ramza insisted.

"In spite of what you think, Ramza," Delita replied. "Your brothers aren't perfect."

Impossible, wasn't it? As sympathetic as Ramza might have found the Brigade's grievances, that was no excuse for the rank banditry and savagery they clearly used to accomplish their aims. To think that other men of the Hokuten might feel differently was inconceivable. Wasn't it?

"Regardless," Delita said. "In order to know where the Marquis was, someone has to have been feeding them information. It's either Limberry or Gallione, and the Corps doesn't operate in Limberry."

Ramza was silent, mulling over that information. It seemed unthinkable. This was the knightly order his father had commanded. Surely they had not been corrupted. Surely they stayed true. Surely...

But he couldn't be sure, could he? Not with another man's blood upon his face.

Again, that flash of terrible memory. Even though he'd cleaned himself, he imagined his face was still faintly sticky with it. And another, more terrible thought: would Ramza have managed to strike the killing, if Argus had failed to do so?

Delita had. Beowulf had. Ramza? Ramza's hands were clean, and that brought its own strange guilt. Would they have stayed clean? Was it only accident? Shouldn't he want to kill such men, who slaughtered and hurt so many?

Traitors in the Hokuten. Traitors who might be sympathetic to a sympathetic cause.

They walked in silence. What else was there to say?

As the sun baked down on them with afternoon heat, they crested a hill and found a small squad of Hokuten charging towards them on birdback. Ramza and Delita tensed, their thoughts filled with Argus' words and the doubts that came with them, but then relaxed when they spied the purple bird in their midst. They waved, and the soldiers adjusted their course. Some five men with seven birds.

"That was quick!" Delita called, as Beowulf and his entourage drew closer.

"They were already out looking for the Corps!" Beowulf shouted. They came to a halt, and one of the men hopped off his bird and approached Argus, palms out. He wore a band of red and white around his left arm, and he raised his hands to Argus. Runes glowed upon his white gloves, and faint light shimmered out from his hands, surrounding the injured squire.

"Already sent a message back to Igros," said a long-haired man who looked hardly older than they were.

“You're in charge?” Delita said.

The man shrugged. “For the moment. Acting Corporal Lambert, at your service.”

“Acting Corporal?” Ramza repeated.

“We're short-handed these days,” Lambert said.

“You're aware of the situation?” Delita said

“We are now,” Lambert replied. “Command had us on high alert. Told us to watch for Corps activity. Didn't know about the Marquis.” He grimaced. “This is a real shitshow.” He gestured to the two spare birds. “We were fortunate enough to have relief mounts.

Ramza felt a brief pang as he remembered his own bird, down dead upon the plains along with so many men and women, from the Corps and from Limberry. He mumbled his thanks and mounted the bird.

“Who treated his wounds?” asked the healer, with his red-and-white band.

Delita gestured towards Ramza. The man moved to his side and said, “Cadet. Those are some of the finest field dressings I've seen made by any soldier. You've got a knack for it.”

Ramza nodded. He should have felt grateful or proud, he supposed. All he felt was empty.

“With your instincts,” the man continued. “You might think about training as a Healer.”

A Healer? A Healer like the man in robes of red and white, powerless to save his father? So used to seeing men die of plague that he maintained a hardened note of practicality even in the face of all their grief?

And what was better? To be a man who couldn't even kill your enemies? A man who sat and sweated with guilt for being alive when another man had tried to kill him?

“Thank you,” Ramza managed.

They headed west at a brisk trot, but they had lost too much time in the morning's battle and in their slow march west through most of the day. On birdback it was an easy two-day ride to Igros, but they'd been delayed by half a day, if not more. They were forced to camp for the night, using what gear they hadn't abandoned. And all through the night was the weary sense of danger. After all, thirty men had taken the Marquis. They could come again, and take all eight of them at once.

So even though it was not his watch, Ramza was awake when Argus slipped out of his tent and sat in an uneven slouch in front of him.

“You should be asleep,” Ramza said.

“So should you,” Argus said.

Silence then. They heard one of the men rustling through the dark, circling the camp to keep an eye out for danger.

“We should be riding,” Argus said.

“You don't want to ride through the Plains after dark,” Ramza said. “Panthers sometimes hit the roads.”

“Panthers,” Argus scoffed. “You have such things here?”

“I hear you have worse than that, in the Wastes,” Ramza said.

“Ydoran ruins are always full of monsters,” Argus said dismissively. “This is different. This should be civilized.”

“It is,” Ramza said.

“Is it?” Argus said. “Monsters on your roads. On four legs and on two.”

Ramza was silent. Argus sighed. “Apologies, Lord Beoulve,” he said. “I'm not...I just want to find the Marquis.”

“We will,” Ramza said. “And Argus, please. I'm not a lord by any means. Just a cadet.”

Silence again. The stars gleamed indifferently overhead.

“From Gariland?” asked Argus. Ramza nodded, and Argus said, “I couldn't go. I'm glad, actually. I think I learn more as a squire.”

Ramza nodded uncertainly. The practice of squiring had fallen out of fashion as Ivalice had grown centralized, but it was still in vogue in some places, having young men serve as apprentice soldiers for their noble lieges. It lacked the consistency of a Gariland education, but there was probably something to be said for a more specialized education.

“The Marquis chose me himself,” Argus whispered. “Granted me an audience. Said I had potential.” Another flinching look of hurt in his eyes. “It's my fault, Lor-Ramza.”

“It's not, Argus,” Ramza said. “What could you have done?”

“I don't know!” Argus shouted. “Something. I could have...surely...”

The man in front of him looked so markedly wretched.

“You survived,” Ramza said. He felt the man's blood flecking against his face again, and repeated himself. “You *survived*. We all did. Now we...we have to try to do more.”

Argus nodded, but said nothing else. Eventually they gave in to the exhaustion of the day's events, and the next thing Ramza knew he was being shaken awake, his clothes damp with morning dew.

“It's time,” Delita said, helping Argus to his feet.

Ramza gazed blearily between them. Two killers, while his hands were still clean.

“Argus,” Ramza said. The squire looked at him, and he said, “Thank you for saving me.”

Argus flushed. “It was *you* who saved *me*, milord.”

As dawn stretched its golden fingers over the Plains, they rode for Igros.

Chapter 5: The Weight of a Name

The rise of Delita Heiral has everything to do with the 50 Years' War. War shook Ivalice from its roots to its highest branches. Commoners, soldiers, knights, nobles, and kings perished in equal measure. The War of the Lions was as much a product of the power vacuum created by all this chaos as it was the fruit of the ambitious. By the time the War of the Lions was over, the great houses were all but extinct, including House Beoulve, House Larg, House Goltana, House Orlandeau, House Thadolfas...

-Alazlam Durai, "Larger Consequences of the 50 Years' War"

"Well," Dycedarg said. "You've had a *hell* of a homecoming, Ramza."

He was seated behind the ornate wooden desk in his office, lounging back in his plush red velvet chair. The golden light of dusk leaked through the latticework window behind him, shining over bookshelves and the polished stones of his walls and floors. His hair was perfectly coiffed, his goatee perfectly trim. Service leaned against the left side of his desk.

Ramza, Delita, Argus, and Beowulf were seated in front of him in rather comfortable chairs. All four were still rather dirty: the moment they had reached the Hokuten garrison on the outskirts of the city, the four young men had been rushed to Beoulve Manor to give their report.

"That wasn't my intention," Ramza said.

"Well, you managed it all the same," Dycedarg said. He smiled slightly. "Three cadets and one squire up against ten hardened anarchists, and here you sit."

Ramza shook his head. "It was just luck."

"I wish I had been so lucky at your age," Dycedarg said. "You do me proud, Ramza. You do the Beoulves proud."

Ramza flushed, gratitude and warm pride mixing with the guilty memory of another man's blood on his lips. "Thank you," he said.

"I could do without your bad news, of course," Dycedarg sighed. "The Marquis was en route to Igros to discuss joint operations *against* the Corps. Now he's their prisoner? And taken by men wearing Hokuten cloaks..." He shook his head. "There's a traitor in our ranks," he said. "We'll have to find out who."

"My lord," Argus said, dropping from his chair into a perfect position of kneeling supplication, one knee on the ground, bracing his other fist to support him (and managing to fall out onto his uninjured limbs, to boot). "Please. Give me 50 men and I will save the Marquis from this common

scum.”

Dycedarg looked down over his long nose at Argus. He raised his thin eyebrows and glanced between Ramza, Beowulf, and Delita.

“50 men,” Dycedarg repeated.

“I would not dare ask for more.”

“Frankly you dare enough, Argus Thadolfas,” Dycedarg said. Argus flinched as though struck. His eyes were fixed on the ground, and he did not rise.

“You are a stranger to Gallione,” Dycedarg said. “You know nothing of our lands or our troubles, yet you presume you could lead 50 men of the Hokuten with greater skill than any of our commanders? Even if you had the knowledge, what man of the Hokuten would follow an untested squire of Limberry? And if we could find the men willing to follow you, who would trust you when they heard the name Thadolfas?”

Argus flinched again. There was a bleak silence throughout the room. Ramza looked between Delita and Dycedarg, wondering at the significance of the name, not quite daring to ask.

“Oh, rise,” Dycedarg said, his voice softening. “I am not speaking against you, Argus. For all I know, you may be the most honorable and talented man since the death of my father. But until you have such a reputation...”

“No,” Argus said. “I understand.” He rose from his kneeling position, retook his seat, and looked at no one in the room. Dycedarg sighed, and shook his head again.

“I am already in contact with Prince Larg, the Nanten, and key officials in Limberry to guarantee we have the means to find the Marquis,” Dycedarg said. “And the whole of the Hokuten will search high and low until they find him. Rest assured, Argus: the Marquis will be found, and I will personally see to it that when he is, he knows of your deeds, and your devotion.”

Argus nodded jerkily, but said nothing.

“In the meantime,” Dycedarg continued. “I’d say you’ve earned some rest. At noon tomorrow, Ramza and Delita will be enlisted as full members of the Igros garrison. Argus, you have my leave to join them, if you so wish. As for you, Mr. Daravon—”

“I’ll leave for Gariland tomorrow,” Beowulf said. “Not sure what the Academy has left to teach me, but—”

“Yes, about your report,” Dycedarg said. “You’re claiming that your chocobo, and I quote, ‘did a sweet flip while I chopped two dudes’ heads off?’”

“It’s a metaphor,” Beowulf said.

“For what, Mr. Daravon?”

“Depends,” Beowulf said. “What's a metaphor?”

“Please leave.”

“No sweat,” Beowulf said, and sprang up from his seat, strolling jauntily into the hall of the Beoulve Manor. Ramza, Delita, and Argus rose to follow. Ramza spared one backwards glance at his brother: Dycedarg had already begun to peruse some papers on the desk in front of him, and did not so much as look up at the cadets leaving his office.

“He's as cheery as ever,” Delita muttered, falling into step besides Ramza as they passed quickly over the plush carpeted floors.

“He's got a lot on his mind,” Ramza said.

“Sure.”

They were almost to the exit of the Manor. Argus was racing ahead, almost past Beowulf in spite of the bandages on his arm and leg.

“Delita,” Ramza said. “Why does Thadolfas...”

He trailed off, unsure of which question to ask. Why did the name mean no Hokuten would ever follow Argus? Why did Delita recognize it? Why did it seem to cause Argus such pain?

Delita said nothing for a moment. “Ramza,” he said. “You are so daunted by your father's legacy that you can barely try to live up to it, much less dream of surpassing it.”

Ramza felt his stomach hollow out with embarrassment. “Delita-” he started.

“That's how much your father's good example defines you,” Delita said. “Imagine how much worse it would be if it were a bad example.”

Ramza said nothing as he tried to wrap his head around the idea of his father's legacy being something evil. He almost laughed. He would have, if he had not seen the terrible pain in Argus' face.

They left one of the Manor's side entrances and strolled through its lush grounds, irrigated by the delicate Ydoran aqueducts they had acquired along with the property. Argus stared down into one of the ducts, his face illuminated by the shimmering light reflected off the water. He did not look at any of them. Delita grabbed Beowulf's shoulder.

“I'm a little surprised, Wulfie,” Delita said. “You're already going home?”

Beowulf shrugged. “I came,” he said. “I saw. I kicked some ass. I'm almost out of things to do.” He lifted his eyes to the nearby hills that separated the Beoulve Manor from Igros proper and grinned. “Almost.”

Ramza and Delita followed his gaze. Three women had crested the hill. Flanking the woman in the center were Alma and Teta. Two years had seen them turn from girls to women, but had not otherwise changed their serious faces. They were a little more distinguishable in dress: Alma wore the

Ydoran rings and bangles befitting her station, where Teta had no such accouterments. Further Alma's dresses had the luxurious shine of newness, while Teta's were a little careworn. However, Teta still looked rather regal. Her dresses may have been Alma's hand-me-downs, but they fit perfectly.

The third woman was taller than both of them, and somehow more regal by far. Hell, she was taller than Ramza and Delita, nearly as tall as Beowulf himself. Her clothes were simple—loose beige trousers and a pink high-collared shirt. She moved with martial ease and wore a gleaming Virgo symbol on a chain around her neck. A faint smile toyed with her thin lips, and a wave of light brown hair cascaded down her back. She was a few years their senior.

“Took your time getting back, Ramza,” Alma called.

Ramza almost smiled. “Sorry,” he said. “There was this whole kidnapping thing.”

“Excuses,” she scoffed, and by then she was close enough to hug him. Teta did the same to Delita.

“How we doing, boys?” Reis asked, as the sisters embraced their brothers.

“Beowulf called you a thing,” Delita said, ruffling Teta's hair.

“It's only because I don't respect you as a person,” Beowulf said.

“Well that's okay then,” Reis said. She slipped a hand around Beowulf's head and pulled him close for a kiss.

“Thank God you're here,” Alma said, pulling away from Ramza. “Teta would not stop talking.”

“That's unusual,” Ramza said, glancing at Teta.

“It's not every day your brother fights ten men single-handed,” Teta huffed.

“Single-handed!” Beowulf exclaimed, jerking away from Reis to glare between Teta and Delita.

“No, Beowulf's right,” Delita said. “Argus helped some.”

“Argus?” Alma asked. She glanced towards the taciturn young man, staring off into the sky. Argus started, and fell to one knee.

“Apologies, my ladies,” Argus said. “I forget myself.”

“Only one lady here,” Reis said. “But I do love the sight of a man on his knees.”

Argus gaped at her. Reis and Beowulf smirked at each other.

“It's an honor to meet you,” Teta said, kneeling and smiling into Argus' face. “Thank you for taking care of my brother.”

Argus shook his head. “No, my lady,” he said. “It is I who should thank you. Were it not for your brothers...were it not for Beowulf...” He lowered his eyes to the ground.

“The man fancies himself a martyr,” Delita grunted, hauling Argus upright. “Come on, you moron. You survived where a dozen trained knights couldn't, and with two arrows in you you felled

more men than any of us.”

Argus' face struggled between shock, pride, and gratitude. It made him look very young.

“Well, what are you boys still doing here?” Reis asked.

“What do you mean?” Ramza replied.

“When do you have to report for duty?” she said.

“Not until noon,” Delita said.

“So why aren't you hitting the town?” Reis inquired. “Celebrating the way heroes should?”

“Well, that depends,” Beowulf said. “Would a certain Templar-in-training be able to take the night off?”

“When you're this good,” Reis said. “They basically let you do what you like.”

Ramza considered, and looked among the others. Alma had a mischievous smirk on her face, and Teta's eyebrows were arched in sardonic amusement. Delita wore a rare, broad smile.

“Alright,” Ramza said. “Why not?”

Gariland is a city for students. It imports most of its essential goods, and its amusements are few and far between. By contrast, Igros is a proper city. Prince Larg's spacious castle overlooks the whole wide town of cobbled streets and wooden buildings. Prosperity comes with its share of entertainments. Gambling halls, stages for the theater, stages for dancers, and more than a few taverns.

By the time the town bells were ringing midnight, Ramza was reasonable confident they'd seen the majority of what there was to see.

They'd ended up at the Mage's Mystery, a strange little place hidden behind a bookstore. The furniture was absurdly comfortable, plush chairs and sunken sofas in myriad colors. All second-hand, and the friendly barkeep admitted that the owner had bought it off minor nobles fallen on hard times for cheap. Sad origins, maybe, but it made for a fine place to lounge back with a drink in hand, especially given the dusky light that glowed softly out from the runes etched near the ceiling all around the room.

“Ugh!” huffed Alma, folding her arms angrily in front of her. “Why can't *I* go to the Military Academy?”

“Little late now, isn't it?” Ramza asked, pleasantly light-headed. He'd had at least one drink at each stop, and he was not one to partake normally, so he felt warm and slightly dizzy, like his eyes were lagging just a second behind his head.

“I *know*, Ramza,” Alma said, glaring at him. Her cheeks were flushed and her wide green eyes blazed with accusations. “But I *wanted* to.”

“Don't blame Ramza for social conventions,” scoffed Reis. Beowulf had fallen asleep in the

crook of her neck about a half an hour ago, and somehow Reis still looked commanding with one arm wrapped protectively around him. "One of the few problems with being a noble lady, neh? Someone's got to carry on the line, and all the men are gonna be too busy murdering each other to guarantee that. So you get your defensive spells and your lessons on politics."

"Sounds boring as hell," Delita said, leaning forward on his elbows.

"You have no idea," Alma said.

"You like it?" Delita asked, glancing at Teta.

Teta shrugged. "It's boring," she agreed. "But it's not so bad. The others treat me nice enough." She looked around the table. "Are we running out of drinks?"

"We are!" Alma said, shoving a bag of gil towards her. "Grab the next round?"

"On it," Delita said. He and his sister rose, each swaying slightly, and took a slightly zigzagging path towards the bar.

Alma grabbed Ramza's arms, pulled his eyes back to her. Her anger was gone: now she seemed desperately sad. "Ramza," she said. "It isn't true."

Ramza blearily tried to follow along. "What's...what's not true?"

"Teta," Alma said. "She's not happy."

"Why would she be?" Reis asked. "She's trying to live in a hornet's nest."

Ramza shook his head in confusion. "What do you mean?"

Alma waved her hand. "The Preparatory Academy...it's all mind-games and politics, everyone trying to get in with the right nobles, with the right people, to make themselves important. I'm a bastard Beoulve, Ramza, but I'm still a Beoulve. The girls won't give me much trouble. But Teta? She doesn't matter, and they all know it. They take their anger out on her, because they know she can't do anything to stop them."

Ramza glanced at Delita, laughing with his sister at the bar. He thought of Cadet Madoc's disdain. He remembered how many other Cadets had acted the same way.

"I've seen it happen," Ramza said.

"But it's worse for her, Ramza," Alma said. "Delita's...Delita's good, right?"

"Better than me," Ramza said.

"No time for your self-pity, Ramza!" Alma said. "Delita's good. He can prove himself in other ways. The Academy...there's nothing she can do."

What a bleak thought.

"So what can we do?" Ramza asked.

Alma's eyes shone. "If I can come up with something," she said. "You'll help me convince

Dycedarg?"

Ramza felt a cold flash of trepidation. "Oh," he said.

"Ramza!" Alma whispered fiercely.

"I know," Ramza said. He did. This was important. But the idea of telling his brother what he should do...in what world was that his place? In what world...?

From the corner of his eye, he saw a slumped figure raise a glass to his lips. Ramza turned his head slightly, and saw Argus drinking alone in the corner. Thoughts of Dycedarg led him back to thoughts of their meeting earlier today. To the name Thadolfas, and of the pain it seemed to bring Argus.

"Yes," Ramza said, looking back at Alma. "If you come up with something, I'll help."

He rose from the table, ruffling Alma's hair, and crossed to Argus. He felt himself stumble slightly, felt that strange warm drunken doubt (*Am I doing the right thing? Would I do this sober? Does it matter?*) but hardened his resolve. He sat down in the chair across from Argus slightly harder than he intended, so it rattled against the wooden floor.

"Argus," he said.

Argus looked up from his miserable slump. A royal Healer had seen to his wounds before they'd met with Dycedarg, so only the faintest hints of yellow bruising remained to cloud his face. A broad jaw was matched by wide cheeks and a wide expanse of forehead, all carved by sharp worry lines. It gave the impression of a face prone to intensity and passion.

"Milord?" Argus said.

"Stop that," Ramza said, shaking his head. "I'm no one's lord."

"You're a Beoulve," Argus said. "Better than me."

Ramza blinked. He felt the awful weight of his name again.

"Argus," he said. "My father took a mistress during the War. A young widow with some money. His wife had just died, you see, and he...well."

It was always hard, to think of Balbanes so human. The idea that he could be lonely. He had seemed so strong, even in the throes of the plague.

"She gave birth," Ramza said. "To me. To Alma. Then the plague took her. He decreed us Beoulve. Had us brought up in the Manor." He leaned forwards. "I'm no lord, Argus. I'm just a bastard with a better father than most."

Argus stared up at him and gave a lurching shrug. "So what?" he asked. "Bastard or not, the Beoulve blood is in your veins, and you had your father's blessing. You had his honor and his reputation."

Such bitterness in his words.

“Argus,” Ramza said. “What's wrong with the name Thadolfas?”

Argus flinched. “You know,” he said.

“I don't,” Ramza said. “Remember, I was...I wasn't born into the house. I don't know what I'm supposed to know.”

“Heh,” grunted Argus. “No, I guess not. Every noble from Limberry to Gallione knows the name Thadolfas.”

“Why, Argus?” Ramza asked.

Argus grabbed his transparent glass and swigged down the amber liquid inside. He shivered, eyes closed.

“You know,” Argus said. “More than one Thadolfas was named Marquis. We can trace our line all the way back to the founding of Ivalice. We've been generals and heroes and kings and dukes and...” He sighed. “There was a time that the Thadolfas family was as beloved in Limberry as the Beoulve family is in Gallione.”

Another long silence. Argus made as though to drink from his glass, then gave it a sad once-over as he realized it was empty.

“My grandfather,” Argus said, setting his glass down in a clumsy clatter. “Was on the front lines when the 50 Years' War broke out. Second-in-command to the Limberry units, which meant he could spit and hit an Ordallian. He was a clever man, y'know.” Argus tapped his temple. “Real head for politics. Untarnished, no matter how much dirt his rivals tried to throw at him. So now he's at war, and he's got a chance to really make something of himself. He was hungry for glory. Took a scouting party deep into enemy territory, and got himself captured.”

“That's bad enough,” Argus said. “But my grandfather, he doesn't want to suffer, and he doesn't want to be ransomed. He's going to escape, y'see. Got a whole story worked out, tricking the guards and heading home. Y'know how he does it?”

Argus was smiling, and it was one of the most hateful faces Ramza had ever seen. The eyes were just too wide, the lips curled back over the teeth. He looked like a snarling animal.

“He's gonna let every man in his scouting squad die,” Argus said. “And he sells out the battle plans of a Lesalian unit. One of the king's personal regiments. Sells out his king and his men so he can avoid a little pain and win a little glory.”

Ramza felt a squirming guilt in his gut, like worms writhing in his belly.

“And it worked, Ramza!” Argus barked. “He was walking out of the gate with a map of the Ordallian lines. Nothing *real*, mind. Confirmation of what Ivalice already knew. But that's not his

fault, is it! He was captive! How was he to know? Give our forces *just* enough so it really looked like a daring escape.”

“Problem was, he hadn't counted on his squire. This commoner lad, a stable boy that my great grandfather had taken pity on before he died. This commoner heard, see. He was in the cell. He *actually* escaped. And he made damn sure my grandfather didn't.”

A heavy silence. Argus stared blearily at his empty glass. “And then he ran for home. Told everyone what had happened. They made the boy a knight for it.”

“So everyone heard,” Argus finished. “That the lord of House Thadolfas would gladly betray his men, his king, and his country all for the sake of a little personal comfort and glory. Who would ever trust such a man?”

Argus sighed and slumped forward onto his crossed arms. He closed his eyes.

“Father wouldn't believe it,” Argus said. “To him, grandpa was like a god. How could a god be so monstrous? But everyone knew. The Marquis. The king. Wasn't our fault, but we were Thadolfas. We were traitors by blood.”

He raised his eyes to Ramza. “Know why I'm not a cadet, milord?” he said. “Because the Academy wouldn't take me. No one would take me. House Thadolfas was to die in dishonor, with me the last of it. Except...”

He sighed and shook his head. “Except I went to see the Marquis, and that fool gave me an audience. Rose from his seat, pulled me to my feet, and told me I was to be his squire. His *personal* squire. A member of the Marquis' retinue. Less than any Thadolfas had been. More than we had any hope of being.”

“*His* squire?” Ramza repeated.

“His!” affirmed Argus, nodding. “He looked me in the eye and told me that we all pay for the sins of our fathers. That's all Ivalice has done since the Ydorans killed the Savior. But maybe there would be a time we'd paid enough. A time when we'd see salvation and redemption. A time when we would stand as equals. And he would not throw away a man for the sins of his father.”

He buried his head in his arms again. His voice was muffled. “And now he's gone. And I can't save him.”

Ramza did not know what to say. His mind, curiously, was not on Argus. It was on Argus' father. On the son of the man who had betrayed his liege lord, his king, and his followers. On the son who would not believe his father's evil.

That's how much your father's good example defines you. Imagine how much worse it would be if it were a bad example.

He said nothing, but reached over and ruffled Argus' hair. The man groaned in protest.

A heavy hand closed upon Ramza's upper arm.

"I think your friend's had rather too much to drink," said a low voice.

Ramza was jerked to his feet. He turned glaring eyes up into the face of the man grabbing him, and felt his surprise and anger melt away in shock. To him, his brother Zalbaag was always the man of military precision in his glossy black armor. To see him like this—in plain beige clothes, with a hooded cloak pulled over his bearded face—was so unexpected that it left Ramza rather at a loss for words.

He allowed himself to be pulled along and flung down into a chair. He saw Argus had come along for the ride, and everyone at their table was staring at Zalbaag, who grinned and threw back his hood.

"What?" Zalbaag said. "Are you really that surprised to see me?"

"Yes," Delita said.

"You shouldn't be," Zalbaag said. "I've lived in this town longer than any of you. I grew up here, and I had a damn sight more fun than Ramza while I did it." He grinned at his brother. "Though even *I* didn't manage to fight off ten revolutionaries as a cadet."

Ramza shook his head. "It wasn't me."

"Spare me your modesty," Zalbaag scoffed. "Any way you slice it, you were outnumbered more than two to one by hardened criminals and you put *them* to flight. If you were a bystander, Ramza, you still did more than some men ever dream."

Beowulf snored on Reis' soldier. There was almost a note of protest in the sound. Zalbaag lowered his eyebrows and gave him a suspicious once-over. "Are you even asleep?" Zalbaag asked.

"Maybe," Beowulf grunted, eyes still closed.

"What are you doing here?" Alma asked.

"Is it so hard to believe I came to celebrate with my brother?" Zalbaag asked.

"Again, yes," Delita said.

"Smart man," Zalbaag said. "Well. I thought you ought to be informed, given that you were the ones who discovered the Marquis' kidnapping."

"Informed?" Argus whispered, leaning forward and almost toppling over.

"Oh yes," Zalbaag said. "A Hokuten soldier delivered the message from Gariland. The Marquis is held in an undisclosed location, and will be executed unless the Corps is paid some five million gil."

Ramza's jaw dropped. "Five *million*?"

“A reasonable price for the liege lord of Limberry,” Zalbaag said.

“Common curs!” spat Argus.

“They are, aren't they?” Zalbaag asked. “But they don't think of themselves that way.”

“No,” Delita said. “They're revolutionaries who will tear down the nobility and build a better Ivalice. Why ransom their enemy when they can kill him?”

“Because they're whoresons!” shouted Argus, a little too loudly. But suddenly Ramza noticed that the bar was empty, save for the barkeep busily cleaning glasses at the rear of the place. When had it emptied out? How had it emptied out? He turned back to his brother, studying his enigmatic face intently.

“Whoresons and anarchists,” Zalbaag agreed. “Who would tear down the Crown and the Church and leave our Ivalice a worse den of heretics and hedonists than it ever was under the Ydorans. But they fancy themselves righteous. So the question is: why would righteous men ever taint their hands like this?”

“Greed,” hissed Argus.

“Argus,” Delita said, putting a hand on the other man's wrist. He looked into Zalbaag's face. “Any idea?”

“Oh, no,” Zalbaag said. “I've no idea what such common minds might scheme. Of course, I had men to tell me such things. Spies in the ranks of the Corps. I was supposed to hear from such a man, in Dorter, but...well. He's gone silent. I mentioned this to our brother,” he added, glancing at Ramza. “But he thinks it's a waste of time. The Hokuten are stretched thin enough, and Limberry is angry indeed. He thinks we should concentrate south of Mandalia and north along the Rhana Strait. That's where the bastards are supposed to be based. So that's what I'll do. Follow my orders.”

He rose again, smiling around them. “Ramza,” he said. “I'm really proud of you. But you know, technically, this outing constitutes desertion.”

Ramza tensed, his jaw dropping. Across the table, Delita flinched.

“Or it would,” amended Zalbaag. “But you're all cadets until noon tomorrow. Until then, there's no legal remedy the Hokuten could take against you. So at noon, you'll be deputized Hokuten, and you'll be subject to all our orders and regulations. I don't envy you. I always found guard duty terribly boring. Maybe you disagree. Still!”

He pulled out a heavy bag of gil and thumped it down upon the table. “I think it's best you enjoy yourself, before you get deputized,” he said cheerfully. “That should cover your expenses. I just expect any change back when you come home.”

He grabbed his brother's hand and shook it firmly. He turned to Alma and hugged her. He

waved jauntily to the barkeep, who nodded his farewell. “Oh,” he said conversationally. “There’s a stable south of town I think I might have forgotten to garrison. It’s the one his chocobo was quartered in.” He jerked his head towards Beowulf. “Would you lot mind checking for me, and reporting on it?”

“We’ll try, sir,” Delita said.

“Too kind of you, boys,” Zalbaag said. “And congrats, again.”

He left the bar quickly, pulling his hood up as he went. Ramza stared after him, then looked around the table in astonishment. Argus’ eyes were blazing, and a disbelieving smile was on Delita’s face. Ramza felt his stomach lurching.

“Well,” Beowulf said, rising to his feet. “We’d best get moving.”

“Alright,” Reis said. “Do try not to think too hard on what you’ll be missing out on.”

Beowulf stared at her, then looked around the table. “Well,” he said. “I guess we don’t *have* to leave at once-”

“Oh yes we do,” Delita said, pulling him away from Reis. “And you!” he said to the older woman. “You’re just cruel.”

Reis’ smile widened. “The boy wasted his time,” she said. “He should know better.”

“What are we...” Argus shook his head as though that would clear the fog of drunkenness. “Did he really mean-?”

“Mean what?” Delita asked. “He just wanted congratulate us. We’d best attend to our duties.”

“Del,” Ramza whispered. “Are you sure...?”

“No,” Delita answered. “But it’s worth doing, don’t you think?”

“Yes!” shouted Argus.

Delita flashed that strange smile at Argus. When he turned towards Teta, however, his face was serious. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Guard duty-”

“Can keep one busy, I’d imagine,” she said, as serious as her brother. “Well, I’ll see you soon, all the same.”

“Yeah,” Delita said, embracing her. “You will.”

Ramza looked at Alma, his head full of the night’s strangeness—of the Marquis, of Thadolfas, of Teta, and of Zalbaag’s figure, daunting in armor or in plainclothes. “Well-” he started, unsure of what to say, unsure of how he felt.

“Be safe,” she said.

“I’ll try,” Ramza said. “Let me know if you...” His eyes flickered to Teta.

“You have bigger things to worry about,” Alma said, hugging him.

Beowulf looked at Reis. “Not even a kiss?” he asked hopefully.

“You want another?” she said. “Then you'd best stay alive.”

The three cadets and the lonesome squire exchanged helpless glances, then made their stumbling way towards the door. Ramza took a moment to stare at the barkeep, who smiled at him “Haven't seen Lord Zalbaag in an age,” the barkeep said. “Old friend. Helps us out in times of trouble. Always points us towards good sales. Among other things.”

Again, he felt the shadows of the Dycedarg and Zalbaag, looming nearly as tall as his father. Suddenly he felt very small and very unsure of himself, even with Zalbaag's endorsement. What was he doing, riding off drunk into the night on some fool's errand? How had his brothers managed so much? How could Ramza hope to do the same?

But he had his name, Beoulve. He had the love of his siblings and the hopes of his father, and he had it on good authority that there was a chocobo stable unguarded to the south of town and a trading city a ways to the east where a man with answers might suddenly have gone missing. And more than that, he had a man who wanted desperately to repay the lord who had shown him such kindness, when his grandfather's terrible shadow had almost robbed him of all hope. That was a cause Ramza could understand, even in all his confusion.

He followed his friends out into the night.

Chapter 6: Of Merchants and Murders

The oldest cities of Ivalice follow a certain order. They are built along Ydoran frameworks, and the Ydorans had a gift for architectural planning that was not rediscovered until the time of King Delita. Dorter lacks such careful organization. It was not chosen because it was a suitable location for a city. How could it be? Located somehow betwixt shale hills, a dour bay, and a rancorous swamp, it is even now a nightmare of a place to live, a patchwork of careful luxury and disordered slum. It was founded because, during the chaos of the Fall, it was convenient to the wealthy interests of Ivalice to meet there rather than risk the long trek to their respective seats of power. East of Gallione and Murond, south of Fovoham and Zeltenia, west of Limberry and north of Lionel. It was a place where the rich got richer while the poor scrabbled in the mud. Such a place made an ideal recruiting ground for rebels across history, such as the Death Corps...

-Alazlam Durai, "A Sociological, Economic, and Political Encyclopedia of the Cities of Ivalice"

Ramza rapped out two slow knocks upon the door. He waited a moment, then rapped out three knocks in quick succession. When no one answered, he slipped his key into the door, turned the lock, and slipped inside.

They had been in Dorter a little less than a week, but the room seemed like it had held them for longer than that. There were only two small beds inside and two bedrolls on the floor, and for the sake of fairness the four men rotated between them. For convenience, each man had his own corner to keep his stuff, but between them they had still managed to leave trash and old food on tables and shelves and on the floor itself. Perhaps the innkeep could have dealt with it, if they had not given strict, *expensive* instructions to leave their room alone.

One more frustration, in a city fully of them.

They had set out from Igros late into the night, all still a little too drunk to manage their chocobos, Ramza's head full of his warnings of panthers. He swore he had seen one keeping even pace with them, perhaps trying to decide if they were easy prey or not. They had rested sparingly, driven on by Argus' desperation. Ramza was not entirely sure the Limberry squire had slept during the four days' hard riding that had brought them and their exhausted mounts to Dorter.

From his first glimpse, Dorter had made Ramza nervous. Dorter was a sprawling anarchy, the guarded palaces of minor nobles and wealthy merchants, the rows of stalls and vendors with their own armed attendants, the diseased tenements where the vast mass of Dorter's population tried to eke out

some form of a living. The exhausted, saddlesore men had ridden through the crowded streets, eyes wide and searching. Igros was nothing like this. No place Ramza had seen was like this.

Six days later, and Ramza felt still more unsettled.

The four of them had no real plans when they'd set off from Igros: just Zalbaag's words and what little they could piece together. A spy for the Hokuten had gone missing in Dorter, and that had to somehow be connected to the Marquis. Now, they had to find out how.

In the end, they had decided to each play a role they thought themselves best suited for. They had gotten this room on the edge of town, paid extra for a guarantee of privacy, and made sure to move on their own so no one would suspect they were colluding.

To be honest, Ramza had thought to crack this thing in the first day or two. With his nicer clothes and his brother's sack of money, he had played the agent of an up-and-coming Igros merchant looking to break into Dorter. The lie did not come easily to him, which Delita thought was a good thing. Delita believed that, if Ramza appeared naïve and unsure, men might speak more freely in his presence, hoping to cow, awe, take advantage of, or intimidate him. It was not exactly a flattering picture, but all Ramza wanted to do was find the spy in question.

He hadn't managed that. What he had managed was to be warned off by friendly aides and vendors, while others had tried to lure him into investing large stakes in their ventures and assuming all the risk. This was not a good time to break into the Dorter markets: word had it that the Death Corps was shaking down merchants, particularly ones dependent on the convoys and caravans. The Corps levied a "common tax" for use of the "common roads." Those who did not pay could not guarantee the safety of their cargo.

"Rank banditry!" Argus had snarled.

"Yes, it is," Delita agreed. "And *not* what the Corps is supposed to do."

"They're common criminals," Argus hissed.

"These are," Delita said, nodding. "But why would a group that wants the support of the people threaten them like this? No, this is a short-sighted move. It's not Corps' practice or policy. But it's just the kind of thing people who want to ransom the Marquis would do."

That had all been during their first day of inquiry, and Ramza thought they might find their man by the second. That had been absurdly optimistic, as he had discovered: most who were actually willing to talk just repeated some version of the story. The rest tried to lure Ramza into bribing them, or attempted to scam him out of his gil. Six days later, and he had nothing to show for it but a slightly lighter moneybag.

There was a knock at the door—two knocks, a pause, then three faster knocks. Ramza moved

to the door and swung it open, admitting a dour Argus.

“No luck?” Ramza said.

“Luck!” spat Argus.

“I’ll take that as a no,” Ramza sighed.

Argus slunk into a chair. Given that there was no chance of hiding his Limberry brogue, they’d decided it was best for Argus to play with his cards face up: a man of the Marquis’ retinue now charged with seeing him safely back home. He was authorized to pay the ransom, if he could find the man. He was also authorized to kill any citizens of Gallione he had to.

“The Limberry merchants don’t *know* anything,” growled Argus. “Except that there’s talk of war in Limberry.”

“War?” Ramza said. “With who?”

“With the Corps,” grunted Argus. “With the Hokuten. With the Crown. It’ll come to nothing and the in the meantime no one *does* anything.”

“And the rest?” Ramza said.

“No one wants to piss off these common bastards,” Argus said, shaking his head. “They worry more about the Corps than the Crown. It’s a bad state, Ramza.”

No arguing that. If the people of Ivalice could not trust the Crown to protect them, how could they feel safe? How could they believe in the people who were supposed to keep them safe, when the Corps could disguise themselves as knights, kidnap the Marquis, and slaughter his escort without reprisal? How could justice ever be served?

The door burst open. Ramza dove at once for his sword, while Argus rolled backwards out of his chair and grabbed at his bow, an arrow already nocked.

“It’s fine!” Beowulf shouted, with a cloth pack pressed to his face. “It’s me!”

Ramza and Argus glared at him. “You are *supposed* to knock!” shouted Argus.

“Waste of time,” Beowulf said, sinking into a chair on the other side of the room.

“No, it’s not,” Ramza said. “Delita explained this.” The knock was supposed to be their way of guaranteeing each others’ identities, and possibly each others’ lives. If someone learned who they were and what they were after, they would have to learn the knock as well, and that would require keeping anyone they captured alive.

“Look,” Beowulf said. “If they’ve captured *me*, you bastards were dead weeks ago.”

“Whatever you say, Wulfie,” Ramza said.

Beowulf glared at Ramza. Argus cleared his throat loudly.

“Oh, what!” Beowulf yelled, whirling to face him.

"Any. News?" Argus asked, through gritted teeth.

"Oh, sure," Beowulf said. "Nother one of those killings. Family's added their bounty to the pot, so it's up to 1200 gil."

"1200?" Ramza said. "What riches. That's enough to keep this room for two whole nights."

"These aren't exactly rich families, Ramza," Beowulf said.

"I know." He stared off into space, thinking. Dorte was never peaceful at the best of times, but word had it that there had been a string of killings lately, men struck down in dark alleys or abandoned hovels.

Ramza's distant eyes found Beowulf's bruised face. "You got into *another* fight?"

Beowulf scowled. "The bartender wouldn't believe me."

"That's because you look like a fifteen year-old running away from his dad," Ramza said. Beowulf had insisted on playing the role of a bounty hunter, which had led less to information and more to a series of fights and brawls whenever anyone expressed disbelief in Beowulf's story.

"I know about the murders," Beowulf said.

"What about them?" Ramza said. "That they happened?"

"More than that!" Beowulf said defensively. "These were executions. All sword wounds, real precise. Someone's taking these guys out."

"Could be the Corps," Argus said.

"Could be," Beowulf said.

"Or it could be unrelated," Ramza said. "As far as we know, this has *nothing* to do with the Marquis."

There was a knock on the door: two slow knocks, a pause, and then three knocks in quick succession. Ramza set down his sword and pulled the door open: Delita stepped through, his sword at his side. Like Argus, Delita's story required little in the way of disguise.

He glanced wryly at Beowulf. "Another fight, Wulfie?" he asked.

Beowulf shrugged, and Delita shook his head. "None of you," he observed. "Are any good at this."

"And you're *too* good," Argus said. "Should the rest of us be worried?"

"Why?" Delita asked. "Am I about to be discharged without pay?" He looked at Ramza.

"How could I do such a thing?" Ramza asked. "We don't pay you."

"See?" Delita said. "You're safe, Argus." He leaned against a wall, his arms folded across his chest.

"Any news?" Argus asked, his voice acerbic.

“Well, that depends,” Delita said. “Nothing *new*, exactly. But some interesting bits and pieces that look a little different now.”

“How do you mean?” Ramza asked. Delita had chosen to play a bitter former member of a noble's staff, looking for revenge after the mistreatment of his father. He went by his real name and advertised his military training. Delita figured that would make him look more attractive to the Corps, although the idea seemed to make Argus awfully nervous.

But few men and women were foolish enough to express their support for the Corps, even to a would-be recruit. Delita had gone to any bar or meeting that would have him, but had been largely unsuccessful in making any contacts. The Marquis' kidnapping had sent most Corps supporters to ground. No one wanted to be caught between the Hokuten and the knights of Limberry.

“Stop fucking around and tell us!” shouted Argus.

“Argus!” Ramza exclaimed.

Delita watched Argus impassively. Argus was breathing heavily, his face red.

“Sorry,” Argus said. “Please.”

“It's not much,” Delita said. “Just trying to make everything fit. You know how many commanders the Corpse Brigade had?”

“Wiegraf Folles,” Argus said. “The commoner who would be king.”

“The commoner who would kill all kings,” amended Delita. “But that doesn't matter to us. Wiegraf commanded the bulk of the Corpse Brigade, but had two chief lieutenants. His sister, Miluda, led an all-women unit called the Valkyries. The other was a man named Gustav Margueriff.”

“Gustav?” Ramza repeated.

“He operated behind the Ordallian lines,” Delita said. “Making it hard for them to get supplies, fomenting rebellion in the territory they'd occupied. The forces of Limberry might not have held out without them.”

“And that gives them the right to hurt their lord?” Argus snarled.

“Argus!” Ramza said again. “Calm yourself!”

“I wasn't defending them,” Delita said. “I was explaining. You have to understand your enemy if you hope to defeat them.”

“And what does this history lesson tell us?” Argus growled.

“Well,” Delita said. “All three were discharged without pay, as were their followers. That was when they led the Brigade into rebellion. That was when they became the Death Corps.”

“And?” Argus demanded.

“Wiegraf's been hounding Igros and Lesalia,” Delita said. “Using the old forts along the

Lenalian Mountains and the Fovoham Plateau. Gives him lots of chances to disrupt the nobility. The Valkyries are supposed to be in Mandalia, harassing Hokuten patrols, making it impossible for them to gather their strength. So where's Gustav?"

"I take it you know?" Argus said.

"No idea," Delita said.

"Then *why bring it up?*" Argus yelled.

"Aargus!" Ramza shouted again, rising from his chair.

"No, Ramza!" Argus roared, whirling to face him. "They will *execute the Marquis if we don't find him!* And what are we doing? Wasting time talking to merchants and playing pretend. Or is it pretend, Delita?" Argus glared at the other man, still impassive on the wall.

"How many men have been killed now?" Delita asked, staring at Argus.

"How..." Argus trailed off, his glare softened by confusion.

"Uh, six," Beowulf said, his eyes flickering between the other men.

"Six," Delita said. "I wonder if one of them was Zalbaag's spy?"

Silence in the room. Ramza and the others glanced between them.

"What are you saying?" Ramza asked.

"I think I'm piecing something together," Delita said. "Six men, each killed very precisely. Executed, one might say. Why? I think it was because that knew too much."

"Too much about *what*, Delita?" Ramza said. In spite of his admonishments to Argus, he was beginning to feel aggravated himself. Why was his friend insisting on being so enigmatic?

Delita shook his head. "Like I said. I'm figuring this out. We know the Corps is here, shaking down merchants for protection fees. Let's leave the fact that that's not what the Corps' is supposed to do: someone's doing it. So why haven't we run into them? We're all over this city. One way or another, we should have heard something. But the only thing we know for sure is that the six men are dead. Executed."

Ramza's annoyance was gradually draining away. He felt like he almost understood what Delita was aiming at. He could see the pieces clicking together.

"Six men are dead," Ramza repeated. "Executed."

"Just as the Corps seems to have disappeared from Dorter," Delita said. "After a series of shakedowns that violate Corps' policy. After the Marquis was kidnapped. And we don't know where Gustav Margueriff is, do we?"

"The men that took the Marquis...the men threatening the merchants..." Ramza thought to himself. "They're the same?"

“And they're gone,” Delita said. “Except for these dead men.”

“What does that matter?” Argus growled. “Dead men don't talk.”

“No,” Delita said. “But their living friends do.”

Argus's mouth dropped. “What?”

“The man who died last night-” Delita started.

“Erik,” Beowulf interrupted. “Erik Fulke.”

“Erik,” Delita continued. “He had a friend. Ivan Mansel. But wouldn't you know it, Ivan's gone missing.”

“You think Ivan killed Erik?” Beowulf asked.

“I don't know,” Delita said. “But I spoke with his mother, and I do know that Ivan and Erik used to play at a little hovel on the outskirts of the slums. Their little fort. And I heard from a man at a bar that Ivan used to host pro-Corps meetings there.”

Argus' mouth dropped. “You...you don't think...”

“I think we've had no answers,” Delita said. “And I think we've earned some. Don't you?”

Argus nodded jerkily. “Delita,” he said. “I'm sorry.”

“It's nothing, Argus,” Delita said. “If it were Ramza that had been taken, you think I'd be acting any different?”

“I'll be sure to get kidnapped next time,” Ramza said. “See you put your money where your mouth is.” From the corner of his eye, he saw a strange look pass over Argus' face, but it was gone as swiftly as it had come.

“What money?” Delita said. “You don't pay me.”

Ramza moved to his sword, but hesitated. “Delita,” he began. “You said we shouldn't all leave together.”

“I did,” Delita said. “But I have it on good authority that Ivan Mansel had supplies delivered to that hovel last week. If he's anywhere-”

“Then what are we waiting for!” Argus exploded.

“Not a damn thing,” Delita said, and the four men set out into the night in pursuit of the first real lead they'd had since they left Igros.

Chapter 7: In Search of Gustav

Of the Ydoran sword arts, perhaps none was more associated with the nobility than the Bursting Blade. By careful training, the practitioners of this art learned to channel their magical energies through their swords, focusing their power to unleash the bursts of magical energy for which the art is named. These blasts could prove as devastating as any mage's art, but the cost of learning it proved largely prohibitive. Without the amplifying materials and microrunes of a proper Ydoran blade, even men who learned the art were not often able to put it to use. Notable exceptions to this rule include Rosalind Selfina, Taran Singleton, and the infamous Wiegraf Folles. It's practitioners were commonly known as Mage Knights, though this term is somewhat misleading, as there is a marked difference between conventional magic and the Bursting Blade. For instance...

-Alazlam Durai, "Sword Arts of Ivalice"

Dorter was a stinking city, thick with too many men and no Ydoran plumping systems to efficiently deal with waste. The whole place always smelled damp and shitty, too crowded and too grimy. For the past six days, that smell had been discouraging; but when Ramza left the inn with his three friends in tow he inhaled as deeply as though he were on the Mandalia Plains again, a smile upon his face.

Beowulf had his twin blades on his hips: Ramza and Delita wore their matching blades: Argus had his bow and his quiver. They were moving, and that movement was certainty unto itself. It had been so long since they'd been able to move with purpose and direction, and they felt righteous and confident for it.

For those few moments where they walked across sun-baked mud with their weapons at hand, Ramza felt grand. He felt like a Beoulve: like a man equal to the challenges of the world. He felt like he could live up to his father's legacy.

That feeling vanished as thunder rolled across the clear blue sky, and a plume of smoke rose up from the city in front of them.

They stopped and stared, looking amongst themselves for answers. "Magic?" Beowulf suggested.

"As if those common bastards could learn it!" Argus said.

"Argus is right," Delita said. "The Corps' not supposed to have much in the way of mages."

But as the masses of Dorter began to flee from the smoke, Ramza and his friends plunged forward, weaving their way through the crowd. Ramza lost track of the others in the press: he could

only see Delita's armor, and he focused on that to the exclusion of all else.

They emerged through the thick press and found the hovel Delita had been leading them towards, a one-story hut approximately the size of the room they'd been staying at. At least, that was Ramza's assumption: it was actually somewhat hard to tell, since half of it had exploded outwards into a smoking ruin. Two corpses lay face down among the debris, naked blades in their dead hands. There were still three living souls.

One was on his knees, while the other two had their swords at his throat. The two with pointed swords sent a peculiar thrill through Ramza that he could feel race down his spine and spread through his stomach and groin. Besides his brothers, he was not sure he had ever seen anyone look quite so *dangerous*.

They were a man and a woman, both in cloaks of green. The woman was imperious, with brown hair hanging down to her shoulders, a hooked nose and a well-defined jaw. Her dark eyes studied the man she was holding at swordpoint with clear distaste. The sword in her hand was steady.

The man besides her shared her rugged jaw and hooked nose, but his hair was lighter in shade, and his eyes somehow softer. His sword seemed to glow faintly, though this could just have been a trick of the light.

Argus drew his arrow. Delita grabbed him, and hauled him into a nook concealed behind some fallen debris. Ramza and Beowulf followed at once.

"Who's there!" shouted the woman, in a deep, authoritative voice. Ramza and the others remained behind their wall, while Argus struggled in Delita's grasp, glaring at him over the hand covering his mouth.

"Someone running," a male voice said, deeper still. "Leave it."

They heard the scuff of feet turning in the dirt. "The Folles," whispered Delita, and Argus stiffened. Ramza and Beowulf gaped at Delita.

Wiegraf and Miluda? The brother and sister who had led the Corpse Brigade? What on earth were they doing here? They were supposed to be harassing the Hokuten, to the north and south of Gallione.

"Now," Wiegraf continued. "Do I have to ask again, or are you going to insist on doing something foolish?"

"I don't...I don't know what yer talking about," said a reedy thin voice.

"No?" Miluda said. "So why did your friends try to kill us?"

"Not my friends," grunted the reedy voice.

"Then whose friends?" Miluda said. "Gustav's?"

Silence. Ramza hesitated, then risked a quick peek around the corner. The Folles still had their blades on the young man's throat. He was looking down at the ground.

Wiegraf lowered his sword and dropped to one knee. "Ivan," he said. "I think those men were here to kill you. Just like they killed Erik."

The young man stiffened, and his eyes jerked up to Wiegraf.

"I think you didn't like what Gustav was doing here," Wiegraf continued. "I think you wanted to get help. I think he wanted to make sure you didn't get the chance."

"He—" Ivan whispered. "Erik...!" There were tears in his voice.

"I know," Wiegraf said, resting a comforting hand on Ivan's shoulder. "It's no easy thing, to be caught between the powerful. That's why the Corps exists. To make sure abuses such as these never go unpunished. To deliver justice to those who think themselves beyond its reach."

Ramza felt a fierce pang somewhere deep in his stomach. This was the leader of brigands and bandits who cut merchants to pieces on the roads? So why did he...

Why did he sound just a little like Balbanes?

"Erik!" Ivan sobbed.

"Graffy," Miluda said warningly. "Someone will come to investigate."

Wiegraf said nothing for a time, and then said, softly, "Where is he, Ivan?"

Ivan said nothing for several seconds. Ramza strained to hear.

"The cellar," Ivan whispered.

Wiegraf patted him on the shoulder, and rose to his feet. "Alright," he said. "Now, let's—"

Movement, from the corner of Ramza's eye. A blur, hurtling towards Wiegraf. He whirled, sliced, and two halves of a neatly-severed arrow hit the earth to either side of him.

"Graffy!" Miluda cried.

"Run!" Wiegraf shouted.

They hauled Ivan to his feet and took off down the street. Ramza turned disbelieving eyes on Argus as he nocked another arrow. He caught the fleeting look of fury on Delita's face, but it passed at once into that familiar, razor concentration.

"No time!" Delita shouted, and launched himself over their cover. Ramza and Beowulf followed, charging after their fleeing targets, all three men drawing their blades as they ran. Another arrow flew, and buried itself in the back of Ivan's leg. Ivan screamed, and Wiegraf cursed.

"Alright!" Wiegraf bellowed, releasing his hold on Ivan and turning to face them, drawing his shimmering sword. "We fight!"

Miluda turned with her own blade held at the ready. Ramza felt a moment's hesitation,

tightening his grip on his sword. He stared at the man who'd sounded just a little like Balbanes, and wondered-

Ivan threw himself sideways, catching Ramza in the midriff, his legs tangling with Beowulf, his arms grappling with Delita. The four men fell in a gasping, struggling heap. Ramza tried to right himself, and heard Ivan give a strangled cry. "Run!"

Miluda and Wiegaf exchanged glances, then took off. A third arrow flew, and bit into the ground where Miluda had been standing.

Delita hauled Ivan to his feet and socked him in the face. As he pitched to the ground, he shouted to Beowulf, "Hold him!" and went running after Wiegaf and Miluda. Ramza followed, but the Folles rounded a corner ahead of them. By the time they'd caught up, they were gone.

"Damn it!" hissed Delita. He turned sharply on his heel, striding back in the direction they'd come. Beowulf had a struggling Ivan pinned in the dirt, and Argus had come to join them.

"Stop struggling," grunted Argus, and kicked at the broken arrow in Ivan's leg. Ivan screamed.

"What the hell were you doing!" Delita demanded.

Argus' eyebrows arched. "Mad I hurt your commoner friends?"

"We weren't ready to move!" Delita roared.

"These curs hurt my comrades," spat Argus. "They took my Marquis. I am not going to let them get away."

"We could have learned more," Delita said. "We weren't ready to move. If you weren't too stupid to see that-"

"You dare-!"

"What do we do with him?" Ramza asked, kneeling besides Ivan.

"You bastards," sobbed Ivan. "You bastards."

Argus kicked the young man in the face, which gave a sickening *crack* as blood spurted into the dust.

"Argus!" Ramza shouted, rising to his feet as Ivan howled in pain.

"These men would put an end to crown and country," growled Argus. "They deserve-"

"We take him with us," Delita said. "We need to know what he knows."

They glanced among themselves, then nodded, and hauled Ivan to his feet.

The journey back to the inn earned them no shortage of strange looks, but Ramza and Argus simply said, "Official business!" in their best commanding voices whenever anyone looked like they might interfere, and so managed to return to the inn. The innkeep might have been more suspicious, but several coins from Ramza's pouch seemed to convince him there was nothing worth his concern.

Still, there was no telling who was in the city today, on the lookout for just such strangeness.

“Beowulf,” Delita said. “Keep watch outside.”

Beowulf nodded, and closed the door behind them.

They bound Ivan's hands behind his back. He had stopped struggling, blood trickling down his face, relying on them to keep him upright as his left leg trembled with the arrow still in it. Ramza could smell the blood. It reminded him of the blood he'd had upon his face.

The moment his hands were bound, Argus shoved the man forwards, and he hit the ground hard. He groaned into the floor.

Argus grabbed him by the hair, and jerked his head upright. His nose was crooked to one side, and his face crusty with blood. Ramza felt a fierce pang against his ribs. “Now,” Argus said. “Where is the Marquis?”

The young man stared at Argus with dazed eyes. Argus pulled the man upright by the hair, and Ivan moaned in protest. “Found your tongue, maggot?” Argus asked. “Good. I'll ask again. Where is the Marquis?”

“I d-don't-” Ivan stuttered, and Argus threw him to the ground. As the man hit the floor, Argus placed his foot against the broken arrow shaft.

“Don't what?” Argus asked.

“Argus-!” Ramza started, but Delita grabbed him by the wrist and shook his head.

“Where is the Marquis?” growled Argus, and pressed his foot down. Ivan screamed.

“Enough,” Delita said, moving forwards and pushing Argus aside.

“I'll say when there's enough,” Argus said.

“Argus!” Ramza said warningly.

Argus gave him a wary look, then relented and stepped back against a nearby wall. Delita pulled Ivan to his feet and placed him gently in one of their chairs.

“You're Ivan, right?” Delita said.

The man said nothing. Delita smiled, as though he'd answered. “I'm Delita,” he continued. “The nice man over there is Ramza. The thing behind me is Argus.”

Argus gave a derisive snort.

“Ivan,” Delita said. “How long you been in the Corps?”

Ivan continued to stare down at the floor, tears and blood mixing freely on his face.

“Not long, right?” Delita said. “I bet. Dorte's a hard place to live. Merchants and nobles just do what they want, and the rest of us have to beg for scraps.”

Ivan's eyes lifted into Delita's face searchingly.

“But you didn't get the full story, Ivan,” Delita said. “See, whatever else is going on: the Corps is finished. Limberry'll do it if the Hokuten won't. But the Corps can't fight an army. And the Crown doesn't care if you had a good reason for trying to kill them. They're gonna kill everyone who ever wore the crowned skull. They have to. To make sure this doesn't happen again.”

Tears were welling in Ivan's eyes. He looked lost and hopeless, and terribly young. Ramza felt another pang against his ribs.

“Now, Ivan,” Delita continued. “It seems to me you know something important. Wiegraf and Miluda wanted to know it, too. That's good. Good for us and good for you. Because you don't have to die. You tell us what we need to know, and you get to walk away.”

“What?” Argus snapped, stepping away from the wall. Delita held up a forestalling hand.

“You don't tell us?” Delita said. “And I'm afraid I have to let my friend here get the information. However he can.”

Gods. In what way was this just? How did torture and intimidation serve Ivalice?

Ivan's eyes were screwed up, tears falling freely. He was sobbing in earnest now. “It's not f-f-fair,” he whimpered. “It's n-n-not. We d-deserve-”

“Oh, what!” Argus growled, shoving past Delita, knocking the chair backwards so Ivan pitched to the floor. The broken arrow in his leg jolted against the seat, and he squealed in pain. “What do you whoresons deserve! You turn against the crown! You turn against God! You kill merchants and men of honor, and you take heroes for ransom!”

“No!” shouted Ivan. “No! We don't! Gustav-!”

He broke off. Delita and Argus hauled the chair upright, bringing Ivan with it.

“Gustav Margueriff?” Delita said.

Ivan gave a shaky nod.

“What did he do?” Delita asked.

“He runs the Corps around here,” Ivan whispered. “E-erik and me, we j-joined 'cause... 'cause we wanted to m-make a d-d-difference. And he m-made us...h-he...” He broke off, breathing shakily.

“Made you what, Ivan?” Delita asked.

“We're supposed to be fighting back!” Ivan shouted. “We're supposed to be making the world better! Not hurting merchants! Not making them pay us! Not...not...!”

“Not kidnapping the Marquis,” Delita finished.

Ivan nodded. “We're b-better than that.”

Argus laughed nastily. “We're b-better than that!” he repeated, in a blubbery falsetto. “Better than what, maggot!”

“We're not thieves,” Ivan said. “We don't hurt people.” He looked up at Argus. “We're not like you.”

“No,” Argus said. “You're not.” He stepped forwards. “Where is the Marquis?”

Ivan said nothing. Argus nodded, then threw himself forwards, raining blows down upon the young man. The chair snapped beneath him. Ivan's voice rose to a terrible screech, and the pang behind Ramza's ribs was like an arrow flying out from his heart.

“Enough!” shouted Ramza, grabbing Argus and hurling him backwards. He stared aghast first at Argus, fists wet with Ivan's blood: then at Delita, arms folded, face impassive; and then lastly to the fallen man, sobbing and whimpering as blood oozed from his wounds.

“Out,” Ramza said. “Both of you.”

Argus' jaw clenched. “Ramza-” he started.

“Out,” Ramza repeated.

Argus hesitated, then left the room. Delita followed without a word.

Ramza knelt by the young man's side. As Ivan cried, Ramza gently pulled him from the broken chair. “I'm going to turn you over now,” Ramza said. “Alright?”

When Ivan did not answer, Ramza turned him over. He pulled his bag towards him, and fished out his healing supplies. He studied the wound in the man's thigh, pulled a little at his trousers to expose the bloody flesh.

“This is going to hurt,” Ramza said. “I'm sorry. But it will help you in the long run.”

He set to work, as Ivan whimpered and gasped and moaned. First, pulling the arrow out in one sickening *squelch*: then hastily dressing the wound with gauze and salve, hoping that not too much damage had been done in Ivan's many falls and blows. The overripe salty smell of blood and sweat was thick in his nose, and Ivan's blood was on his fingers.

Again. How many times would he bear the blood and never swing the sword?

He untied Ivan's bonds, and stretched him back along one of their bedrolls. He studied the man's bruised and bloody face.

“Better?” he asked.

Ivan hesitated, then nodded. Ramza looked towards the closed door.

“I'm sorry,” Ramza said. His head was full of doubts again. The Corps had done monstrous things. They had taken the Marquis, who was in need of rescuing. He could hardly fault Argus for his desperation, but to cause such pain to such a man?

“For what?” Ivan croaked.

“About my friends,” Ramza said. He paused, then added, “And about yours. Erik, right?”

Ivan closed his eyes and nodded again.

“Who killed him?” Ramza asked.

Ivan tried and failed to choke back a sob. “We w-wanted to...we...”

“It's alright,” Ramza said. “It's not your fault.”

“It is!” Ivan howled. “E-erik d-didn't want to! He was s-s-scared! I t-told him...it was our d-duty! We had to...we had to...!”

Ivan dissolved into sobs again. Ramza waited, tempted to comfort the boy in some way, unsure if he should. This was his prisoner, right? This was a member of those terrible bandits, those anarchists who would tear Ivalice apart. But Ivan didn't seem like that. Ivan seemed like a scared young man. Ivan seemed like Ramza.

“What did you have to do?” Ramza asked.

“To t-tell someone,” Ivan said. “T-to t-t-tell Wiegraf, or...”

“Wiegraf,” Ramza repeated, thinking of the gentle man in the streets of Dorter. “He's not like Gustav?”

Ivan shook his head fiercely. “He's gonna make the nobles pay,” Ivan whispered. “Gonna make'em see. We got pride. We got...we're better. We're...”

“Not like Gustav,” Ramza finished.

Ivan shook his head again. Ramza was thinking of his father. About Justice and Service. About the way the Corps had undeniably been wronged. About the way Argus had been wronged.

“Ivan,” Ramza said. “This Gustav, he...he had your friend killed?”

Ivan nodded, tears leaking out beneath his closed eyes. Ramza tried to imagine how he would feel if someone killed Delita, and felt cold dread creeping out from the pit of his stomach.

“He had your friend killed,” Ramza repeated. “He's had merchants killed. He...”

He remembered the slaughter in the Plains. Remembered the mans' blood on his face.

“Someone needs to stop him,” Ramza said, wondering if he had the strength to do it.

“Wiegraf will,” Ivan said.

“Maybe,” Ramza said. “He seems...” He didn't do the word. Daunting, he supposed. “But what if he can't?”

Ramza sat by Ivan's head, and Ivan breathed in shallow gasps, and neither spoke for a long time.

He pushed the door open, leading Ivan into the hall. Argus, Delita, and Beowulf stared at him. “What-” Argus started.

“Go home,” Ramza said, nudging Ivan. “Stay safe.”

“Ramza!” Argus said.

Ivan gave Argus a look of terror, but Ramza took him by the shoulders. “It's over,” Ramza said, staring into the other man's eyes and trying to muster some kind of conviction. “We'll see to that.”

He looked from Ivan to the other men in the hall, one by one. Each reluctantly nodded, and Ivan nodded in turn, and limped down the hall.

“He's a traitor!” hissed Argus, when Ivan was out of sight.

“He's a young man who made a foolish mistake,” Ramza said. “I think you of all people would know the value of forgiveness, Argus.”

Argus reddened, but said nothing. Ramza turned towards Delita, who was studying him with a sad smile on his face.

“You're too soft, Ramza,” Delita said.

“Maybe,” Ramza said. “But I know where the Marquis is.”

“You what!” Argus bellowed, grabbing Ramza by the shoulders.

“I know where the Marquis is,” Ramza repeated.

“Where?” Delita asked.

“An abandoned trading post on the outskirts of the Zeklaus Desert,” Ramza said. “A place they call the Sand Rat's Cellar.”

Delita nodded. “Shouldn't be hard to find.”

“What the hell happened in there?” Beowulf asked.

“We got what we needed,” Delita said.

“I don't understand,” Argus said. “Why a Cellar?”

“Gallione slang,” Delita said. “Cellar's what we call a rat's nest.”

Chapter 8: The Cornered Rat

If you have to choose between the fire and the frying pan, which do you choose?

This was not the first time the question had crossed Gustav's mind. In some ways, he felt like it had been with him his entire life. It had certainly been with him when he'd first seen what soldiers might do, in the name of victory and vengeance. It had been with him when he'd seen what the powerful might do, to line their pockets. It was with him now, as he stared down at the bloody Marquis Elmdor.

He looked around the dusty room. Once, the place had been lavish: crates still lined the stone walls, and broken desks rimmed the gaudy red carpet. His father had brought Gustav to this trading outpost in its twilight years, looking for a rare kind of Ordallian seed that war had made exceptionally difficult to find. But trade in the Zeklaus Desert was a risky proposition at the best of times, and the 50 Years' War had driven the place to ruin.

It had always lingered in Gustav's mind, however. Its isolation. The clear view it provided of the surrounding dunes and scrub grass. A good base of operations, for rebels looking to make a stand against terrible powers.

An even better place, for bandits and thieves to hide from justice.

After all, that was what he'd become, wasn't it? Gustav Margueriff, once a rising star among the Hokuten. Gustav Margueriff, Wieggraf's right hand. Gustav Margueriff, kidnapper and murderer of young men who were little more than children.

He kicked the bound Marquis, who groaned and folded into a fetal position as much as his tied hands would allow. Crusted blood soaked his long silver-blonde hair, and his once-fine clothes of red and black had been shredded by harsh treatment.

"You fuckin' nobles," Gustav whispered, as though his sins could be laid at the Marquis' feet.

No better than the Hokuten, was he? He remembered the captured Ordallians still. One captured knight. One squire. One woman-at-arms, an Ordallian commoner recruited to serve in the masses of soldiers needed to fight a war that had lasted five decades. The knight had earned a tent and good food, while they arranged his ransom. The squire and the soldier?

Ivalice and Ordallia had been at war for a long time. And the Hokuten weren't going to let live scapegoats go to waste.

He remembered that night. The tents stretching out for miles in every direction, just north of the green bulk of the Germinas Mountains, campfires flickering tentatively beneath a thick blanket of stars above. He remembered how impassive and terrible such a beautiful night seemed, when he knew

what was happening beneath it.

He remembered the screams, the scratching of a bedroll against the dirt and the thick slap of flesh against flesh. He remembered the cracks of bone. He remembered that there came a time when he couldn't tell the difference between their screams and cries and whimpers anymore. When it was just a duet of human misery, never quite masked by the jeers and sadistic derision of the soldiers.

He remembered walking away, and hating himself for it.

He'd listened as long as he could. He sat in his tent with his fists clenched and his sword in his hand and imagined himself bursting in as a hero. Were these not human beings, just the same as the men and women of Ivalice? Were these not the same as your sons and daughters, brothers and sisters? How could you do this?

How could you just sit there, and let them?

And he had walked away, until he couldn't hear the screams. As though by not hearing them, they had never happened. As though by not hearing them, he was absolved of letting them...

He had walked into the captured knight's tent, unchallenged. The knight had looked up at him with surprise and interest.

"How can you let them do this?" Gustav had asked, in a low whisper.

The knight's heavy face fell. "What choice do I have?" he asked, in that lilting Ordallian accent. "Should I fight alone against an army? Should I risk my life for the sake of...?" He trailed off, his face darkening. He stared into Gustav's eyes. "How can you?"

For the same reason, of course. Because Gustav had never wanted to be a farmer's son, searching for rare Ordallian seeds in the vain hope it might give him some edge over the neighbors to the east. Because Gustav dreamed of glory, and in the chaos of the 50 Years' War he had a better chance than most to show his skills. He had a knack for logistics. For managing supplies and breaking enemy lines and capturing enemy intelligence. It was his own planning that had led to the capture of the knight, once his squad had been slaughtered.

It was Gustav's own planning that had led to the screams of the squire and the soldier.

What matter dreams of glory, when they led to such ruin? But then, what was the choice? Was it all scrabbling in the dirt or the breaking of innocent men and women? What was the alternative, between the hellfire of guilt and the frying pan of pointless toil?

He tried to ease his conscience. Tried to report it to some higher-up, some commander or noble who might listen. At best, he got grudging sympathy and musings about the brutal necessities of war. At worst, he was lambasted as a traitor, a man who sympathized with the loathsome Ordallians.

No hope from above. No hope anywhere. No choice at all.

The answer to his dilemma came to him by luck, because he was part of a Hokuten detachment reinforcing the Limberry battle lines. But they were not the only unit of Gallione to join the fray. There was another, widely considered a joke by the Hokuten and their noble commanders. “Commoners playing at war!” one man had called them, laughing over his beer.

But when Gustav saw them, they didn't seem like such a joke. The Corpse Brigade was a unit of commoners gathered from all across Gallione, carefully trained and disciplined. An Ordallian cavalry unit could not outflank them. Ordallian mages could not scare them into retreat or break their ranks. They faced their foe with a courage and idealism that had long since been lost among the other martial orders of Ivalice. They treated their captives, noble and commoner alike, with distinction.

So Gustav went in search of their commander. He went in search of Wiegraf Folles.

The man was easy to find. He and his sister might have been the commanders and recruiters of this grand company, but they did not stand on ceremony. He found them in a tent no larger than any other, drinking and laughing among a host of common soldiers and a handful of officers. They did not have the rigorous uniformity of the Hokuten: they were a ramshackle army, cobbling supplies together with whatever Ivalice could grudgingly spare them. But each man and woman wore the green cloak. Each man and woman wore the skull emblem.

“Did you lose your way, friend?” Wiegraf asked, smiling at him.

“No,” Gustav said.

“No?” Wiegraf repeated, glancing wryly at his sister Miluda. “Look at this. A Hokuten comes among us willingly.”

“Brave of him,” Miluda said. “He should know how dirty we commoners are.”

Gustav sat down without being invited. Wiegraf wordlessly handed him some of the roasted chocobo. Gustav had never cared for the taste of the bird—far too gamy—but beggars couldn't be choosers, and he ate willingly. He was surprised by how good it was: someone had seasoned it expertly, and it drifted with a slightly-sweet sauce that was a nice counterpoint to the lean meat.

“This is delicious,” Gustav said, inhaling deeply of the smoky scent.

“His doing,” Miluda said, jerking her head towards her brother. “He was always the daughter our parents wanted.”

Wiegraf grinned. “I learned the recipe from our mother,” he said. “Our parents were innkeepers, and they had to feed their guest something.”

“Were?” Gustav asked.

Wiegraf and Miluda stiffened. “Were,” repeated Wiegraf.

“I'm sorry,” Gustav said.

Wiegraf shrugged. “We’ve all lost something in this damn war. No one gets off scot-free. And we’ve all got to bear the burden.”

“But why?” Gustav asked. He knew that the derision he’d seen among the Hokuten he’d come to hate was just the tip of the iceberg. There were commoners in every part of the army—how could you have an army without them? But few and far between were the men who were allowed to rise above their station. Gustav had once been proud to be among that few. Now...

Now he wondered if it was the worth the price of his soul.

“Is this an academic question?” Wiegraf asked.

“No,” Gustav replied.

“We’re Ivalicians,” Miluda said, as though that were explanation enough.

“So?” Gustav asked.

“So,” Wiegraf continued. “So we’re of Ivalice. Just like Balbanes Beoulve, or Cid Orlandeau. Just like Duke Barinten or Prince Larg. Hell, just like the king.” He leaned forwards, and there was silence at the table, everyone watching Wiegraf with rapt attention. “We’ve all lost something in this damn war,” Wiegraf said. “But we stand to gain something too. Most nobles are people, just like you and me. Show them what we can do. What we *will* do, for our country. Show them that we deserve their respect. That among us the best that Ivalice can offer.”

Gustav was silent. His head was full of remembered screams.

“Why are you eating chocobo?” he asked.

“Trouble getting supplies,” Miluda said. “And there were enough dead Ordallian birds to feed us for the night.”

“I think we can do better than that,” Gustav said.

“Can we?” Wiegraf asked, eyebrows arching.

“If you’ll let me.”

It was a minor scandal when Gustav turned in his blue cloak with its White Lion. Few and far between were the men who rose above their station, only to step down of their own volition. The officer in charge cursed him out, in fact. Called him nothing short of a traitor, an anarchist, an Ordallian sympathizer, and some more generic epithets besides.

But Gustav had seen it. The path to equality and power that did not lead through the blood-soaked mire of screaming innocents. He did not want to sell his soul.

As his first act as a member of the Corpse Brigade, he convinced Wiegraf to give him command of a hundred men, and used those men to rescue a Zeltennian baron well-known among the Hokuten for his foolish charges. In gratitude, the viscount gave them money and supplies.

That was only Gustav's first triumph. He had kept his contacts in the Hokuten supply chain, and for all his hatred of the farmer's life he still knew that world well. He knew just who to flatter, pester, aggravate, and intimidate among the Hokuten staff to get them the support they needed. When that fell short of their needs, he would go directly to the farmers of Limberry, cajoling, inspiring, bribing. Reminding them that all the men and women of Ivalice must share the burden, to prove what the common people were capable of.

Within a month of his joining, the Brigade was better armed and better fed than it had ever been.

"You're something else, Gustav," Wiegraf said, as the two of them and Miluda drank the last of the wine the grateful baron had sent their way.

"I'm not," Gustav said. "Just a farmer's son."

"And I'm just an innkeep's daughter," Miluda said.

"We're not *just* anything," Wiegraf grunted. "We're all human. We all end the same way."

"As corpses?" Gustav asked.

"*Exactly.*" Wiegraf leaned forwards, bracing his jaw against his interlocked fingers. "That's all we are. Dead men living out our short time. So I gathered up a brigade of dead men, to remind everyone in Ivalice what even walking corpses can do."

"And you?" Gustav asked, glancing at Miluda.

Miluda shrugged. "My mother used to tell me stories," she said. "Before the Glabados Church and Ajora, the Ydorans worshiped many gods. One of them had a small army of female attendants, who stalked the battlefields of the world and found him fallen heroes." She allowed herself a rare smile. "I figured my Valkyries could send him some Ordallian heroes a little early."

They drank together until night turned to dawn.

The serenity of that night did not last long. The war was not going well. Even with the Romandans to the north out of the fight, the Ordallians were unrelenting. They all knew that Ivalice could not long hold. Money and supplies grew ever shorter. It was all Gustav could do to make sure anyone got fed. And rumor was that Balbanes Beoulve had caught the plague.

"We can't prove our worth to Ivalice if there's no Ivalice left," Wiegraf said.

"And we can't ask soldiers to fight if they're not even getting paid!" Gustav said.

"No one makes it out of this war unscathed," Wiegraf said. "We all have to bear the burden."

"Tell your men that," Gustav said.

"I will."

And wonder upon wonders, it worked. Gustav had never understood how that was possible. He

knew that he did not have what Wiegraf had. He could not compel that level of fervor or adulation. The men under Wiegraf's command believed in him. They listened to him.

Hell, so did Gustav. Like the rest, he agreed. They asked the crown to suspend their pay, until such time as the war was won. In gratitude, the crown gave them extra weapons and supplies. There was a war to win, after all. And Gustav intended to win it. He intended to see Wiegraf's Ivalice, whatever the cost.

Miluda and Wiegraf linked up with the Hokuten and the forces of Limberry. There were soldiers and warriors, well-suited to the work. But Gustav knew his strengths. He could not build Wiegraf's Ivalice from the front lines.

He left his most capable lieutenants in charge of their supplies and took a group of handpicked men into occupied Limberry, where Ordallians lorded over the men and women they'd conquered. But there were still men and women here who chafed beneath Ordallian boots. The crops from friendly farmers mysteriously "disappeared" before the Ordallians could commandeer them for their own use. Convoys across the region were hit before they could reach the front lines. Army units preparing to sally forth found themselves short the barrels of beer they'd been hoping for, the quivers of arrows or crates of fresh food, the swords they desperately needed. Individually, none of these things was significant, but the cumulative effect was terrific. The Ordallian war machine suddenly felt fragile to every common soldier.

And if Gustav needed to dirty his hands a little? If a merchant had his throat slit because the prospect of the reward for selling out the culprits to these deeds was too compelling, and died gurgling at Gustav's feet? If a farmer tried to alert local patrols to their presence, and found his fields scorched and ruined as his farmhouse burned? There were brutal necessities to war, after all. Gustav did not have to like them to see they were essential.

The signing of the peace accord should have been a triumph. Gustav and his band, much smaller than they'd once been, returned to Limberry, exhausted but exalted. They had played their part in the end of the war. They had made fighting Ivalice unsustainable. And he knew that the Brigade elsewhere had done just as well. Had shown themselves the equal of any of the knightly orders.

But there was too much pain in Ivalice, too much grief. Too many dead, from war and from the Choking Plague. Food shortages were endemic, with so many men and women called to fight. No one had enough gil to pay their bills. He remembered those days now, staring down at the beaten Marquis. In his mind, even the brightest day was somehow overcast, greyed out. That was how all Ivalice had felt. Like the pall of the smoke of a great fire still hung heavy over them.

There was nowhere for Gustav to go. His father wouldn't see him, and Gustav would not have

returned to that farm, even if he would. So he traveled with Wiegraf and Miluda, as they returned to Gallione, older and wearier than they'd been when they'd left.

"It's all fucked up," Gustav said, after the grey days had worn on him too much. They had returned to the Folles' long-abandoned inn, but the fact that it still had beds made it a damn sight better than most of the places Gustav had bedded down the last few months.

"50 years of war," Miluda said, handing him a glass and sinking down into the bed next to him. "What do you expect?"

"It's over, though," Gustav said.

"Is it?" Miluda asked, staring into his eyes. And his head was full of what he'd heard and seen. He remembered his eyes watering as he'd set a torch to the fields. His head was full of the squire and the soldier, screaming.

"We all have to bear the burden," Miluda said, in a passable imitation of Wiegraf's deep, strident voice. The corners of Gustav's mouth twitched.

"We did good," Miluda said. "All of us. That doesn't mean it's gonna be easy." Her fingers slipped beneath his hair, fingertips traced along his scalp. Gustav slowly leaned into the crook of her neck, breathing in the deep, earthy, sweaty scent of her.

"Is it ever?" he whispered, as they sank back against the headboard.

It never was. He knew that after the celebration at Igros, where the Crown had honored them with accolades for their service, praised them as heroes and formally discharged them with the promise that their service would never be forgotten.

It was only months later that they found out that they would also never be paid.

It was transmitted by royal decree: that all Ivalice suffered the cost of long war, and that all must bear the burden to rebuild their nation in peace. Translation: any units without high-blooded connections would go without pay, content with the little glow of warmth and pride they'd earned as their bellies, and the bellies of their families and friends, went empty.

And what could Gustav do? Gustav, who had alienated every Hokuten ally in his fervent faith and service to the Brigade's cause? Gustav, who had alienated his father and his friends in his hatred for the life of the farmer? Gustav, who felt like a ghost in the house of Wiegraf and Miluda?

"Say something!" Gustav demanded, slamming his hands down on the table between them.

Wiegraf sat at a table by the fireplace, his face gloomy, his fists clenched in front of him.

"What is there to say?" he asked.

"We need a plan," Miluda said.

"What plan!" Wiegraf shouted. "We fought for Ivalice. What would you have me to do now?"

Turn my sword against it?"

"Never," Miluda said. "But what's Ivalice?"

Wiegraf stared up at her, the fire flickering behind him. Gustav stared at her, too.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"What's Ivalice?" she asked again. "It is the Crown? Is it the nobles who force us to fight their wars and think they can get away without paying us? Or is it the people, Graffy? The people who are suffering because these bastards think they can always get away with it?"

"And they can't," Gustav hissed. "They can't."

Wiegraf considered them both. "We must all share the burden," he said. "If they refuse to share it, then we must make them."

That was how their rebellion began. It wasn't hard. The whole Brigade was suffering, but the whole Brigade was seething, too. They had all known a taste of glory, of battles decided by their strength and will. More than that, they had known that their strength and will were great enough to change the course of history. When Wiegraf put out the word, they came. In ones and twos, in squads and packs, they left their homes with all they could carry, and marched north. To the frozen fortresses on the border of the Rhana Strait, which Gallione and Fovoham had abandoned just as surely as they'd abandoned the Brigade.

"Nobleman led us into this war!" Wiegraf roared, his voice carrying in the chill air, the black sunken bulk of Fort Zeakden rising high into the gray skies behind him. The Brigade stood in neat lines before him, with all the weapons they'd kept and stolen. "Nobleman fought their proxy battles, the brothers and cousins and sons of kings vied for power and they could. Not. End it."

"And when all Ivalice suffered!" he howled. "When plague took our loved ones as surely as Ordallian blades, when Limberry sat at the very edge of defeat, who saved them!"

"WE DID!" came the roar from the crowd, so fierce it shook the boards beneath Gustav's feet.

"They called to us in their hour of need with false promises on their lips," Wiegraf growled.

"They praised us and would not honor us. They would have us be their tools. They think we will be ruled like sheep. Well I say, if this is how our rulers behave, then we will make new rulers!"

A howl of wordless affirmation, like wolves baying for blood.

"We were a brigade of dead men, spending our lives as best we could," Wiegraf said. "Now we are assembled once more, but I do not see dead men. I see men who will bring death to those who spit on their responsibilities and obligations. I see a whole god damn corps of men who know how to swing their blades. We are the Death Corps, and we will cut out the rotten nobles of Ivalice!"

The crowd descended into screams of bloodthirsty affirmation.

“But!” Wiegraf cried, as the crowd slowly dwindled into silence. “But we must not become them. We are not assembled here for vengeance. For too long, we have seen those who claim to be our betters force us to sacrifice where they will not. We will be better than that. We are a Corps. We are the very example of discipline. We will hurt the nobles who betray us and those like us. We will protect the people, whatever the cost to ourselves. We will be the very instrument of justice. We will build a kingdom of the like even Saint Ajora would call a Paradise upon the earth!”

And the screams this time were triumph incarnate.

“We can base most of our soldiers and supplies here,” Wiegraf said later that night, studying the map of Ivalice in the fort's war room and drawing a line along the Rhana Strait, dotted with the abandoned forts they'd already occupied. “They'd have to send an army to get rid of us, and they don't have the strength for that, right?”

“Right,” Gustav affirmed. “But it's going to be hard to get supplies.”

“We'll hit them two ways,” Wiegraf said. “Barinten won't send his soldiers out of Riovanes, so we can hit some of the outlying farms in Fovoham. We also need units in Mandalia. We have to keep the pressure up in Gallione-”

“Leave that to me,” Miluda said.

“The Valkyries won't be enough,” Wiegraf said.

“Agree to disagree,” Miluda said. “But I can tap a few captains with good squads.”

Wiegraf nodded his approval.

“You want to open a two-front war?” Gustav asked, unable to hide the fear in his voice.

Wiegraf glanced at him. “Why not?”

“We don't have the resources,” Gustav said. “The Hokuten might be exhausted, but they've got a government behind them. I know what it's like to fight something like that.”

“I know you do,” Wiegraf said. “That's why I'm sending you to Dorter.”

Wiegraf and Gustav stared at each other. “What?” Gustav said.

“The Hokuten are weak,” Wiegraf said. “If I keep the pressure up in the north and Miluda harasses them in the south, they'll have to capitulate or call for help. I'm sure his Highness Prince Larg-” and here Wiegraf sneered. “-can't bear the thought of yielding to the likes of us. He'll call for help. He'll call for supplies. And most of that will come through Dorter.”

Pieces clicked together in Gustav's mind, as the old war machine began to tick again. He could gather information from all the corners of Ivalice. He could hurt the Hokuten while strengthening the Corps. And on territory he knew. On territory where there were men and women of Gallione, hurting just as he was, aching for justice.

Here was the path to righteousness he'd been looking for. To use the talents he'd developed during the war to take down the same men and women who abused their power. He felt alive, like there was fire beneath his skin. He burned with something pure and righteous.

"I can do this," Gustav said.

"No other man could," Wiegraf agreed. "Pick the men you want. They're yours." Wiegraf clasped Gustav's hand. "We need you, Gustav."

Trusted. Honored. So Gustav picked his men, and they slipped away in the night. They wore the altered cloaks of the Death Corps: the skull emblem now wore a crown, to remind their noble foes that they could die, too.

For the first few months, it was exactly as Gustav had imagined. The people chafed beneath the harsh dictates of Prince Larg and the crown. The Corps offered them a hope they hadn't dreamed of, and supplies came in from all across Ivalice: clandestine shipments of food from Larg's political enemies, weapons from old veterans eager to see the noble fools who'd used them as cannon fodder laid low, gil from commoner merchants and peasants and anyone hoping to see justice in Gallione.

And Dorter? Dorter was a seething nest of a city where the only language readily understood was that of power and influence. It was the exact kind of city all of Gustav's experience had prepared him for. He flattered friendly merchants and appealed to their vanity and virtue. He intimidated and berated the indifferent souls who sat on the fence while the people of Ivalice suffered. And whatever merchants might have dreamed of opposing him found their supplies vanished beneath their noses, where they did not simply have their throats slit and their wealth taken from them as they looked on with desperate dying eyes.

That was how it started, if he was honest. When he killed a merchant who had taken advantage, sold secrets to noblemen in hopes of material gain. When the act was met with approval throughout Dorter. Because it was an easy way to guarantee supplies and make sure anyone sitting on the fence, unsure of the course of action, knew exactly what the Corps would do if they tried to help the nobles.

And as time went on, Gustav found that there was no one in Dorter who could oppose him.

All the old criminal syndicates went to ground. To face a hundred soldiers would have been asking much of them: to face a hundred soldiers commanded by a man who understood exactly what he was doing? Who knew how to leverage those soldiers so you felt the boot on your collective necks? He had been made for this, he had trained for this. He was good at it.

For months, Gustav watched Dorter from his rat cellar, and took freely from Hokuten supply chains, and became the bread basket of the Corps. For months, he poured food, and weapons, and gil, and any supplies he could lay hands on north and south, and made sure that Wiegraf and Miluda had

everything they needed to build their Ivalice.

And when money got tight? When Wiegraf and Miluda needed money and weapons, and there were none to give them? He found other merchants. He found the indifferent men who'd chosen no sides and hoped they would escape the conflict unscathed. He did not earn the popular accolades he'd gained from targeting of the noblemen and their cronies, but nor did he earn the ire of Dorter.

Perhaps that was part of the problem. Perhaps the indifference was something Gustav should never have known about. Because once he knew, it was hard to forget. Especially when he saw that the Death Corps was doomed.

He tried to pretend that he didn't know. He kept stealing weapons, food, gil, and intel. He was the vanguard of the Corps, gathering all the information they needed to stay alive. And he tried to ignore the larger import of the intel he gathered. He tried to ignore the certainty of the Death Corps' defeat.

But he couldn't do it. He had spent too long learning to look at the big picture, to see how the small details fit together into a cohesive whole. The fight between the Corps and the Hokuten was not like the fight between Ivalice and Ordallia. The latter was a case of two vast nations pitting their full weight against one another. Even with the Hokuten weakened by the 50 Years' War, they were as strong as the Corpse Brigade had ever been. Not were they alone. The Nanten might have disdained them: Khamja might hide away. But Larg's sister was the Queen of all Ivalice, and Dycedarg Beoulve was one of the cagiest diplomats in all the land. The best-case scenario saw the Corps suing for favorable terms, but the best-case scenario also imagined that nobles would ever deign to parley with commoners.

And why would they, when they were winning?

Even without reinforcements, even with Gustav raiding their supply lines, the Hokuten could afford to fight far better than they could. If every man and woman of the Corps killed two Hokuten, they might still lose. And rare indeed is the man who can make his life so costly. Hell, the Corps couldn't even afford to face the Hokuten in the open. The Valkyries raided, and Wiegraf hunted any patrols that made their way to him, and it was not enough. It couldn't be enough.

The hope had always been to inspire the people. To take on recruits, and inspire a movement that would shake Ivalice. And to be sure, there were men and women who flocked to their banner, at first. Gave freely from their coffers and pockets, to make sure they could fight. But untested boys and girls did not make for effective soldiers, and as the months dragged on and they were hunted and hounded and cold and hungry, more and more were leaving. Miluda's forces were stretched thin, and many of their veteran units had been depleted in the north and the south by constant conflict.

What hope, as the cause of rebellion lost its luster, and the noose tightened around their necks?

Gustav knew it. He could see it. He took more and more from the merchants. He turned on the people of Dorte before they could turn on him. He made examples of troublesome merchants, striking at them in their homes when they thought they were safe, raiding their most valuable cargo. He was as bad as any syndicate, and he knew it, too. Because Wiegraf had offered him what looked like hope, and now Gustav knew that hope was poisoned, and once again he was caught between fire and frying pan, with no hope of a miracle like Wiegraf.

Until Dycedarg Beoulve, cagiest diplomat in all Ivalice, had approached him.

Now he held the Marquis Elmdor, ruler of the land where the Brigade had been tested and forged. That was before, of course. Before Elmdor had come to Gallione to discuss reinforcing the Hokuten. Before Gustav had taken him, and killed six boys whose only crime was that they still believed in noble ideals, and wished to see Gustav pay for the horrors he'd caused.

I didn't kill them!

No. You just ordered them killed.

What choice do I have? Should I fight alone against an army? Should I risk my life for the sake of-

There was a thunderous explosion from above. The cellar shook, dust raining down from the corners, and shouts of alarm rose into the air. The Marquis groaned on the floor, and Gustav turned to the door, reaching for his sword.

The door burst open. The body of one of his men fell through on it, and Miluda pulled her blade from his chest. Gustav's heart froze in his chest

"Miluda-" he started, and then she was lunging towards him, and he could barely block her cutting blade.

"You would kill me?" he shrieked, over the clanging of the metal.

"After what you've done?" she whispered. "Yes."

He forced her back, and there was another thunderous explosion from above, more screams and cries. Miluda drove him back, and a moment later Wiegraf descended the staircase, his sword shining.

"Why, Gustav?" he asked, his eyes heavy.

Fire and the frying pan. Do you scabble in the dirt, knowing your soul will break long before you back does? Or do you use your talents for men who torture and hurt?

Fire and the frying pan. Do you believe in the cause of Ivalice, and forego pay? Or do you insist on your gil, knowing how thinly stretched the whole kingdom is?

Fire and the frying pan. Do you accept the ultimate insult from the crown and country you

sacrificed so much for? Or do you try to oppose the very crown and country for which you sacrificed so much?

Fire and frying pan. When Dycedarg Beoulve offers you a pardon in exchange for the assassination of the Marquis, do you compromise everything you are? Do you trust a man who would so easily betray his supposed ally? Do you seize the opportunity in the hopes of buying your way free, whatever the cost to the men and women around you?

“What choice was there?” Gustav asked.

“Every choice,” Wiegraf said.

“No choice,” Gustav said.

Never a choice. From birth until death.

Chapter 9: Foes By Birth

...traders and entrepreneurs have ever been interested in the borderlands of the Zeklaus Desert. The south offers a chance for a faster trade, bypassing the nightmare of Dorter's roads if only someone can forge outposts along its small oases, and those willing to brave the baking heat of the sand dunes in a crossing to the north can find some of the most fertile land in all Ivalice, fed by the occasional lava flow from the volcano at the heart of the Bervenia mountains. But tough times leave little room for such endeavors: the 50 Years' War put an end to many of these outposts, as it did to so many things...

-Alazlam Durai, "Larger Consequences of the 50 Years' War"

They heard the explosion just after daybreak.

They had left the inn at once, riding through the night, leaving behind the damp of Dorter and trotting into the low, dry cool of a desert at night. Argus had wanted to push the birds to their limit, and it had taken a great deal of effort to keep him in their pack of four. The Hokuten war mounts were sturdy birds that ran swift and true, but they could only take so much. Still, Ramza could hardly blame Argus for his haste. The Marquis was suddenly, unexpectedly in reach.

Was that why he'd hurt Ivan so badly?

The image haunted him. Argus pounding his bloody fists into the screaming boy who'd already lost so much. Delita, standing impassively behind him. Was this the face of heroism? Was this what was required in the pursuit of Justice? In the name of Service?

But it had worked, hadn't it? Not by itself, but the three of them together. The pain, the threats, the indifference, and...

And whatever it was Ramza had done, that had made Ivan give up the location.

He wished the man well. He'd gotten in over his head, and tried to do what was right, and his friend had died in the course and...

Ah, God, but it was hard to be righteous.

They rode through the night, their eyes heavy, their bodies weary, their eyes fixed forward. Slowly, the sun rose in the east, and cast embers of dim golden fire across the dusty landscape, painted the warm dunes held together with scrub grass. Ramza kept his eyes open for any of the telltale landmarks Ivan had described to him: the way the dunes and hills would cluster together, to form almost a wall from which any guards could see you coming. Nestled within those hills was the outpost that now served as Gustav's headquarters.

Nestled in those hills would be the Marquis.

Thunder on the clear horizon—the same thunder they'd heard yesterday, when they'd found the hovel broken open. And in the distance, a rising plume of smoke, from behind a line of hills.

“Damn!” Argus shouted, and urged his bird on to a fast sprint. Ramza and the others exchanged panicked glances, and urged their birds onwards, just as quick. Ramza's head was filled with the image of those two deadly souls, the leaders of the Death Corps. And his ears were filled with the voice of a man who had spoken earnestly about the cause of justice.

They rode, as the sun baked down on them, and the birds sweated and stank in their exertion, and thunder sounded through a cloudless day.

They charged up the hill and spilled out onto the outpost—a low-slung building of wood, stone, and brick, almost fort-like in its construction. There had been sentries, but most of these appeared to be dead: male and female bodies scattered about a massive hole blasted into the side of the building. Delita looked thoughtfully at what seemed to be the doors, but Argus was already charging for the blast site.

“Argus!” Delita shouted, before he made it too far down the hill. “Back!”

Argus turned a dismissive glare back at Delita, but Delita gestured down at their mounts and said, “We don't want to lose the birds. You want to get the Marquis fast, right?”

“I-” Argus broke off. “Yes. You're right.”

They dismounted, and led their birds back a little ways. Delita pulled out one of the posts and plunged it into the earth as best he could, and the four men hastily tied their birds.

“Should we leave a guard?” Ramza asked, finishing a knot.

“I'd like to,” Delita said. “But I think we need all four of us.”

He looked to the other three men, who nodded their assent. Then he gestured, and they surged forwards, heading for the blast site again. Ramza's leather armor pulled tight against his joints, and his oiled chainmail rattled on his chest. Everything felt very dreamy and very real, all at once. Like he was walking through a nightmare from which he could not awaken.

They entered into a hallway strewn with rubble and corpses, and might have been lost if they could not hear the sounds of fighting down a nearby staircase. Desperate shouts and the clanging of metal on metal filled the air, and Ramza drew his blade (remembering again the fight in the plains, and the spray of blood against his face). Together, the four men made their way down to the sound of the fighting.

By the time they got there, it was already over.

They stepped out of a stairwell to find Wiegraf and Miluda, standing with bloody blades above a corpse. Argus made to fire an arrow, but the movement gave him away: Miluda rolled to one side,

grabbed a piece of rubble, and hurled it at Argus in one fluid motion. The piece of brick struck him in the shoulder, and Argus fell backwards, releasing his arrow so it flew far overhead.

Beowulf hurled himself forwards, but it was Miluda who rose to meet them and suddenly there was no sign of Wiegraf and Ramza wasn't sure where he could have gotten to. Miluda and Beowulf were a flurry of dancing steel, but Beowulf was being driven back, step by step. Delita and Ramza rushed forwards to support him.

And found that somehow they were still outmatched.

This was *not* the clumsy desperation of the man Ramza had fought on the Plains. She actually reminded him of his sparring matches against Delita back at the academy: that same economy of force, quietly but persistently targeting his weaknesses, forming an impassive wall of steel to any counter he attempted. But she was better than Delita: sharper, faster, deadlier. Though it was just her blade against their four, they were the ones being driven back. It was just so damn *fast*: no sooner had Ramza and Delita joined the fray than Beowulf was knocked backwards by a shoulder slammed into his solar plexus, and Miluda was spinning and dancing between them, keeping them off balance, her swordpoint darting like a needle, and Ramza could almost taste the death that hung on its sharp edge.

There was no time for thoughts of justice. There was only the aching of his arms with every impact, and the whistling of blades.

She struck with terrible force, and the blade fell from Ramza's numb fingers. Delita rushed to defend him, but fell back before a series of darting thrusts. She whirled on Ramza, scything her blade from side to side, and Ramza ducked and wove between each blow. He stumbled over some debris, lurched backwards to dodge her blade, hurled a handful of dust and pebbles up towards her face. She staggered away, narrowly deflecting Delita and Beowulf's charge.

"Enough!" boomed Wiegraf's deep, commanding voice. Ramza reflexively glanced towards him, then stopped dead. In time of war, the Marquis Elmdore had been known as the Silver Demon by allies and enemies alike, as a laughing reference to his fabled spirituality and an admission of his terrible prowess on the battlefield. Even though Ramza had never met the man before, he could recognize the tell-tale silver-blond hair. He could tell it was the Marquis that had Wiegraf's sword pressed against throat.

They froze, Miluda several feet from them with her sword sweeping slowly between all three of them.

"Move," Argus growled from the door. "And your sister dies." Ramza glanced over his shoulder: Argus had his arrow trained firmly on Miluda.

"And your Marquis will still be dead," Wiegraf said. "After all you've been through to save

him, I think that'd be a shame.”

“He's dead either way,” Argus said. “I know your kind.”

“You know *nothing*,” spat Miluda.

“She's right,” Wiegraf said. “The Brigade fought alongside the Marquis. He always treated us with respect. It's not his fault he's of noble blood.”

“And yet you hold your sword to his neck,” hissed Argus.

“Argus,” Delita said warningly. He was breathing slow and steady, in that relaxed pose of poised danger Ramza had seen so often at the Academy. He was studying Wiegraf. “Why should we trust you?”

“The man responsible for your troubles lies dead,” Wiegraf said, nodding towards the corpse on the floor a little ways behind Miluda. “I would not taint my cause by copying his methods.”

“Taint your commoners' cause,” sneered Argus.

“Taint my cause,” Wiegraf continued. “The Marquis' abduction was an act of cowardice, just like these attacks on merchant convoys. When we taint ourselves with the blood of innocent men, we make ourselves like the bastards who claim nobility.”

“You dare-!” Argus shouted.

“I dare,” Wiegraf said. “Gustav is dead. Dealt with by the hands of the Corps.” He paused, then looked around the room. “What became of Ivan?”

“He's alive,” Ramza said. “I let him go.”

“And we should just believe you?” Miluda whispered.

“You should,” Ramza said. “He gave us this place, so we could stop Gustav if you couldn't.”

“Hmmp!” Wiegraf grunted. “The boy's more idealistic than I am.”

“I wouldn't go that far,” Miluda said.

Wiegraf stared at Ramza. Ramza stared back at Wiegraf. Facing him on was a different experience. His eyes were serious, his face set, and his sword hand didn't shake. He looked nothing like Balbanes Beoulve, except that he wore the same cool, confident expression.

“You want the Marquis?” Wiegraf asked. “He's yours. Provided you let us go.”

“What!” Argus roared.

“Graffy!” Miluda snapped. “We can take these children!”

“You can try!” Beowulf yelled.

“Perhaps,” Wiegraf said. “Though I'm not sure what's to be gained by killing children whose only crime is service to a cause they think righteous.”

Miluda looked chastened, and Wiegraf continued, “Besides, even if we could, I doubt they'll be

alone for long. The whole damn country's looking for the Marquis, and we haven't exactly been quiet.”

He jerked his head back to the patch of wall next to him, and Miluda moved slowly to his side, glancing between the three men. With their backs to the wall, they began to circle towards the entrance.

“Get your friend away from the door,” Wiegraf said, looking at Delita.

“I'm not going anywhere until the Marquis is safe,” Argus said.

“If you want the Marquis safe, you'll move,” Wiegraf said conversationally. “If you want the Marquis dead, you'll stay.”

Ramza glanced towards Argus, not quite daring to speak. Argus' face was contorted in the same hateful snarl Ramza had first seen at the bar. He still had an arrow nocked to his bow. There was a brief, tense silence, and then Argus slowly stepped away from the entrance, circling around to the opposite wall.

“We're not gonna fight?” Beowulf asked, disappointed.

“You should be glad, boy,” Wiegraf said. “I really don't want to kill you.”

“I can't say the same,” Beowulf said.

“You want to kill yourself?”

“That's not what I-hey!” Beowulf glared at Wiegraf.

“Funny,” Delita said.

“Thanks,” Wiegraf replied.

“You're *joking* with them!” Argus shouted, outraged.

“Sure,” Delita said. “Long as they give us the Marquis. If they don't, we'll kill them.”

“Confident, aren't you?” Miluda sneered. “You couldn't defeat me by yourselves. You think you can take the two of us?”

“Gustav,” Ramza said, cutting through the noise. “He was your ally.”

Wiegraf and Miluda stopped their slow inching. Miluda looked down at the ground: Wiegraf's blue eyes bored back into Ramza's.

“He was my friend,” Wiegraf said.

“You killed him.”

“*We* killed him,” Miluda said softly.

“He deserved to die.” Wiegraf's eyes closed briefly, then snapped back open, blazing with force. Ramza swallowed against the sudden dryness in his throat. “We deliver justice to those who think themselves beyond it's reach. Be they strong or weak. Be they friend or foe.”

“Big words for a coward,” Argus said.

"Call me what you will," Wiegraf said.

"That's what you want?" Ramza asked. "Justice?"

The fire in Wiegraf's eyes dimmed a little. He nodded, studying Ramza with obvious interest.

"Then don't go," Ramza said. "Come with us to Igros."

"Who are you to make such an offer, boy?" Miluda laughed, though there was little humor in the sound.

"Ramza Beoulve," Ramza said.

"Ramza!" Delita hissed.

Wiegraf and Miluda were staring at him in shock. Ramza extended his empty hands forwards, thinking of Ivan Mansel on the floor, thinking of the dead man's blood upon his face. Thinking of Balbanes' last words.

"Well," Wiegraf said. "You certainly live up to your name, don't you?"

They started inching to the door again. There was a slight smile on Wiegraf's face. "You've got a big heart, boy," Wiegraf said. "But you don't know the world that well, if you think the Crown would ever forgive us. If you think your brothers would ever forgive us."

"They would!" Ramza shouted, taking another step forwards as they neared the door. "We don't have to be enemies!"

Wiegraf sighed, and Miluda laughed that same cold laugh. "Boy," she said. "We were foes from birth."

Wiegraf shoved the Marquis to one side. Argus cried out, and loosed an arrow, but it vanished from view as Wiegraf swung his sword in a glowing arc. The world faded behind an explosion of crackling light and white-hot force, as thunder filled the air and turned all sound to a distant whine. Argus was thrown backwards: Ramza, Delita, and Beowulf staggered. The blast faded, and Ramza rushed forwards. Argus was already crawling forwards, eyes squinted as he coughed. His hands found the Marquis' shoulders, and he pulled the man into his lap, his fingers on his neck.

"Alive!" he croaked, though his voice was strangely muffled to Ramza's ears. "He's alive!"

Ramza nodded and stumbled past him, into the thick cloud of dust. He coughed once or twice as it became too much to bear, his nose filled with the acrid burning of old dirt and earth. The staircase had been destroyed.

He stared up after them, his mouth dry, his eyes watering, his head full of Wiegraf's righteous fire and kind, calm certainty that there could be no hope for peace and justice in the arms of the Beoulves. That they were foes by birth.

"Ramza," Delita said. Ramza glanced over his shoulder to find his friend watching him. "You

okay?”

Ramza shook his head. Delita nodded, and gestured back at the Marquis. “We did it,” he said, and his voice sounded as hollow as Ramza felt.

Chapter 10: The Righteous Path

...but the Queen's reign would not have been secure without the support of her brother, Prince Bestrald Larg. The Larg family traditionally governed Gallione and enjoyed the loyalty of the Hokuten, and in the chaos of the 50 Years' War Prince Ondoria solidified his claim to the throne of Ivalice by marrying Duchess Louveria. Thus did Baron Larg earn the title 'Prince'...

-Alazlam Durai, "Larger Consequences of the 50 Years' War"

"So," Dycedarg said, peering at them over his laced fingers with his elbows propped upon his desk. The four young men stood at stiff, nervous attention in a line that stretched across the office, not looking at each other. "The deserters return. Execution is standard practice, of course, but I think we can at least wait for an explanation."

Still no response from Ramza or his friends, but Ramza felt a sick, guilty cloud of nausea rising from the pit of his stomach.

The last few days had passed by in a whirl. The Hokuten were already out in force, searching for some sign of the Marquis. It had not taken long for Ramza and his friends to find one such search party, and from there they had at once raced for Igros in a thick convoy of mounted soldiers. And once again, they were brought before Dycedarg to give an account for themselves while the healers tended to the Marquis.

"Allow me to retrace your steps," Dycedarg said, calm and deadly as an assassin's dagger. "You see, we called for cadets to reinforce the Igros garrison so that we could deploy the full strength of the Hokuten against the Corps. This is a rare honor for cadets, but I was proud to offer it, especially after your illustrious encounter with the Corps in the field. Instead, you decided to run off and play hero, abandoning your posts and your duties."

A little ripple that Ramza could see from the corners of his eyes, his friends flinching together.

"The men shirking their duties," Dycedarg said. "Include Ramza Beoulve, heir to the responsibility of the Beowulf name. Heir to the cause of Justice and Service. No less responsible for upholding these values is Delita Heiral, a ward of the Beoulve house who has been a credit to us, given his exemplary performance at the Gariland Military Academy. Of course, the son of the Academy's finest instructor is a deserter twice-over, having first abandoned his post at the Academy and then refused to return when granted undeserved leniency for his delinquency. Last and *certainly* not least, they count a Thadolfas in their ranks."

The words dripped off Dycedarg's tongue, venomous.

“So please,” Dycedarg concluded. “Which one of you was responsible for abandoning your post, convincing your friends to follow you, and involving yourself in a sensitive matter of the highest military and diplomatic importance without any permission or authority granted you by the armies *you’re supposed to serve?*”

At once, Beowulf fell to one knee. “It’s my fault, my lord,” Beowulf said. “I didn’t want to return to the Academy. I wanted an adventure.”

“Is this true?” Dycedarg asked. “Did this junior cadet convince you to desert?”

“That would be ridiculous, Lord Dycedarg,” Delita said, falling to one knee besides Beowulf. “It was I who convinced them. I wanted the glory of saving the Marquis, to do honor to the Beoules and to my name.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Ramza said, his voice quavering. He stepped forwards, and knelt in turn. “They would not have dared, but I...I wanted to be like you and Zalbaag, brother. Like father-”

“Ramza, no!” Argus said, falling to one knee next to him. “My lord, please, I was bent on going after the Marquis, and they would not desert me. I put them in an impossible-”

“Do you think this is funny?” Dycedarg asked, his words sharp as knives. “Do you think if you fall over each other to take the blame I will forget what you have done? You deserted your post, left the castle unguarded, fraternized with the enemy, and attempted to storm a Death Corps stronghold single-handed!”

“And in so doing,” said a wry, rough voice. “They have saved the Marquis.”

Dycedarg stood at once, his head bowed. “Your Highness.”

Ramza gaped at his brother, feeling hollow, then spun around on his knee, lowering his head still further. The others around him did the same in jerking, stumbling motions, and he could hear Prince Larg laughing. “Oh, rise!” he said. “This is no state for heroes.”

Ramza lurched to his feet and stared at the Prince. Larg wore luxurious robes of blue with a red border, and his trim facial hair was the mirror of Dycedarg’s. He leaned a little heavily on the cane in his left hand, and smiled at them, looking between each of them with bright green eyes. Lank brown hair fell just above his eyebrows.

“You give them too much credit,” Dycedarg said.

“Do I?” Larg asked. “A Daravon, a Thadolfas, a Beoulve, and one of the Academy’s brightest face off with the Folles and rescue the Marquis Elmdor? Who could have done more?”

“It was idiotic,” Dycedarg retorted.

“We were all young once,” Larg said. “I wish we’d managed to do so much at their age.”

“You’re spoiling them,” Dycedarg said.

“And why not?” Larg said. “I think they've earned it.”

“Hmmp!” Dycedarg said nothing for a little while, and Ramza did not dare to take his eyes from Prince Larg. The Prince was smiling at him.

“Lucavi take me,” Larg said. “You are the very image of your father. Something in the eyes, I think...the same zeal.”

“Do Beoules run from their duties?” Dycedarg asked sardonically.

“I think Beoules do the impossible,” Larg said. “That's why I collect them and put them in charge.”

“Oh, fine!” exclaimed Dycedarg. “Fine.” He stepped out from behind his desk and joined his liege lord. “Limberry is sending its forces to help us finish off the Corps,” Dycedarg said. “As such, we have no particular need of a garrison here at Igros. If you so wish it, you may all take part in these operations against the Corps.”

“Including me, my lord?” Beowulf asked, his voice unusually small and respectful.

“Including you,” Dycedarg said.

“My lord!” Argus exclaimed, falling to one knee. “Thank you, but I...I need to know what the Marquis wishes of me.”

“Hmmp!” Dycedarg grunted, with a slight smile. “*Now* you listen to your superiors.” Argus said nothing, and Dycedarg shrugged. “He's been treated by healers, and is resting in our father's old room. You're welcome to consult with him.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Argus said, rising to his feet. His eyes flickered to Prince Larg, though he didn't quite dare to look at him. “With...with your permission, your Highness.”

Larg waved a hand airily, and Argus rushed from the room. “And I think you've all earned a bit of rest, hm?” Larg said.

“Yes, your Highness,” Delita said, lowering his head.

“Thank you,” Beowulf added, in a rasping whisper.

They made to leave the room, but Ramza remained where he was. Delita turned slightly, his eyes widening. “Ramza, no!” he hissed.

“Is something the matter, Ramza?” Larg asked.

“A private concern, your Highness,” Ramza said, ignoring Delita's pleading eyes. “Permission to speak freely?”

Dycedarg's thin eyebrows arched, and he and the Prince exchanged sidelong glances.

“Pardon him, your Highness,” Delita said, grabbing Ramza by the shoulder. “He's tired.”

“That's as may be,” Prince Larg said. “But I'd hear what he has to say. Speak, Ramza.”

Ramza's throat felt very dry, and his muscles felt stringy and taut, as though they were about to snap. "It's about the Death Corps."

"Yes?" Larg asked.

Ramza swallowed, his head filled with Wiegraf and Miluda, with the notion that there could be no peace.

"Sir," he started. "The only reason Gustav is dead is because Wiegraf and Miluda put an end to him. They moved to correct an injustice."

"They moved to put down a dog who'd slipped his leash," grunted Dycedarg.

Ramza nodded shakily, and continued. "I...I understand that what they're doing is wrong. But surely...surely there's a better way end this war."

Larg cocked his head quizzically. "How do you mean, Ramza?"

Ramza took a deep breath, struggling to keep his voice level. "Could we not bring them to the table? Could we not make peace?"

Silence in the room. Delita's hand tightened on his shoulder. Dycedarg stared at him aghast, while Larg's face was impassive and unreadable.

"These are not Ordallians," Dycedarg whispered. "They are not a rival nation separated by history and sovereignty. These are traitors and rebels who are tearing our nation apart for the sake of greed. They raid our convoys and harm our people. We do not treat with them. We cannot. That would be an end to the power and authority of the crown."

His words were soft, but sudden and painful as a switch against Ramza's skin. He nodded, and felt his neck aching with the strain.

"That said," Larg added slowly. "Once we have expelled them from the south, it might be wise to discuss terms of surrender instead of frittering our forces away trying to purge them from their forts in the north. If they are willing to come to the table then...well, who knows?"

The strain vanished. Ramza stared in wonder at the Prince. "You're very kind, your Highness," he said.

"Kind nothing," Larg said, chuckling. "Just good sense."

"Thank you," Ramza said, bowing. He turned his head towards Dycedarg. "I'm...I'm sorry, brother."

Dycedarg sighed and shook his head. "Ramza," he said. "I do not mean to demean your accomplishments. But the duties and obligations of a Beoulve are complex. You have to understand that this all could have played out very differently. They could have killed the Marquis. They could have killed *you*."

"I know," Ramza said.

Dycedarg nodded, his eyes closed. "It's not easy, Ramza," he said. "Living up to our responsibilities...living up to our name..." He shook his head again. "I don't know how father did it, with the fate of the kingdom on his shoulders.

He looked very tired, and Ramza said, "I don't think I could do what you do, Dyce."

Dycedarg smiled a little. "Be careful, Ramza," Dycedarg said. "Still a cadet, and you've managed to save the Marquis of Limberry. You might have more responsibilities coming your way."

Ramza shook his head. "By the Saint, I hope not."

"A pity," Larg sighed. "I do need more Beoulves."

"You have enough," Dycedarg said.

"We'll see," Larg said. "You may go, Ramza."

Ramza and Delita left the room. Beowulf was already outside, hunched against a wall, his face very white.

"Beowulf?" Delita asked quizzically, leaning down in front of him.

"A Prince knows my name," Beowulf whispered. "A *Prince*."

"He knows all our names," Ramza said, exchanging puzzled glances with Delita.

"I *know*," moaned Beowulf, burying his face in his hands.

"What's the matter with you?" Delita asked.

"It's just so big," Beowulf said. "It's so *real*."

"But the killing wasn't?" Delita said.

Beowulf shook his head. "I trained for that," he said. "I didn't train for this."

Delita opened his mouth, closed it, and gave Ramza a confused look. Ramza shrugged, equally baffled.

"And as for you," Delita said, turning away to face Ramza. "Saint's sake, Ramza. You couldn't wait a day?"

"We might not have a day," Ramza said.

Delita sighed and shook his head. "Well, you certainly don't waste time. Have to jump right into the stupid."

"What new folly has my brother committed?" Zalbaag asked.

Ramza and Delita turned down the hall. Zalbaag was striding across the carpet, wearing his dark armor with his blue Hokuten cloak on his shoulders, the very picture of military precision.

"I just don't know how you'd manage another so quickly," Zalbaag continued. "I mean, running away on stolen Hokuten birds to find the Marquis? Where did you get such an idea?"

“Who can say?” Delita asked, smiling.

Zalbaag came to a stop in front of them, and shook each of their hands. “You did well,” he said. “Corporal Lambert's eager to have you under his command.”

“We're serving with Lambert?” said Delita.

“He requested you,” Zalbaag said. “Now, tell me. What new idiocy has my brother committed?”

“I asked them if we could make peace with the Corps,” Ramza said.

Zalbaag pursed his lips. “Wow,” he said, looking at Delita. “That *is* stupid.”

“I tried to warn him, my lord,” Delita said.

“I know,” Ramza said, refusing to look either of them in the eye. “But they...the Folles...” He was struggling to put his complex thoughts into words, trying to explain how he'd felt when he'd heard Wiegraf's promise to Ivan, when he'd heard Ivan's pitiable pride, when he'd seen the lengths Wiegraf and Miluda would go to, to bring justice to someone who thought himself beyond its reach.

“You know,” Zalbaag said, looking somewhere above his head. “There's not a lot of white in the world. I don't know if there used to be. I think there did. I think God gave us clear instructions.” He fingered the silver Virgo symbol upon his neck.

“But then man's greed and pride and evil tainted it. And now? Now there are so few truly righteous responses to the world's wickedness. It's all a quagmire of grey, with only the faintest threads of white and black

Ramza stared at his brother in astonishment. He'd never heard Zalbaag talk this way. He didn't think of Zalbaag as the introspective type. He always seemed so firm, so confident, so decisive.

“So what we do,” Zalbaag said. “Is wander through the grey, clinging to what white we can find, and trying not to step into anything too black. That's what it means to be a sinner looking for God's truth.” He rested a hand on Ramza's shoulder. “You've a big heart, Ramza,” he said. “Don't let anyone take that from you.”

The compliment would have been nice, if it had not been delivered with the exact same language, and the exact same intonation, as Wiegraf Folles had used in the Cellar. Ramza's throat felt very dry again. He nodded, not really knowing what he was doing, and Zalbaag clapped him on the shoulder and said, “Now. I *suppose* I'd better go in there and plan this offensive.”

He waited for some response from Ramza, who was too busy reeling from a peculiar sense of déjà vu and vertigo to pay any attention. Some small part of Ramza noticed that Zalbaag and Delita exchanged bemused looks, and then Zalbaag was gone and Delita was in front of him.

“Are you alright, Ramza?” Delita asked.

"I don't think so, no," Ramza said, and his voice sounded very far away even to his ears. He headed down the hall in a daze.

He was exhausted, physically, mentally, and emotionally. For the past weeks, he had been in constant motion, first fighting for his life on the Plains, then chasing after the Marquis with Zalbaag's permission. He had searched for secrets in a simmering city, and met Ivan Mansel, hurt and hunted on all sides. The enemy they had chased had been killed for his unjust acts by a man who spoke like Balbanes and who believed there was no hope of peace. Everything Ramza had seen had confirmed his words. In the past few minutes, he had seen more into his brothers' minds than he had ever known. He had seen them as human as himself.'

He needed to stop. He needed rest. But more than that, he needed answers.

His wandering feet led him to Balbanes' old room. He hesitated by the door.

"-lord, I am not worthy," Argus whispered, with tears in his voice.

"It is no more than you deserve," came the soft, gentle croak of the Marquis Elmdor.

"I abandoned you. I let them-"

"I do not wish to be too prideful," said the Marquis. "But I am widely considered a warrior of moderate caliber." He chuckled. "They deceived us, Argus. They knew they could not defeat us on the field, so they made sure they could slip the daggers into our backs. And in spite of that, you survived. By the grace of God, yes, but also by virtue of your abilities. I had hoped to do you a good service by taking you into my retinue. I had not imagined what wonders God had planned."

"Eavesdropping, are we?" Delita whispered into his ear. Ramza started and whirled around to face his friend, who had snuck up behind him.

"No," Ramza said, ignoring the squirming sense of guilt in his stomach. He knocked on the door to forestall any further comments from Delita, and a moment later it creaked open. Argus stood on the other side. He beamed at Ramza with tears in his eyes, caught him in a crushing embrace, and then guided him into the room.

"This is him, my lord," Argus said.

"Cadet Beoulve?" the Marquis said, propping himself up on his elbows so that a curtain of silver-blond hair hung around his face. Even after the healers' ministrations, his face was mottled with bruises. It was odd to see him in Balbanes' bed. It made Ramza feel unsteady on his feet.

"Yes, my lord," Ramza said, inclining his head.

"Ramza, you won't believe it," Argus said eagerly. "The Marquis has...I...!"

"Given his exemplary service," the Marquis said. "I felt it only fitting that Argus Thadolfas be appointed Special Limberry Liaison to the Hokuten. To oversee our forces and make sure we pull our

weight in the coming conflict.”

“Well done!” Delita exclaimed from the doorway. He bowed to the Marquis. “Apologies for any intrusion, my lord.”

The Marquis waved one hand weakly. “I think we can abide a little impropriety,” he said. “Are you Cadet Daravon or Cadet Heiral?”

“Heiral, my lord,” Delita said.

“Then I owe you my thanks, as well,” said the Marquis.

“I owe it all to you,” Argus said. He fell to his knees, clutching at Ramza's hand, and Ramza stared at him, reeling still more. No one should kneel or bow on Ramza's behalf. “Without you...” He pressed his forehead against Ramza's hand. “Thank you.”

“Argus, really!” Ramza said, trying and failing to pull the other man upright. “It was nothing!”

“It was *not* nothing,” Argus said fiercely, remaining firmly on the ground. “You are a true friend, Ramza, and I behaved monstrously, to you, and to Beowulf, and...” His eyes flickered to the door and he shook his head. “Please. Forgive me. I am not worthy.”

Ramza, unsure of what else to do, dropped to one knee himself. “Really, Argus,” he said. “It was my duty, as a Beoulve.”

Argus looked up at last, smiling with tears trickling down his cheeks. “Then I am luckier still,” Argus said. “Thank you, Ramza.” He rose to his feet, bringing Ramza with him.

“Now, Argus,” the Marquis said. “I know you're tired, but time is of the essence.”

“Yes, my lord,” Argus said. “But by your leave, I will take the field with Ramza.”

The Marquis smiled. “Oh, I think that could be arranged,” he said. “Just let Dycedarg know that you request them as your personal escort. Plenty of honor all around.”

Argus nodded again, and moved to the door. He hesitated in front of Delita. “Delita-” he started.

“Forget it,” Delita said. “I already told you. If it were Ramza, I would have done the same.”

Argus nodded and left the room. Delita and Ramza were left alone with the Marquis.

“Was there something you needed?” the Marquis asked, reddish-brown eyes flickering between them curiously.

“I'm not sure,” Ramza said. “Maybe. My lord, I-”

“Boys,” the Marquis said. “You carried me like a sack of grain. You saved me from the Corps. I think we can do away with the courtesies. You may call me Messam.”

“Yes, my-Messam,” Ramza said.

“Now,” the Marquis said (he might insist on being called Messam, but Ramza could not help

but think of him as the Marquis). “What's the trouble?”

“Messam,” Ramza said. “We didn't...we didn't save you. Gustav was dead when we got there. Wiegraf had already-”

“Ah, Wiegraf,” the Marquis said, his eyes closed. “He is an idealistic soul.”

“You knew him, my lord?” Delita said, and then, as the Marquis shot him a sardonic look, added hastily, “Messam.”

“I did,” the Marquis said. “We fought together in Limberry. Our forces were stretched thin, but between the Brigade and the Hokuten, we held the line. I respected him then. I respect him now. He's simply made an error in judgment.”

And there, unbidden, the answer had appeared in front of Ramza.

“What error, Messam?” Ramza asked.

“One far too many idealistic men make,” the Marquis replied. “He believes faith alone sufficient.”

Ramza stared at the Marquis in surprise. From the corner of his eye, he saw a similar look on Delita's face. The Marquis chuckled, and said, “I take it from your expressions that you've heard I'm something of a fanatic.”

“I wouldn't use that word, Messam,” Delita said.

“Being a smart lad, I didn't think you would,” the Marquis said, smiling.

“But you are an ordained inquisitor in the Glabados Church, aren't you?” Delita asked.

“I am,” the Marquis said. “And what of yourselves? Are you men of God?”

Ramza hesitated. The truth was, he'd never spared much thought to St. Ajora or to the God who was supposed to have made the world. His mother had not been a believer, and while Balbanes certainly had, the war kept his father away so often that there had not been much time for Ramza to learn from him. Ramza had always figured that if there was a God, he sort of preferred him hands-off. Ramza was lucky enough: divine attention should be focused elsewhere.

“Not to the same degree as my brother,” Ramza said.

“Which is to say that you observe the forms out of social convenience,” the Marquis said. “And lack the faith.”

Ramza bowed his head slightly. “Yes, my lord.”

“And you?” the Marquis asked, glancing towards Delita.

“If I may speak freely, Messam,” Delita said. “A man's faith is his own, so long as he does not go delving into heresy.”

The Marquis smiled. “Well said. But the problem comes with those who put their personal

faiths beyond common good and common authority. It is one thing to seek change: another to tear down the world around you in the vain hope that you can build a better one.”

“Wiegraf...” the Marquis closed his eyes and sighed. “Wiegraf and the Corps were wronged. There are seeds of justice in their labors, but their deeds would tear apart a nation. What matter change, if it leaves chaos in its wake?” The Marquis sighed again and settled back on his pillows. “It has ever been my experience that men who hold their personal faith above all else are given to the folly of haste. To believe is easy. We all believe in something. But to build a place of worship? To build a church? That requires patience. That requires laboring and knowing you may never see the fruits of it.”

“But if you seek justice-” Ramza started.

“Then *seek* it,” the Marquis said. “But do not tear down the building. Move through it. It is not as satisfying to build a wall as it is to tear one down. But if you build onto the existing structure...if you labor for justice within an institution of weight and years...”

The Marquis shrugged. “We are all sinners, Ramza. We all have much to atone for. To be just is rarely easy or satisfying. When this is over, we will have to examine our institutions, and hope we can build upon them so that good men like Wiegraf need never have such cause to rebel. But it *is* a rebellion, and we cannot allow our foundation to be torn apart.”

Ramza pursed his lips. It was a good idea, one that spoke to the world Zalbaag had painted: a world where you clung to threads of white as best you could. But as the Marquis said, it was not satisfying. It did not take the weight off of Ramza's mind.

Something of his feeling must have shown on his face, because the Marquis examined him closely, eyes boring into his. “Ramza,” he said. “The key to living righteously is to cling to the faith in your heart while dealing with the realities of the world. You and I are men born to illustrious names, to power that few men can dream of holding. We have an opportunity to do so much good. And if we labor patiently, if we build upon this church so that we can make it a cathedral...perhaps we can atone for the sins of our fathers.”

But suddenly the Marquis looked very pale, and Ramza was abruptly conscious of the fact that this man had been kidnapped and possibly tortured, and Ramza had spent the last several minutes interrogating him.

“I'm sorry, Messam,” he said. “We'll take our leave.”

“Do not worry, Ramza,” the Marquis said. “I'm always pleased to speak with earnest souls like yourselves. Particularly ones with such bright futures ahead of them.” He smiled slightly, his eyes drooping. “Not even your father had...rescued a Marquis...at your age.”

Ramza bowed, and left the room. Delita bowed as well, then followed him.

"You alright?" Delita asked again.

"No," Ramza answered again. "What did you think of him?"

Delita nodded. "It...it made sense."

"I thought so, too," Ramza said.

They looked at each other in the darkened hall. "We're going to war," Delita said.

Yes. To war, with men like Wiegraf Folles and Ivan Mansel. To men whose cause had carried the seeds of justice. How long could Ramza's hands remain clean? How much more blood would fleck his face?

The answer came to him then, all the day's conversations melding into one. He stared at Delita, his eyes wide.

"Delita," he said. "I know what to do."

"Do you?" Delita asked.

Ramza nodded. "I won't kill anyone. Not a soul."

Delita frowned. "What, you're gonna stay here? After all that?"

"No," Ramza said, shaking his head. "No, I'll...I'll fight. They can't tear the kingdom apart. But they deserve to see justice, too."

"What are you..." Delita trailed off, his mouth agape. "No," he said. "You're not serious."

"I am," Ramza said.

"Ramza, not even Balbanes fought without killing."

"I'm not my father," Ramza said. "I'm not my brothers. I think...I think this is what I believe. I don't think I can kill these men."

Delita sighed and shook his head. "I'm not doing it," Delita said.

"I'm not asking you to," Ramza said. "This is my burden to bear."

Delita snorted. "Always the martyr. Well, fine. Someone's got to keep you safe."

Ramza smiled. "Thank you, Delita."

Delita shrugged. "Well, we already did one impossible deed," Delita said. "Why not add a couple more to the pile?"

Chapter 11: The Best-Laid Plans

"I'm sorry, Bestrald" Dycedarg said, pouring a measure of wine into Larg's glass.

Larg waved a hand dismissively. "Please, Dyce," he said. "What do you have to be sorry for?"

"Gustav," Dycedarg said, staring down at his desk. "My brother." He shrugged helplessly. "Everything."

Bestrald shrugged in turn, and took the glass. He lifted it into the dusky sunlight, swirling it idly. "Nothing to be sorry for," Larg said. "We didn't count on Gustav kidnapping him. Or the survivor revealing it."

"There weren't supposed to *be* survivors," Dyce said gloomily.

"Good thing there were," Larg said. "Otherwise we wouldn't have known fast enough."

Dycedarg shook his head. "It's a mess." He took an undignified swig from his own glass, draining it at once.

"That it is," Larg agreed. He sipped at his glass, enjoying the tart dry tang against his palette. His job now was to act as sounding board for all of Dycedarg's frustrations. He had played the role more than once over the decades they'd known each other. It was a price he willingly paid, so that the mind behind that despondent face would keep working on his behalf.

"It was such a good plan!" Dycedarg exclaimed, rising to his feet and pacing. "The Corps kills the Marquis, so we can use Limberry's forces to finish off the Corps!"

"Well, that part of the plan still works," Larg said.

"With the Marquis alive!" Dycedarg exclaimed. "And now I can't get rid of the pro-peace commanders in the Hokuten."

Larg took another sip of his wine. "No? Why not?"

Dycedarg shook his head. "It was only the Marquis' death that would have justified such extremity," he said. "Traitors in the Hokuten get the liege lord of Limberry killed? God, I could have done what I wanted, and done it in the name of peace."

"And I know how you hate for anyone to get in the way of your unadulterated power," Larg said wryly.

Dycedarg rolled his eyes. "It's *your* power, Larg," he said. "I just borrow it from time to time."

"Well, can't you dispose of some of them?" Larg asked.

Dycedarg shrugged. "One or two," he said. "Which will make it much harder to go to war. Have to find the right reasons...bah." He waved one hand. "Besides, it wasn't just about that. We were supposed to weaken Limberry, too."

"We still will," Larg said. "They're taking the brunt of the fighting."

"Oh, sure," Dycedarg grunted. "But who knows how long it'll be until King Ondoria dies, and they might have time to rebuild."

"That would be true if you killed Elmdor, too," Larg replied.

"Not quite," Dycedarg said. "He hasn't got an heir."

"When has that ever stopped anyone?" Larg asked.

"No heir," Dycedarg said again. "And no one with a clear claim. None of the Limberry nobles are all that strong, besides the Elmdor family. The Thadolfas were closest, but of course--"

"Of course," Larg said. "He did well, by the way. I like him."

"Argus?" Dycedarg said. "He's useful. Bit wild for my taste, but he sees a little clearer than Ramza."

"Thank God for your brother," Larg said. He was very grateful for all the good the Beoulvcs had done him. Balbanes had kept the Hokuten intact through a terrible war, and now Zalbaag continued his legacy of proud and inspiring leadership. Ramza had managed to rescue them from a political quagmire. And Dycedarg...

Well. Dycedarg was the right hand he could not bear to be without.

"Dyce, listen," Larg said. "We were screwed the moment Gustav kidnapped him." Larg pursed his lips. "God, if he'd gotten that ransom, he could've bought himself a new life anywhere he pleased. We might never have found him."

"Is that all you saw?" Dycedarg asked, staring in horror at Larg. Larg was rather used to this: Dycedarg was so brilliantly paranoid, imagining a thousand daggers from a thousand different directions. Of course, some of those daggers were real. The trick was figuring out which.

"Well, yes," Larg said. "He was *supposed* to kill the Marquis. Instead he went into business for himself. Would've made us look like fools, if word got out."

"Oh, so what?" Dycedarg asked. "We can stand to look like fools, so long as we're still standing. But Gustav *knew* Bestrald. Can you imagine..." He shook his head. "What if he'd *talked* to the Marquis? Just long enough to get a meeting with Goltanna?"

"Oh," Larg said, and then his eyes widened and he set down his glass and stood up, all without quite knowing what he was doing. "*Oh.*"

Dycedarg nodded glumly. "Gustav kills the Marquis," Dycedarg said. "We kill Gustav, and everything folds our way. Gustav takes the Marquis, and you're executed for treason, and so am I, and maybe both our families!"

"And Goltanna takes the throne," Larg whispered.

“And Goltanna takes the throne,” agreed Dycedarg, massaging his temples.

“When did you figure this out?” Larg asked.

“The moment I heard he'd been taken,” Dycedarg said. “We were skirting disaster.”

Larg absently drained his glass and closed his eyes, letting the bitter fire ooze down his throat.

“Well,” Larg said. “We've been lucky, haven't we?”

“We have,” Dycedarg said. “Argus survived to bring us news, thanks to my brother. Wiegraf dealt with the traitor for us.” He paused, then added, “It's a good idea, you know.”

“What?” Larg asked, eyes still shut as visions of disaster circled him like gulls at sea.

“Forgiving any Corps troops who surrender,” Dycedarg said. “They're basically trained soldiers. We pass some token laws, give them some respect and what gil we can spare...we could build a new regiment out of them.”

Larg's mouth twitched, and he opened his eyes to study his old friend. That was what he loved about Dycedarg. In the aftermath of a crisis he was unbearable, poring over every mistake he had made, every disaster that they had narrowly averted, making even the most unambiguous triumphs bittersweet. But that was because his mind never stopped working. He always looking at the pieces, trying to figure out what new ways they could fit together.

“And you!” Dycedarg suddenly snapped, glaring up at Larg. Larg recoiled.

“What about me?” grunted Larg defensively.

“You fought with Goltanna at Orinus' birthday.”

Larg rolled his eyes, trying to fend off the stab of doubt and guilt angling for his heart. “Don't believe everything you hear.”

“Even when it's Louveria who tells me?” Dycedarg asked, and the knife in Larg's chest redoubled in force.

Larg grimaced. “Since when do you talk to my sister?”

“Since we were kids,” Dycedarg said. “What happened?”

Larg held his tongue for just a moment, feeling like a chastened schoolboy. And then that shame gave way to rage, because he was the Prince of Gallione, brother to the queen, and what right did anyone have to make him feel ashamed? “He was so *damnably* arrogant!” he shouted. “He was snide, and he made his jokes, and he called my sister-!”

“Have you learned nothing from the Corps, Bestrald?” Dycedarg asked. “This war is going to be fought in the hearts of the people. Whatever may be said of you, good or ill, true or false, you must always think about how it will seem. About what kind of story will be told. You cannot rule Ivalice if you do not accept this truth.”

Larg bit back his bitter response and closed his eyes. Dycedarg would not be saying it if it weren't true. "I know," he whispered. "I know."

"Good," Dycedarg said. "A beloved king is much harder to assassinate. Look how little anyone cares what becomes of Ondoria. Do you want to repeat his failures?"

"No," Larg said. No, never. When the throne was his, he would be a king worth remembering. He would be the king presiding over Ivalice's golden age. He had known it from the moment his sister had married Ondoria.

"It's not as bad as all that," Larg said, forcing himself away from the alluring visions of his future reign. "The Limberry forces will take the brunt of this fighting. We'll build a new regiment from whichever members of Corps who surrender. And Gustav still had Hokuten cloaks. You can still take out the worst of the opposition."

"I suppose," Dycedarg sighed. "But we'll have to have sufficient pretext to mobilize the rest to war. Goltanna will have to be unambiguously in the wrong. It's the only way to make sure they won't sabotage our efforts." He said nothing for a moment, then added, "And the King?"

"Sicker by the day," Larg said. "He won't last long."

"Orinus will need a regent," Dycedarg said.

"And who can my sister trust, but her dear brother?" Larg asked.

Dycedarg poured the rest of the bottle into their glasses, and raised his to Larg. "To the Crown," he said.

Larg raised his glass in turn. "To the Crown."

To the crown that would one day sit upon his head. Especially so long as he kept Dycedarg by his side.

Chapter 12: Purpose

...when the War of the Lions finally broke, the two armies had their own advantages. His location in Zeltennia and his careful maintenance of the fortifications from the 50 Years' War gave Goltanna a decisive defensive advantage, but he lacked the numbers and experience that gave the Hokuten leave to outmaneuver him. Not only were his Limberry forces still depleted, but the Hokuten had also trained their new recruits during the Death Corps campaign. It is also worth noting that a small but significant number of the Corps was captured or surrendered, and were granted amnesty in exchange for service to the Crown...

-Alazlam Durai, "The Hokuten: From Ydoran Militia to Illustrious Army"

Pebbles scattered underfoot as swords clashed in ringing blows across the foothills. A bitter wind blew out of the mountains, carrying it with the wet frost of the distant sea. Farther up the hills, Beowulf dueled two men: Delita had already left a body in his wake, and was charging up the slope. Farther up the hill, Argus, Lambert, and the other Hokuten soldiers fought a wide line of troops.

Ramza's sword was fallen in the dust, but so had his foe's. His metal-lined leather gauntlets gave his blows extra weight, and he knocked aside the Corps' soldier's flailing punches, pinned him to the ground and wrapped his arm around his neck. The man struggled and twisted, his breathing coming in frenzied gasps. With agonizing slowness, the man stopped struggling. As his breath slowed to a dull whisper, Ramza released his grip, and the man slumped unconscious to the dirt.

But there was no time to rest, though Ramza's nose was bleeding and his ribs ached and he felt a bruise forming on his brow. He rose to his feet, racing up the hill to help the others.

It was only two days after the group had returned to Igros that the northern defenses of the Hokuten were crippled by a surprise attack. Everyone knew that the Corps had their strongest bases in the frigid north along the Rhana Strait, but there was only a single winding pass through the mountains that separated the Strait and Igros, and the Hokuten had manned garrisons at the entrance to this pass so that no army could surprise them. They wouldn't fritter away their forces on a push to the north, but they could make sure that no one ever came through.

At least, so they thought. But small, well-trained bands of Death Corps veterans had migrated through the mountains themselves, catching the forts and garrisons by surprise. Suddenly there were Corps soldiers within striking distance of Igros, and the Hokuten meant to guard them were scattered across southern Gallione in preparation for the coming campaign.

The forces of Limberry were still days away, but the Special Limberry Liaison could not miss a

chance to show his talents, and he brought his Hokuten escort along for the ride. So Ramza Beoulve's resolve not to kill was tested for the first time.

The problem, Ramza had realized, was the sword itself. The sword was not a defensive weapon. The sword might be able to block a foe's blade, but its principle purpose was to cut an opponent's flesh. Ramza did not have the skill to cut and not to kill: even if he did, he would have been hesitant to wound, not knowing what consequences it might bring. A fist might kill a man, but the odds were much smaller.

Ramza had been one of the best at the Academy at unarmed combat (which wasn't saying much: no one was counting on their fists winning a war). Over the next few days, he had cause to get better still, as he learned how to twist just so to knock a blade from an enemy's hand. Five small battles, and six men captured.

But it was too risky, too hard a fight for too little gain. He needed better tools, if he was to cling to this thread of righteousness.

He started with Argus, archery practice after every battle, even when his ribs ached and his arms felt hollow and the cut on his face had not yet healed. Practicing and practicing until he could hit a dummy anywhere he wanted from ten yards, then twenty, then fifty.

"But your targets move," Argus said. "Doesn't matter how keen your eyes. You can't practice hitting a moving target without hitting a living thing."

"How did you learn?" Ramza asked.

"Hunting," Argus said. "It's about all my father *did*, towards the end."

"Your father was a hunter?" Ramza asked.

"He started before my grandfather..." Argus trailed off. Ramza glanced towards him, but couldn't make out his face through the thick shadows of the night. "And anyways, saved us on food. Our coffers were starting to run dry. He probably bought us another few years from hunting." Argus shrugged. "I was handy with a bow before I was 12."

But there could be no time to hunt, could there? It was taking all the energy Ramza had merely to practice hitting the stationary targets. He was exhausted.

He thought the solution might lie in magic, so he he consulted with the healer who'd complimented his dressings—an older man named Rauffe.

"That's a tricky question," Rauffe admitted. "Trickier because I'm not a trained mage."

"But you're a healer," Ramza said.

"A military healer," Rauffe said. "We learn according to other traditions. With the right equipment, it doesn't take much work. I only trained for six months at Igros."

“Why does that make a difference?” Ramza asked.

“You want to...what?” Rauffe said. “Put your enemies to sleep?”

“Something like that,” Ramza said.

Rauffe shook his head. “I don't know much magical theory,” he said. “But your body constantly carries a field of magic around it. This field protects you, or strengthens you. Usually when you're fighting someone else it's kind of a wash: their field tries to protect them, yours tries to hurt them. It takes a lot of time, energy, effort, and equipment to strengthen that field so you can use it. You'd have to find a way to make their body do something it doesn't want to do.”

“But you can heal people!” Ramza said.

“I can't do anything,” Rauffe said. He raised his gloves. “These cost about half as much as I'll make this year. Take them away from me, and I can't do much more than heal scrapes and bruises. The only reason I can heal anyone, even *with* these, is because the body heals on its own. I'm strengthening their magic, not trying to bypass it. I'm feeding their field.”

Ramza sighed. He knew a little of this—at least enough to know how difficult it was. Even in the halcyon days of the Ydoran Empire, mages had been a minority. Now they had only the dregs of what Ydoran knowledge they could find, and only the Gariland Magic Academy produced any mages of consistent quality.

“Can you teach me anyways?” Ramza asked.

“What I can,” Rauffe said.

Enough Hokuten units were eventually filtered back to serve as guards for Igros, and Ramza and his friends returned to the Beoulve Manor. Argus consulted with the Marquis: Beowulf disappeared with Reis: Ramza and Delita trained with Coproral Lambert and his men.

But even Ramza and Delita could not train all the time. Alma and Teta found them late one night with two bottles of wine.

“So they sent you to your fancy school so you could *not* kill anyone,” Alma said.

“Shouldn't *you* be at school?” Ramza asked.

Alma shook her head. “Dyce wants us home,” he said. “Especially with the Corps near Igros. We're safer in the Manor.”

“And I'm sure you mind being pulled away,” Ramza said.

“Oh, dreadfully,” Alma replied, smiling.

“What about you?” Delita asked.

Teta shrugged. “I mean, it means more time with Alma,” Teta said. “But I'm sure I'll endure.”

“Thanks,” Alma grunted.

There was a knocking upon the door. "Come in!" Alma called.

"It's my room," muttered Ramza, but he trailed off as Dycedarg entered, wearing formal robes with Service hanging at his side.

"Ramza," Dycedarg said. "May I speak with you in the hallway?"

Ramza's throat went dry. He rose to his feet, waved Delita down when he started to rise as well, and followed Dycedarg into the hall.

"You've done well, Ramza," Dycedarg said, but his voice was just as soft and deadly as it had been when they'd returned from their rescue of the Marquis.

"Thank you," Ramza said cautiously.

"Five battles," Dycedarg said. "Five victories. Twelve men captured. Six of them by you."

"Yes," Ramza said.

"I hear you haven't killed a single man," Dycedarg said.

Ramza hesitated. He could feel the weight of his brother's shadow. "I haven't," he said.

"Ramza," Dycedarg said. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to stop the Corps," Ramza said.

"Without killing anyone?" Dycedarg said.

"If I can."

"You can't." Dycedarg sighed. "I told you this before, Ramza. To be a Beoulve requires--"

"Requires what, Dyce?" Ramza asked. He felt his stomach quiver at his own audacity, and saw a look of shock on Dycedarg's face. But exhausted as he was, desperate as he was, Ramza felt righteous. This was something he wanted to do, something that felt right to him, and he was surprised to find the courage that gave him. "Why should I kill men who were wronged?"

Dycedarg's face hardened. "So you blame the Crown?"

"I blame no one," Ramza said. "I don't want to have to make decisions like that. They were treated unjustly, and they resort to unjust means to correct it. I don't want to be unjust, Dyce.

"So you can think of no reason to ever execute a man?" Dycedarg asked.

"I can think of no reason to execute *these* men!" Ramza shouted.

Dycedarg inhaled deeply, his nostrils flaring. "You cannot possibly live up to the responsibilities of our name without bloodying your sword," Dycedarg said.

"You may be right," Ramza said. "But I see no reason I shouldn't try."

Dycedarg closed his eyes and sighed. He reached beneath his robes and pulled out a strange bundle of purple cloth and a crumpled piece of paper. He offered them to Ramza. "Gently," he said.

"What is this?" Ramza asked, taking them from Dycedarg's hands. The bundle of cloth had a

strange, cloying smell that made Ramza's head feel light.

“Bestrald was almost poisoned at his tenth birthday,” Dycedarg said. “I was there.” It took Ramza a moment to remember that Bestrald was Prince Larg's first name. “That was how I started researching poisons and their antidotes. I was quite good at it. I admit, I've never had cause to put the knowledge to practical use, and even if I had, what you're holding is outside my field of expertise.”

“What am I holding?” Ramza asked.

“A bundle of herbs wrapped around a detonator of the kind we use for our cannons,” Dycedarg said. “In theory, this will explode on contact with the ground and release a cloud of spores and pollen that will cloud the eyes, bodies, and minds of anyone who breathes it in. It's non-toxic, too. The worst they'll get is similar to a hangover. The paper has a list of the ingredients you need, and instructions on how to package and prepare it. Most quartermasters should have the supplies on hand.”

Ramza stared at the purple bundle in his hand, and lifted his eyes back to Dycedarg. “When did you...?”

“It's copied off a design we used in the War,” Dycedarg said. “I just modified it a little.”

“Dyce-” Ramza started.

“It is difficult to be a Beoulve, Ramza,” Dycedarg said. “You cannot keep the blood off your hands forever. The least I can do is make sure your hands are clean as long as possible.”

Ramza hugged his brother. He felt Dyce stiffen in surprise, and then wiry arms folded around Ramza.

He would have liked more time to learn how to use these devices, but the next morning he awoke with his mouth dry and his head pounding in time with the knocking at his door. The Marquis had given Argus new instructions, and Argus needed his escort.

The Death Corps was entrenched across southern Gallione, occupying old forts and abandoned towns emptied by the long, brutal progress of the 50 Years' War. Man-for-man, the Hokuten could probably have bested the Corps, but each fight turned into an unforgiving slog that tied up too many troops. With the forces of Limberry on the march, that was no longer such a problem, but the Corps knew it, too, and the attack in the north had acted like a signal, sending their forces raiding. Southeast Gallione was a hornet's nest of small Corps bands, making sure that when the forces of Limberry arrived they would find an inhospitable countryside waiting for them.

So the Special Limberry Liaison was sent to clear the way, along with his escort and a handful of Hokuten knights.

Ramza knew intellectually that this feud with the Death Corps was practically a skirmish compared to the miles-wide battles of the 50 Years' War, but he could not truly understand this fact. He

had never fought like this before. Three battles stood out in his memory for a long time to come. The first was an old blocky garrison protected by some twenty armed men and women, where swords clashed and clattered against each other in the heavy afternoon air. The second was an abandoned tavern house, whose archers had sunk an arrow into Rauffe's shoulder before Ramza and his friends even knew they were in danger. The third was an old canyon lined with tents and guarded by one of the few mages who served Corps, lathering the outlying hills with fire and lightning to drive back any man who got close.

But the Corps had not reckoned the Special Limberry Liaison and his escort. The two dozen swords who held the old garrison were not prepared for Beowulf and Delita, whirling in among them like cyclones of steel, cutting down anyone who might try to stop them. And though the mage bathed the outlying hills in frost, fire, and crackling lightning, he made himself too prominent a target, and one swift arrow from Argus felled him where he stood.

As for the archers in the old tavern? Every one of them lived.

The Special Limberry Liaison and his escort approached at dusk, and retreated the moment the arrow hit their healer. Rauffe and Ramza worked together to dress Rauffe's wound, and the group tried to decide what to do. But Ramza already knew what he would do. He spent the next few hours studying the tavern from afar, eyeing its doors and its windows. There was one that drew his eye: a window that was always open on the top floor, with an archer visible inside.

In the deep of the night, Ramza prepared four arrows, each with one of Dycedarg's devices bound around its head. They gave the arrows a strange weight, but Argus had compared them to fire arrows, so Ramza had practiced a little bit with those unlit as they moved across Gallione. Now he put what he had learned to use. He trained his Hokuten-issue bow, aimed just above the tavern, and released.

The arrow exploded into a cloud of white dust. He heard coughs and shouts of alarm from inside the tavern, but Ramza was still preparing his other arrows, aiming for other doors, other windows. As the shouts and cries and coughs escalated, he laid down his bow and charged forwards with his sword in his hand. He rested his other hand on his chest, and the twin runes he'd etched there with Rauffe's help glowed for a moment.

Ramza had not learned nearly enough to do any meaningful healing, and without proper Ydoran materials he couldn't really enhance himself anyways. But this was slightly different. The two runes had been inscribed with some smaller materials readily available from Hokuten healers and were designed to simply absorb his ambient magical energy so it could be released back into his system as needed. One to ease his breathing. One that boosted his immune system so it could fight off foreign

toxins.

So when Ramza burst through the tavern door, he and he alone could breathe easy, and fight with his mind clear. Choking and gasping, the Corps tried to fight the interloper. Choking and gasping, they found they couldn't. Swords swung, and were knocked from numb hands. Clumsy fingers fumbled for their bows, before Ramza was upon them, prying their weapons from their grasps and knocking them to the ground. The fight was endless, but he needed to do this alone. He needed to know he could.

"And how many were there?" Instructor Daravon asked, pouring a generous measure of whiskey into Ramza's glass.

"Eight," Ramza said, his legs, chest, and arms aching as he curled back against Daravon's comfortable armchair.

"Eight," repeated Daravon, shaking his head. "Eight soldiers, taken alive. And you're only a cadet yet, Ramza." He smiled, and looked around the room. "You've all done so well."

Victorious from their campaign across southern Gallione, they had come to Gariland, waiting to make contact with the Limberry forces streaming in from the east. Beowulf had insisted they come to his father's, and Ramza could see why. It was a cozy, dilapidated place squatting in the center of a few wild acres on the outskirts of Gariland. The foyer they were sitting in had an enormous fireplace casting shadows against the vaulted ceilings, with a haphazard array of sunken furniture scattered within. A few runes in the walls were outlined in dim light: Ramza couldn't tell if they had been dimmed intentionally or were failing.

"Even me?" Beowulf asked, and in that moment for all he'd done at their side he looked very young.

"Even you," Daravon said. He bent over his son and kissed him on the forehead. Beowulf squirmed with embarrassment, but could not hide the smile on his face.

Argus rose from his chair and stumbled to the balcony. Ramza rose from his own chair, his head swimming, but hesitated.

"Go," Daravon said.

Ramza followed after. He pushed open the glass doors and stepped out onto a little hemispherical balcony overlooking Daravon's acres. He slumped down onto the banister next to Argus, and the two men stared out over the wild grass with the stars gleaming overhead.

"Thank you," Ramza said.

"All I did was teach you to hold a bow," Argus said.

"You also killed that mage," Delita said, stepping through the doors and standing on the

opposite side of Argus.

“I suppose,” Argus said.

“Argus,” Ramza said. “What happened to your parents?”

Argus said nothing for a while, and merely drank from his glass. Ramza did not press the issue, and he and Delita did not exchange glances.

“Father loved to hunt,” Argus croaked. “Surprised a pack of minotaurs during mating season. They...he didn't make it.” Argus was silent again, finishing his glass. “Mother didn't last long. She'd always been a bit too fond of her wine, and she mixed it with a tincture she was supposed to take sparingly for her back trouble. The Healers said it was an accident, but...”

The stars gleamed over head. Wind rustled the grass.

“And now you're the Special Limberry Liaison,” Ramza said.

“I...yes.” A smile flickered across Argus' face and then was gone.

“Choking plague,” Ramza said. “For mine.”

“And mine.” Delita said.

Another long silence, as the three young men stood together with their glasses in hand.

“A month ago,” Delita said. “We were squires and cadets.”

The three men stood on the balcony, and stared out at the stars. And for the first time he could remember, Ramza felt like he was exactly where he wanted to be.

Chapter 13: “Just Like You”

...like the Nanten, the armed forces of Limberry were decimated by the constant fighting of the 50 Years' War, having to hold their territory against a powerful army that occupied nearly a third of their traditional territory for decades. Unlike the Nanten, however, their armies never fully recovered. Limberry was neither as prosperous or populous as the other regions of Gallione, and what efforts had been made to reconstitute their forces were undone by a number of rebellions, including the conflict with the Death Corps and Miluda Folles' famous charge through their ranks...

-Alazlam Durai, “The War of the Lions”

Smoke in the air, thick and cloying from countless small fires. The armies of Gallione and Limberry were stretched across the Plains. Hundreds of men. Perhaps thousands. And again, Ramza felt the strange disconnect. He had never seen so many soldiers assembled in one place, or felt the stunning weight of their collective purpose.

How could his brothers command still more men? How could his father have led such armies into even more terrible battles? But the truth was, it didn't feel quite as daunting as it once had. The past few weeks had given Ramza a taste for audacity. He could dream a little bigger now.

“Ramza!” Delita called from farther down the hill. Ramza shaded his eyes against the setting sun and saw his friend striding towards him.

“How is he?” Ramza asked.

Delita snorted. “He's pissing off the Viscount again.”

Ramza chuckled. The Special Limberry Liaison and his escort had set out from Daravon's estate and met the incoming wave of soldiers from Limberry. This had immediately degenerated into an authoritative disaster, because the field commander of the Limberry forces, one Viscountess Maronne, did not want to take orders from a squire, much less a Thadolfas. If the Viscount had not been a rather vain and inexperienced young woman, the soldiers of Limberry might have followed her lead. As it was, every maneuver and every night's camp devolved into a lurching, stumbling mess as the confused Limberry soldiers tried to figure out who they were supposed to obey.

“It's a little better, though,” Delita said. “They don't want to embarrass themselves in front of the Hokuten, so they're trying to present a united front. They've at least agreed that Argus will distribute the Limberry reserve units to reinforce their line.”

“Well, that's something,” Ramza said. “Where's Beowulf?”

“Some of the soldiers were going to have a melee,” Delita said. “Everyone throws in 50 gil.

Winner takes the pot.”

“Of course,” Ramza sighed.

Delita sat down in the grass. Ramza kept staring out over the tents.

“What’s the plan?” Ramza asked.

“Units are going to spread out,” Delita said. “Sweep south. Kill or capture every soldier of the Death Corps we can find.”

“A net across all Gallione,” Ramza said.

“Looks like.”

Delita fished a blade of grass from the ground next to him and put to his lips. The low buzzing filled the air.

“It’s big,” Ramza said.

“I know,” Delita said. “You ready?”

“I think so,” Ramza said.

“You look it.” Ramza looked down to his friend, who was looking up at him with appraising eyes. “Doing the impossible agrees with you.”

“It’s not impossible,” Ramza said, plucking a blade of grass from the hillside and raising it to his own lips.

“No,” Delita said, smiling as Ramza’s high fluting sounded over the field. “I guess it’s not.”

That thought carried Ramza through the evening, and stayed with him even as he awoke the next morning, and joined Argus at the commanders’ tent. A lot of men and women would die today and in the days to come. Ramza couldn’t help that. What he could do was make sure that he saved as many people as he could. He checked his armor. He checked his sword. He examined the arrows with their bundled packs of cloth, and he fingered the runes he’d inscribed onto his chest with the little stones that were supposed to quietly absorb ambient magical energy for emergency use.

Then he was off and moving. The Special Limberry Liaison needed his escort, after all.

They rode together atop seven chocobos: Argus in the lead, with the others flared back around him in a loose v-shape. Solid lines of soldiers were sweeping throughout southern Gallione, surrounding, besieging, killing, and capturing. Wherever those units were having trouble, Argus and his men rode in—to provide support, to assess the situation, and to take the front lines themselves.

On the third day, they had pushed so far south that they had left the Mandalia Plains behind. Their duty for the day was reconnaissance: interrogated soldiers had indicated that there was a main storehouse somewhere in the coastal marshes, a place where battered bands of Death Corps troops retreated to rearm and resupply, and where their wounded were cared for. But sending an army into the

swamps would have been a waste of time, effort, and manpower. The lines of soldiers continued their sweep, encircling the main routes out of the bog so no one could escape. The Special Limberry Liaison and his escort searched for this storehouse, riding over old docks, past low shacks where fishermen and hunters had once plied their trade, and a dozen other places. They found traces of soldiers—old firepits, trash and abandoned latrines—but nothing of the soldiers themselves.

The swamps stank, and the thick humidity left Ramza's armor creaking and squeaking against his chafed skin. He wasn't alone, either: they were all in a foul mood, trying to find some way to get comfortable and muttering curses to themselves as they failed. Things rustled in the underbrush or slithered through the mire, and if you escape your own sweaty reek you found only the rotting muddy fog of the place waiting for you. The whole place boiled with quiet hostility.

And just like that—stinking, sweating, swearing—their birds wound down a path, and they came face-to-face with Miluda Folles.

She wasn't alone: she and two other women stood upon a narrow wooden pontoon bridge leading out to a blocky structure of mud, brick, and wooden slats in the middle of a pond. One of Miluda's allies wore leather armor with her red hair tied back in a ponytail. The other wore heavy knight's gear with her blonde hair cut boyishly short. Their swords were drawn, and they faced the oncoming soldiers with nothing but fury in their eyes.

Fury, and a moment's shock on Miluda's face.

Argus had an arrow nocked and trained before Ramza had quite begun to think. Ramza raised his voice to shout a warning, and the red-headed woman slashed her sword. The air between her and Argus shimmered like heat off stone walls, and Argus slumped in his saddle, his bow trembling in his hands.

“W-what?” stuttered Argus, blinking wearily.

From the corner of his eye, Ramza saw the woman fall to one knee, with Miluda resting a comforting hand on her shoulder. Ramza hesitated, looking between them—between Argus, turning his head slowly from side to side, and Miluda and her soldiers. He remembered the last thing she'd said to him. Her insistence that they were foes by birth.

He raised both hands, and shouted, “Peace!”

“Ramza!” hissed Argus, though his voice was weak, but Ramza still had his certainty. He dismounted his chocobo, and walked forward his hands upraised.

“Come no closer, Beoulve!” Miluda shouted, when Ramza was some twenty feet away.

“If you insist, Folles,” Ramza said, coming to a stop.

“Your friend just tried to kill me,” Miluda said.

“Your friend beat his Marquis to a pulp,” Ramza replied.

“And that's justice?” she asked.

“No,” Ramza said. “Neither is killing him. None of this is just.”

There was the squishing sound of feet in the mud. Ramza turned his head slightly and saw that Delita had also dismounted, and was approaching with his hands in the air.

“What do you want, Beoulve?” Miluda demanded.

“We were sent to find a Death Corps base,” Ramza said. He jerked his head towards the building in the distance. “I take it that's the place?”

Miluda said nothing, but Ramza saw her grip tighten on her blade.

“You could kill me,” Ramza said. “But I'm not alone.” He jerked his head back towards the men on their birds. “One of them will get away. You know they will. They'll let the others know where you are.”

“They won't catch us,” the blonde woman whispered.

“They will,” Delita said. “You know they will.”

“We'll kill every one of them,” the blonde woman said.

“If you kill ten of them for every one of you who falls,” Delita said. “You'll still lose. And somehow I don't think the wounded will be killing ten soldiers apiece. Do you?”

“What do you want, Beoulve?” Miluda repeated, her face impassive. “Do you think I'll surrender to you? You know what happens to your captives, don't you? How else did you find out where we were?”

Ramza felt a sudden dryness in his throat, at odds with the sticky heat of the swamp. He hadn't asked. He hadn't even stopped to think. But he knew, didn't he? How else did you interrogate a man? And how many of those that had been interrogated were men and women that Ramza had captured?

Precarious again, fragile again, clinging to a thread of white in a world of murky grey. No justice on any side, right? He'd said so himself.

“I want you to surrender,” Ramza said. “But not to me.”

Miluda studied him, her mouth twisted to one side. “No?”

“No,” Ramza said. “If you ride north. If you fortify beyond the Lenalian Mountains. You can sue for fair terms.”

“Ramza!” Argus shouted. He was off his chocobo now, stumbling towards him as though his body had fallen asleep. Ramza's eyes flickered to the red-haired woman still on her knees at Miluda's side. What had she done to him? What magic was that?

“Emilie, no!” barked Miluda. The woman had advanced a single step, her blade pointing

towards Ramza

"If you want to fight, feel free," Beowulf called. Violet was strolling forwards, and Beowulf had both his swords drawn atop his bird's back. His face was still mottled with bruises from the melee days past. "You won't make it out alive."

"No one is fighting!" Ramza shouted, though his stomach lurched as though he had taken a plunge from a tall place. He kept his hands in the air. "I've spoken with my brothers," Ramza said. "I've spoken with the Prince. Once you're out of the south, they have no reason to risk their troops in the north. They'll let you surrender with fair terms."

"But it will be a surrender, Beoulve!" Miluda shouted. "They will go right back to taking everything from us."

"You insolent cur!" spat Argus. "You defy the natural order, and you call it justice."

"What order?" Miluda demanded. "The order where you steal from our pockets and take the food from our mouths? The order where the men and women who won you your kingdom suffer because you will not bear your burden?"

"We bear the burden of leadership!" Argus roared. "This is God's will, whore. And when you refuse to serve, you are as useful as a cow who can no longer be milked. No!" He shook his head. "No, that's not fair. The cow does not believe itself the equal of the farmer. The cow can still be useful in death."

"Argus, enough!" Delita growled.

"You *would* side with her," Argus hissed.

"ENOUGH!" Ramza said, louder still. He contorted his face into a glare, tried to pretend at a ferocity he did not feel.

"We're human," whispered Miluda. "Just like you."

"You're *nothing* like me," Argus snarled.

Everything was spinning, and Ramza could feel it, like water trickling through his fingers. Soon there would be nothing left but the need for violence. Nothing left but injustice.

"Argus," Ramza said. "She saved the Marquis just as much as we did."

"Curs like her took him!" Argus yelled. "Took him and killed...so many, Ramza!"

Ramza hesitated, just for a moment. He knew how cruel he was about to be, but he saw no other way to make his point.

"Argus," Ramza said. "That's like saying every noble is like your grandfather."

He saw the pain and shock in Argus' face, eyes wide with just the faintest hint of tears. Before that pain could turn to anger, Ramza pressed, "She saved the Marquis. She and her brother. We can't

hate them for that.”

Argus closed his eyes. “What would you have me do, Ramza?” he asked, his voice soft. “Let them go?”

“Yes,” Ramza said. “We can't beat them. Not like this.”

“Hold on,” Lambert said, riding his own bird forwards with Rauffe and the other men of the Hokuten at his side. “Ramza, you can't make this call.”

“I know,” Ramza said. “He can.” He nodded at Argus.

Argus said nothing for a long time. Ramza felt his heart straining. He felt as though he were standing on a swaying rope that was about to snap beneath his weight.

“Argus,” Ramza said, as the silence stretched. “Please. They don't have to kill anyone. *We* don't have to kill anyone. Just tell them where to go. Where we aren't.”

“Surrender's not an option,” said Emilie.

“Maybe not,” Delita said. “But it might be, if terms are fair enough. Pardons. Amnesty. Maybe even some laws passed that address your concerns. And the better fortified the north is, the more likely it'll be that they have to deal with you with words instead of swords.”

“Everyone lives,” Ramza said. “Argus. Please.”

“Alright,” Argus whispered. “Alright.” He opened his eyes, and Ramza saw the faintest trace of tears still on his face. He turned away at once and said, “Let me...let me look at my maps.”

Lambert came closer, his eyes flickering between Miluda, Ramza, and the other Hokuten. “Ramza,” he said quietly. “This isn't a good idea.”

“Why not?” Ramza asked. “I don't feel like dying today. I don't feel like killing today. Do you?”

“I...” Lambert shook his head. “You're setting policy.”

“I'm not,” Ramza said. “I'm choosing who to fight. We all do that, don't we?”

“If you'd like a fight,” Emilie said. “I'd be happy to oblige you.”

“No one's fighting unless I'm involved,” Beowulf said.

“No one's fighting anyone,” Ramza said.

“Why are you doing this?” asked the red-headed woman. She was on her feet again, though she seemed a bit unsteady, and watched him with fervent green eyes.

“I'm trying not to kill anyone,” Ramza said.

“Why?” she asked.

“I don't think any of you deserve to die,” Ramza replied. He hesitated, then he looked to Miluda. “And...and I don't think we have to be enemies. You're human, just like me.”

Miluda pursed her lips. The group hung in uneasy silence.

“North,” Argus called, walking forwards. “Well. East first, until she hits the Lenalian River. Then you'll ride north along it until you hit the Siedge Swamplands. When you leave the Siedge, head north towards the Lenalian Plateau. Whatever you do, do not go towards Gariland. We're using it as a staging area, and I can't speak for the movements of the soldiers there.”

“You don't have anyone on the river?” Emilie asked in disbelief.

“No one,” affirmed Argus. “We didn't know the area well enough, and we know none of the Corps operates near it.”

“How can I trust you?” Miluda asked, her deep voice level.

Ramza turned back to face her, shrugging. “I want what's just,” Ramza said.

“Beoulve,” she repeated, shaking her head.

The rope felt so close to breaking.

“Alright,” Miluda said. “Ride out of here.”

“You're not giving the orders, you sow,” Argus spat.

Ramza held up a forestalling hand.

“We're going north,” Ramza said. “We'll camp in an hour, and we'll report what we've seen by midday tomorrow. You have to be on the move by then.”

“And if we're not?” Miluda asked.

“You know,” Delita said.

Miluda nodded slowly. “Alright,” she said, sheathing her sword.

Ramza felt weak with relief. He turned back to where he'd left his bird.

“Beoulve!” she shouted. Ramza looked over his shoulder. “If this is a trap,” she said. “I'll kill you. I'll kill your family. I won't stop hunting you. Not to the very ends of the earth.”

“It's not a trap,” Ramza said.

Miluda shrugged, and headed back down the pontoon bridge, supporting the red-headed woman. Emilie spat on the ground, then turned to follow.

The group rode at once. No one spoke until they made camp an hour later.

“I want guards posted throughout the night!” Argus shouted. “Everyone sleep light. I don't want us getting ambushed.”

“They won't ambush us,” Ramza said.

“Just like they didn't ambush me?” Argus asked. Again, the pain in his eyes.

“Argus,” Ramza said, taking him by the shoulders. “I'm sorry.”

Argus shook his head. “You can't trust them, Ramza,” he said. “They're monsters.”

“They're not,” Ramza protested.

“They are,” Argus whispered. “I've seen what they do. Destroying the natural order. Opposing God's will. They'd burn Ivalice to the ground, and you would rather let the flames smolder.”

“Then why did you listen to me?” Ramza asked.

Argus smiled slightly. “Like you said,” Argus replied. “I believe in repaying my debts.”

It was like the Marquis had said, wasn't it? The will of God, rewarding him for his pursuit of justice. Even a man who didn't believe in his cause still gave him the tools he needed to try and serve it.

“Thank you,” Ramza whispered, and he slept that night with a deep, profound relief.

Chapter 14: The Manor Besieged

“I mean, it's not like I *mind* getting away from the Academy,” huffed Alma, glaring out her window. “But why do I have to be locked up in here?”

“It's not safe,” Teta said. Personally, she was relieved. She liked the Beoulve Manor. She liked being Alma's lady-in-waiting. It wasn't difficult, since Alma was so restless that she pushed aside all Teta's attempts to help her.

“I *know* it's not safe!” Alma shouted. “It's not safe for anyone! So why...” She trailed off and folded her arms across her chest.

Teta said nothing. She knew better. Alma had been fixated on her exclusion from military training ever since Ramza had begun his. Perhaps it was an even older obsession. Perhaps she'd been obsessed since her father had died, and she and her brother had been ordained as full-fledged Beoulves. She flung herself into their magic classes at the Preparatory Academy, but those were designed to protect the women from kidnapping and assassination, not to make them useful. Or at least, so Teta gathered: generous as the Beoulves were, they would not buy Teta any Ydoran jewelry to amplify her magic. Who would ever want to assassinate her, anyways?

Maybe that was why she liked the Manor. No expectations. No responsibilities. No need to teeter on that line between civility and submissiveness so the other women of the Academy would not look at her as either threat or easy prey.

She looked out the window, smiling a little. The barbs and jibes of spoiled noblewomen were little concern to her. Her brother was somewhere out there with a sword in hand and enemies trying to kill him. He'd already shown himself so strong. What did words matter, while Delita dodged swords?

“They'll be alright,” Teta said.

“They'd be *more* alright if we were there,” Alma said.

Was that true? And even if it was, was it worth killing anyone? Teta didn't think so. Teta had yet to hear a single compelling argument for why this stupid war had to be fought in the first place, though she was careful never to say so. No one, at the Academy or in this manse, would take kindly to a commoner questioning the war against the Corps. She'd spent a lot of her life keeping her thoughts to herself, even from Alma. Alma would never betray her, Alma would never judge her, but Alma might repeat the things Teta had said, confident that she could convince anyone to listen. Teta had learned a long time ago that good intentions could hurt you just as easily as bad ones. It was safer this way.

People lost enough to the accidents of life—to cart crashes and to plagues. Why add human malice to the list? Why not leave well enough alone?

Staring out the window and thinking of her brother. Thinking of her parents. Thinking of the Academy, and nasty whispers, and bloody swords. Thinking of...

She squinted. There was someone moving in the distance. Not on the roads, but on the rolling hills that led up to the Beoulve Manor. That was unusual: most official delegations took the road.

“Alma?” Teta said. “Do you see that?”

“See what?” Alma asked, peering over her shoulder. “Who are they?”

“I don't know,” Teta said, but she felt a creeping sense of something, like the tingling on your skin just before a storm. There was something off about those men, something she couldn't quite place, something in the scraps of dark green cloth they wore, or-

Dark green. No one wore dark green but the Corps.

“Alma!” Teta shouted. “Lock the door!”

“What?” Alma asked, but there was no time to explain, and she was not going to allow her best friend to die like her parents had died. Teta rushed from the room, pounded down the stairs, and pushed her way past the surprised guard standing outside of Dycedarg's door.

“Teta?” he said, looking up in surprise from a map of Gallione splayed across his desk. “What are you-”

“It's the Corps,” she said. “They're coming by the southern wall.”

“That's not possible,” Dycedarg said, though he grabbed at Service.

“I saw them, Dyce,” she said, momentarily careless of propriety or civility. “Dark green cloth.”

“Corps' members wearing their colors?” he said. “That's not-”

There were shouts of alarm from outside, and the ringing clash of sword against sword. A moment later, a bloodcurdling shriek sent frost coursing through Teta's veins.

“Damn!” Dycedarg roared, drawing the gleaming blade from its sheathe. He threw open the door and gestured to the knight outside.

“Alma?” Dycedarg asked.

“I told her to lock the door,” Teta said.

“And what do you think are the chances she actually did?” Dycedarg asked.

“50/50,” Teta said.

“Wow, she likes you,” Dycedarg said. “I can't order her to do anything.”

“You brought her back from the Academy.”

“She *wanted* to leave the Academy.”

She had never spoken with Dycedarg like this before. Ramza, of course: Zalbaag, occasionally: but Dycedarg? Never. Why now? Why, when blades clashed and someone screamed their death-

scream? Why didn't this feel real, even as fear chilled her to the bone?

They raced up the stairs to Alma's room. Alma was standing in the doorway, looking both ways down the hall.

"50/50," mumbled Teta.

"Well, you tried," Dycedarg said. He grabbed his sister by the shoulder. "We need to get out of here."

"What's happening?" Alma demanded.

There was the clomping of feet upon the stairs at the other end of the hallway. Dycedarg hissed and gestured with his sword as though it were a conductor's baton. The runes on the sword darkened, and with another quick gesture Dycedarg flung a cloud of inky darkness down the hall. It exploded into a jet-black fog by the opposite stairwell. She heard shouts of panic and alarm, and the repeated *thumping* and cursing of a man falling down the stairs.

"Other way," Dycedarg said, pulling Alma back the way they'd come. Teta kept close, throwing one glance over her shoulder to look for any sign of movement from the black cloud. The Hokuten guard led the way, sword drawn.

There was a flash of sunlight on steel, and a spray of blood against the wall. The knight tumbled down the stairs.

"Damn!" roared Dycedarg, jabbing with his bright blade, and an arrow of crackling blue burst from the swordpoint and exploded into the wall, so chunks of masonry hammered into the man in ragged leather standing over the dead knight. Dycedarg plunged forwards again, burying his sword in the man's chest. The man gasped and sank to the wall.

Alma was already kneeling by the fallen knight's side. Dycedarg grabbed her by the shoulder and hauled her to her feet. "Dyce!" she protested.

"There's no time!" Dycedarg roared, struggling to pull her along. He wasn't looking at the blonde, pale man charging towards him from down the hall, leading a small pack of soldiers, all with weapons drawn.

"Dyce!" Teta shouted in warning. Dycedarg turned, too late: the sword slashed, and Dycedarg collapsed backwards, clutching at a bloody wound across his chest. Teta felt that sickening disjointed feeling, the lurching unreality of a nightmare. This couldn't be happening.

"No!" Alma bellowed, lifting her hands, and a shimmering white light flowed out from her palms and formed a translucent opal-colored barrier between them and the man with the dark green cloak. The pale man cursed and started running back down the hall, the emblem of the crowned call just visible upon his cloak. A single soldier of the Corps glared at them through the transparent shield.

“Dyce!” Alma cried, falling to his side. Dycedarg had a gloved hand on his chest, shimmering with faint radiance: Alma put her hands over the wound, and added her light to his. The hot salty tang of blood filled the air, and bile trickled up Teta's throat.

“Run,” whispered Dycedarg.

“No!” Alma said fiercely.

“Where?” Teta asked.

Whatever he might have said was drowned out by a shout of triumph from above them. Teta and Alma looked up to find soldiers with swords and spears standing at the top of the staircase, staring down at them. Teta's heart spasmed in her chest, and she jerked away from Dycedarg and Alma, her back against the liquid pressure of Alma's barrier.

“Noble bastards,” whispered the man. “Noble bitches, too. What are ya good for?”

This couldn't be happening, could it? This couldn't be real. Dycedarg with blood on his chest, armed soldiers coming towards them with hate in their eyes.

Her imagination had shut down. Everything had shut down. She was frozen in shock, blank and afraid. All at once, everything was so terribly real.

Thunder sounded from above, as though a lightning bolt had struck just in front of her. White fire exploded outwards; the soldiers crumpled and screamed. She caught a glimpse of a figure in the thick of that heat—Zalbaag in his sable armor, a gleaming bastard sword in his hand, the broken bodies of the dead scattered all around him.

The pressure at Teta's back gave way. Teta fell, and was wrenched upright by powerful arms around her chest and throat, so she choked and gasped and could not breathe.

“Zal!” Alma shrieked, as the hard-eyed soldier from the other side of the barrier grabbed her and pulled her away. She struggled in his grasp, until he struck her across the face and pulled her slumped body over his shoulders.

“Let's go!” shouted the man holding Teta, heaving her over his shoulder as though she were a sack of grain. Why wasn't she fighting? Shouldn't she be fighting, like Alma? She'd been moving so quickly, why had she-

I didn't believe it I didn't believe it just doing what I was supposed to it's not real it's not real

The soldier carrying Alma gave a strangled cry and threw her to the ground, kicking her in the stomach. Her mouth was covered in blood, and so was the neck of the man who'd been carrying her.

“GET UP!” howled the man holding Teta, and the bleeding soldier grabbed Alma and moved forward again, one hand firmly around her neck. She choked and wheezed and would not stop fighting. But Teta did not want to be kicked, or punched, or hurt. Why were they doing this? Why would

anyone do this?

Doors burst open, and a painfully clear sky glowed blue above her, as a delicate breeze tugged at her hair. How could it be so lovely, when there was such fear in horror in her? How, when-

“Alma!” roared Zalbaag, and the man holding her collapsed, his severed head rolling from his shoulders as blood dripped down the stump of his neck, and he was so close Teta could have reached out and touched his outstretched hand but then there was the scratching of taloned feet in the dust and a pack of mounted chocobos charged by. Teta lost sight of Alma and Zalbaag, and then with a lurching start she was thrown onto the back of a bird and the Manor was already shrinking away into the distance.

“Teta!” screamed Alma, face still slick with blood. She moved forwards, but Zalbaag wrapped an arm around his sister's shoulders and pulled her back. He was right, of course he was right, neither of them could catch up to a chocobo at a full sprint, but Teta could jump off, it wouldn't even hurt, she'd done it before for fun, and she gathered her nerve and-

And felt a sharp needle-prick against her back.

“Move and you die,” whispered a terrible voice, and Teta closed her eyes and felt the nightmare weight settle in over her.

Chapter 15: Brothers

...of course, we cannot be sure what the Hokuten and Limberry forces might have done once they'd completed their campaign in southern Gallione, but the actions of Gregory Levigne removed any chance at a peaceful resolution. Dycedarg Beoulve had been attacked: neither his childhood friend, Prince Larg, nor his brother, Knight-Commander Zalbaag, would allow the act to go unpunished. So the Hokuten and Limberry forces blockaded the Lenalian Plateau and pushed north, to eradicate the Death Corps once and for all.

-Alazlam Durai, "Shadows of the Lion War"

Was this Ramza's fault?

He knew, on some level, that it couldn't possibly be. The band of soldiers who had attacked the Manor had not come out of southern Gallione. The band of soldiers who had taken Teta had nothing to do with the men and women Ramza had captured and set free. The men and women who had hurt Dycedarg and Alma had nothing in common with the ones he'd been unable to hurt, save for the fact that they paid allegiance to the same cause. Save for the fact that, while he had refused to hurt them, they had hurt his family and taken Teta.

The thoughts chased each other round and round through Ramza's bed as he sat on a stool in Dycedarg's bedroom. Not his fault. Not his fault.

"I'm fine," huffed Dycedarg, his arms crossed in front of his bare bandaged chest.

"You are not fine!" Zalbaag growled, looming over him. "You had your chest sliced open."

"It was a shallow cut," Dycedarg said, waving one hand dismissively.

"It was a deep wound," Zalbaag said. "If Alma hadn't been there..." He rested a hand on Alma's shoulder. She was hunched over Dycedarg's bed, clutching at his hand. Her face was still bruised and scraped. Ramza didn't like to see her that way. He didn't like to imagine the violence that had been done to her.

And if he didn't like that, how must Delita be feeling at this moment?

"I didn't do anything," Alma whispered. "I couldn't...I didn't...Teta...!"

"Not your fault," Delita said, his voice stilted, as though each word had been pronounced separately by someone who didn't understand what they were saying. He was staring straight ahead, past Dycedarg, past Alma, past Zalbaag. He was staring out to the glow of dusk through the window, as though he could see Teta somewhere out there. And Ramza felt another shock of guilt. Was this what his attempts at justice brought him? Is this what came of trying to keep his hands clean?

“They fled for the Lenalian Plateau,” Zalbaag said.

“You didn't pursue, did you?” Dycedarg asked.

“I'm not risking our soldiers on a wild goose chase,” Zalbaag grunted. “The Limberry forces have it cordoned off. No one's getting out that way.”

“And the mountains?” Dycedarg asked.

“Nothing can get through,” Zalbaag said.

“I haven't heard that before,” Dycedarg replied, smiling sardonically.

“I've pulled two-thirds of the Hokuten north,” Zalbaag said. “When we're done, there won't be anything left of the Death Corps.”

“Where did they come from?” Delita asked, staring out the window, not looking at any of them.

“We don't-” Zalbaag began, but Dycedarg held up a forestalling hand.

“We can't say for sure,” Dycedarg said. “But my best guess is that the Corps raids out of the Lenalian mountains were one giant diversion. They were veiling elite units, designed to make the war in the south as costly as possible. I suppose that includes killing me.”

“They'll pay,” Zalbaag whispered.

“They will,” Dycedarg agreed. He squeezed Alma's hand, but he reached out with his other and grabbed Delita's shoulder. “Delita,” he said. “Look at me.”

Delita's face drifted away from the window. His dark eyes were wide, and clear, and almost seemed empty, like there was no thinking person behind them.

“Del,” Dycedarg said. “How long have I known you? How long have I known Teta?” He squeezed his shoulder. “Do you imagine I will leave her in the clutches of these bastards?”

Delita nodded, stood up, and walked out of the room without another word. Ramza hesitated, but could not quite bring himself to follow. Not while his brother was laid up with a wounded chest.

“I'm sorry,” Ramza said. “I should have been here.”

“What could you have done that we didn't?” Dycedarg asked.

Ramza shook his head, remembering Miluda, remembering all the men and women he hadn't killed. Could he say for certain that he was not responsible? Could he really be sure?

“You did well, Ramza,” Zalbaag said. “Every report says so. This isn't your fault.”

“What do we do now?” Ramza asked.

“Nothing,” Dycedarg said. “We have the Corps penned in the north. There's nowhere for them to run. Do your duty. Keep Argus safe. We'll handle the rest.”

“And Teta?” Alma asked.

“I'm leading our forces,” Zalbaag said. “I'll find them. I'll find her.”

Ramza nodded, then rose from his seat. “Dyce, I’m sorry,” he said, jerking his head out into the hallway.

“No, you’re right,” Dycedarg said. “See to him. Zalbaag and I must discuss the coming operation.” He squeezed Alma’s hand and gently lifted her from her seat. “Alma,” he said. “Thank you.”

Alma nodded, but didn’t say anything. She left the room with Ramza, who wrapped a protective arm around his sister’s shoulders.

“Teta,” Alma whispered. “They took...and I couldn’t...!”

“It’s not your fault,” Ramza said. It was Ramza’s, if it was anyone’s. They had attacked his brother. They had taken Teta. He had done his best to seek justice, and they had repaid him by tearing his world apart. Was this God’s will? Was this part of some divine plan? Everything felt very fragile, very precarious. Ramza felt brittle, like he might break at any moment.

“I should have been a soldier,” Alma said.

Ramza shook his head. “I am one,” he said. “Who have I saved?”

They wandered together through the desolate halls of the Manor. The smell of blood and smoke was thick everywhere they turned—reminders of the battle that had been fought here. The sun had nearly set by the time they found Delita in the shadow-laden stables, loading heavy saddlebags upon his chocobo’s sides.

“Delita,” Ramza said, stepping away from Alma.

“Get away from me, Ramza,” Delita said.

“What are you doing?”

“Going after her.”

“What’s the point?” Ramza started, and Delita was upon him, faster than Ramza would have believed possible, shoving him back against a stable door. The birds around them crooned and cried and stirred restlessly, rustling their feathers and flapping their short wings.

“What’s the point?” whispered Delita, his eyes wide with fury. “What’s the *point*?”

“Delita!” Alma cried.

“In getting yourself killed!” Ramza shouted, not fighting against Delita’s grasp. “We have no idea where they’ve taken her!”

“Would that stop you if it was her?” Delita demanded, jerking his head towards Alma.

“Of course not,” said a deep, cold voice. “She’s a Beoulve. What’s your sister again?”

Delita dropped Ramza unceremoniously to the ground and turned to face Argus, standing in the doorway to the stables

“Look at you,” Argus said. “I think this is what it looks like when a mad dog forgets its place.”

“What did you say?” Delita whispered.

“You heard me.”

Delita stalked closer to Argus. Argus seemed unafraid.

“She's my sister,” Delita said.

“And you're a dog who needs to be put down,” Argus said.

Delita struck Argus across the face with sudden force, and the chocobos exploded in frightened squawking cries. Argus collapsed against the wall, clutching at his face.

“Delita!” Ramza shouted, but Delita was already moving, stepping over Argus and out of the stables. Ramza moved to follow, and Argus grabbed him by the wrist.

“Where do you think you're going?” Argus asked.

“After him.”

“After what he did to you?” Argus asked. “He's just another commoner who's forgotten his place.”

There was an awful hate in Argus' voice, and when Ramza looked down he found the other man's eyes were blazing.

“She's my friend,” Alma whispered. “She's my friend, and she tried to save me, and-”

“As she should,” Argus said. “Her place is to serve.”

“You're a monster,” Alma said, and rushed past Ramza, out of the stables. Ramza tried to follow her, but Argus still had a firm grip on his wrist.

“Let me go,” Ramza said.

“Why?” Argus asked.

“He's my friend.”

Argus shook his head. “He's your servant.”

“He's my brother!” Ramza shouted.

“NO!” cried Argus, and twisted, so that Ramza lost his balance and slammed chest-first into the ground. Ramza scrambled to his feet as Argus did the same, so Argus was blocking his path, glaring into his face.

“No,” repeated Argus. “Your brother sits in bed with a wound in his chest, while your so-called friend barks and growls. Look at him, Ramza. Look familiar? Like Wiegraf, eh?”

“Wiegraf-” Ramza started.

“How many men are dead, because he forgot his place?” Argus asked. “His friend killed all the Marquis' men, Ramza. Killed those commoners, too. Filled their heads with heresy and then punished

them for drinking from his well. How long before your so-called friend wets his blade with *your* blood?"

"He would never," Ramza said.

"He would," Argus said. "These dogs forget their place. They think themselves the equals of their masters. Look at the chaos that comes from their perversion of the natural order! They have to be put down."

"They weren't treated fairly," Ramza said.

"Fair!" scoffed Argus. "We were born to power, Ramza, so power is ours! All your pretending and all their barking won't make it otherwise! Now we must put down good dogs or fear for our own throats! Would you give these curs the reins of power? After what they did to your brother? What they did to my-"

He broke off, shaking his head. "You're a Beoulve, Ramza," he said. "Act like it. I can't keep fixing your mistakes."

Ramza stared at the other man. He had a vague foreboding pressure against his sinuses, as though he were standing in the open while the stormclouds crackled overhead. "What do you mean?" Ramza asked.

Argus gave Ramza a withering look. "Do you really think I gave that whore a safe route?"

That whore? Who was he talking about? Did he...did he mean Miluda?

Ramza's eyes widened. That moment of precarious hard-won trust, convincing her that they didn't have to be foes just because of their different births. What had Argus done? What had *Ramza* done?

"Argus-"

"I received the reports just before we returned," Argus said. "She ran headlong into our reserves. Nowhere for the dogs to run, with all those wounded in their ranks." Argus' mouth tugged up into a small, satisfied smile.

There was a moment of disjointed motion, as a drunken fuzz passed through Ramza's head and made everything feel distant and hazy. Argus was suddenly a lot closer, so close Ramza could see the blond bristles of a nascent beard upon his jaw. It took Ramza a moment to realize he had hauled Argus closer to him, grabbing him by the shirt.

"What did you do?" Ramza asked.

"What you were too weak to do," Argus said.

"Alma's right," Ramza said. "You're a monster."

"And you're a fool," Argus said. "You've seen what happens when you let these people live,

Ramza. They spread their poison.”

Ramza shoved Argus to the ground. Argus did not try to rise, but stared up at Ramza with something like pity in his eyes.

“You intend to go after the girl?” Argus asked. Ramza could barely hear the words: that drunken haze blunted every feeling save his rage. It was all he could do not to grab for the sword he still wore on his belt and cut Argus apart where he lay sprawled out upon the floor.

“Her name is Teta,” Ramza said. “You drank with her.”

“Be reasonable, Ramza,” Argus said. “Your brothers will not hold back the Hokuten for the sake of one common girl.”

“They're not like you,” Ramza said.

“No,” Argus agreed. “They're stronger still.”

Ramza shook his head. His brothers were Beoulves, devoted to the cause of Service and Justice. They would not sacrifice Teta for the cause of vengeance. They wouldn't.

Would they?

“You have to become a Beoulve some day, Ramza,” Argus said.

“I am a Beoulve,” Ramza whispered.

“You're a child playing the part,” Argus said. “Grow up.”

“And you...” Ramza shook his head. “I don't have a word vile enough for you, Thadolfas.”

Argus' eyes blazed with sudden fury. He rose to his feet, and the two men faced off, burning with rage. Ramza's fingers curled around the hilt of his sword.

“The heart of the Corps is Fort Zeakden, on the Rhana Strait,” Argus said, through gritted teeth. “Your brother's heading north through the passes, and the Corps will fight them for every inch. If you take the road east to Fovoham through the Lenalian Plateau, you might beat the Hokuten there. I'll tell the Limberry forces to let you pass.

Argus turned to leave. It took a moment for what he'd said to penetrate the murderous fog in Ramza's head. “What?” Ramza breathed.

“You heard me,” Argus said.

“Why?” Ramza asked.

“I pay my debts.”

Argus was gone. Ramza was alone in the stables, with the gentle crooning and rustling of the birds all around him. Alone, with the world cracking around him. Because Miluda and her men had been slaughtered though he'd tried his best to save him, betrayed by a man Ramza had thought of as a friend. Alone, because his friend's sister had been taken by the same people Ramza had tried to save.

Alone, because his every attempt to live up to his name had failed. There was nothing of justice here. He was a pretender, exactly as weak and insufficient as he had always imagined.

How could he have been fool enough to try to change the world? How could he have believed himself worthy of the name Beoulve?

He stumbled out of the stables, devoid of rage, devoid of hope, devoid of purpose.

Outside was the orange blaze of the setting sun, staining everything with fire. Delita was hunched over in the grass, sobbing: Alma stroked his hair, crying in turn, tears dripping down her bruised face. Hurt. Ramza didn't feel hurt. Ramza didn't feel anything.

He crossed to them, walking across one of the aqueducts that bubbled and burbled through the Estate. He sank into the grass beside them, and said nothing, because he didn't know what to say.

Until he heard a high, thin note.

He looked over, and found Alma with a blade of grass in her mouth, blowing as hard as she could. The high sound spread across the grounds, and Alma blew until she was red in the face, tears glistening on her eyelashes and on her cheeks. She ran out of breath and dropped the blade of grass from her lips, panting.

Delita sniffled, and pulled up his own blade of grass. He blew his deeper note, and Alma snapped her own blade back to her mouth. Her high note sounded much clearer and cleaner than Ramza's, sweet and musical, and Ramza remembered the day when Balbanes had taught them all to play, as Dycedarg and Zalbaag laughed at the four of them fumbling clumsily with their blades of grass. His brothers and his sisters and his father.

He picked up his own blade of grass, and blew, and wished Teta was there with them.

"What are you doing!" shouted Beowulf's brash voice.

Ramza turned, and found Beowulf striding towards them, leading Violet by the reins. He was not alone: Reis walked at his side, in a loose martial outfit with long sleeves and trouser legs.

"We have to hurry!" Beowulf said. "They've already got a lead!"

Delita rose to his feet. "Beowulf-" he started.

"I figure I need a third desertion charge," Beowulf said. "Complete the set."

"And obviously I can't let him go by himself," Reis said. "He's helpless without me."

"The Templars are just letting you go?" Alma asked.

"I explained the situation to Bishop Bremond," Reis said. "He's a good man."

"I can't ask you-" Delita said.

"You don't have to," Beowulf said. "We've got to rescue a damsel from distress. This is hero's work. I'll let you come along anyways."

Delita grabbed Beowulf around the neck and hugged him tight. Beowulf clapped him on the back, looking uncomfortable. Delita released him and turned around, his face still wet with tears.

“You're right,” Delita said. “I don't-”

“Fort Zeakden,” Ramza said. “If go by way of the Fovoham Plains, we might beat the Hokuten there.”

Delita's eyes widened. “How-”

“Does it matter?” Ramza asked.

Delita hesitated, then shook his head. “No,” he said. “But you don't have to-”

Ramza glared into Delita's eyes, trying to convey something of his feeling, of his failures and confusion and pain, of the memories he shared with Teta, drinks and dancing and quiet conversations in a summer haze and that golden memory in the orchid outside Lesalia. Delita closed his eyes and nodded. “Thank you,” Delita whispered.

He moved back to the stables. Ramza turned to his sister. “Alma-” he began.

“Find her,” Alma said. “Bring her back.”

“I will,” Ramza said.

He was no Beoulve. He had no justice, no resolve, no achievements to his name and no divine will to guide him. But his brother needed him. His sister needed him. And he would not stand idly by.

He headed to the stables.

Chapter 16: Violence

They rode without rest through the day and through the night. Teta was bound with rough rope that chafed her wrists, and any movement her captors didn't like was met with the delicate pricking of that needle-sharp knife. She couldn't stop thinking about what that knife would feel like inside her, spilling her blood and guts into the earth. What would dying feel like?

They rode without rest, and Teta was slung like a saddlebag across the creature's back, her ribs aching with every jolt and jostle in the road, her nose filled with the thick sweaty smell of the animal. The perfect weather continued through the day and then gradually cooled after sunset, but Teta's torn dress was not made for such cool. She shivered, and her captor pricked her with the knife again. "Don't move," he whispered.

She didn't move. She didn't want to die.

She must have slept at some point, though she could not imagine how. One moment she was staring out into the bleak night, watching an indifferent sky alive with blazing stars: the next, her side exploded in pain as she hit the ground. She cried out, her bladder aching so it felt like it might burst at any moment, but she couldn't do that, she *wouldn't* do that, she was bound and captive and she did not know what these people would do to her, if she would be raped or stabbed or a thousand other horrors that bubbled in the back of her mind but she would not piss herself. She was a woman, she was in control, she wouldn't-

"Fuckin' nobles," hissed a deep voice, and a rough hand grabbed her by the hair and hauled her to her feet. She gasped as her scalp burned, barely seeing the bearded, barrel-chested man in front of her. His other hand pulled at the skirt of her dress.

"What are you doing, Foxe?" asked the calm voice who had threatened her with the so-sharp knife.

"Bitch needs to pay," said the man in front of her, glaring over her shoulder.

"She will, Foxe," said the calm voice. "They all will. But we need her alive and whole."

"She'll stay whole," grunted the man. "Just be a little sore."

"No."

"You don't give me orders, Gregory!" spat the bearded man.

"Yes I do."

The bearded man glared over her, then shoved her backwards. Someone caught her, turned around so she was staring at the cold blonde man who'd slashed at Dycedarg and cursed at them from behind Alma's barrier. Gregory?

"I have to pee," Teta said.

"I don't care," Gregory said, and shoved her to the ground. She landed hard, barely able to keep her balance, jostling her full bladder. She bit her lip against the pain and the pressure.

For a moment, she almost begged. "Please," she would have said. "Please, I have to, don't make me do this, please." And begging worked, sometimes: give someone a chance to be magnanimous, make it clear you are entirely in their hands. But that depended on the person in question. Sometimes, begging just made them crueler.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, not looking at him. "I just...I don't want to...I..."

Tears coming, and that was too much weakness so she swallowed them down. She had to make him feel powerful, but if she seemed out of control herself he could treat her as less-than-human, a pet or toy he could play with as he pleased. "I don't want to piss myself," she said. "And I don't want to stink up you or...or one of the birds, but I can't go without you cutting me loose, I can't-!"

She did not look up at him, did not raise beseeching eyes to his face. It was better this way. Appeal to self-interest while looking weak. She'd played this game before at the Academy. She'd just never played it for such high stakes.

"Alright," Gregory grunted. He drew that so-sharp knife and slit her bonds in one fluid motion. "You got one minute," Gregory said. "And if you try to run—"

"I won't," she said. "Thank you."

She rose to her feet and stumbled a little ways away. His eyes were still on her, but she understood the stakes. It was go now or be hauled back atop that bird, and while she didn't want him watching she needed to relieve this pressure. It was the smallest of victories, but it was a victory.

She pulled down her underwear and squatted in the grass, her eyes searching for any sign of the bearded man or anyone else who might threaten her. Her mind was racing.

She hadn't fought, like Alma had fought. But Alma's fighting hadn't saved her: Zalbaag had. All Alma's fighting had done had gotten her beaten before Zalbaag had rescued her. There were knives and swords all around, and Teta had no magic and no sword, she had nothing with which she could save herself. This wasn't some story about the commoner girl who fought her way free through ingenuity. If she was to survive, she would do so by clinging tenaciously to life and never giving them her captors a reason to hurt her.

Right now, they thought she was a noble. These men might hate nobles, but they weren't stupid. A noblewoman could buy them freedom. A commoner girl—a commoner girl who *sympathized* with nobles—would be disposable. They'd kill her, and they'd take their time.

Stay alive. Stay intact. Survive.

She rose from the grass and pulled up her underwear. She walked back, her head bowed.
“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Who are you?” Gregory asked.

Teta swallowed, tried to think of the names of other nobles at the Academy, anyone this man might have heard of, tried to think of a compelling lie.

“Alma,” she said. “Alma Beoulve.”

“Beoulve, huh?” Gregory said. “Your brother's the one who didn't pay us.”

Alma said nothing. She kept her eyes on the ground.

“Hands,” Gregory said, with a fresh length of rope in his fingers.

Teta swallowed, warred with herself, and pushed her hands forwards. As Gregory moved towards her, she gambled. “Where would I go?” she asked.

Gregory stopped and looked at her. She couldn't see his face in the dark.

“I can't run anywhere,” Teta said. “I haven't tried.”

“So what?” he asked.

“Do you really need...?”

Having her hands free might not mean much, but what was the point of adding chafed wrists and aching arms to all her other problems if she could avoid it? Besides, free hands could help her in other ways. If there was an opportunity she could seize, she'd do it best with her hands free. And she could protect herself from walls and steady herself during their ride.

Gregory lowered his hands. “You sit in front of me,” he said. “You do anything I don't like, and I leave you alone with Foxe as long as he likes.”

The images flashed in Teta's mind, half-heard horror stories whispered in the dormitories of the Preparatory Academy and the memories of Foxe's rough hands on her. She nodded, though her throat felt tight and dry.

“We're moving out!” shouted Gregory.

They rode through the night, as the stars blazed pitilessly overhead and the half-moon shed ghostly light over the Plains. Gregory's arms were around her, firmly on the reins of his bird so there was nowhere for her to go.

Teta must have slept again at some point, because when she came to the world was brighter, the stars faded away behind a lightening sky. The Lenalian mountains were shadows on the horizon, but growing larger and larger with every passing moment. The rolling green hills of the Mandalia Plains slowly gave way to shale slopes with loose shrubs clinging tenaciously to life.

And it was still too gorgeous. A gentle breeze rolled out of the north, mingling with the warmth

of the sun so high above. The air got crisper and cleaner as they started rising in elevation. It burned a little in her nostrils. At least it had been raining on the day her parents had died—the way such a day should be, gloomy and grim. How could it be so gorgeous, when she was so afraid?

The climbed a winding switchback track that wove higher and higher between two tall speaks. The sun was setting in a blaze of orange fire by the time they finished their long ascent and reached the Lenalian Plateau—a wide expanse of flatlands the mirror of the ascent behind them, shale and dirt and scrub grass spreading out between the mountains. In the far distance, she could make out the lush green expanse of the fertile Fovoham Plains.

So much stark natural beauty. So pitiless compared to the ragged band of soldiers camped across the Plateau, men and women in bloody bandages shuddering against the oncoming cold as the wind howled overhead.

“Gregory!” shouted a deep, commanding woman's voice. Teta turned to stare at the brown-haired woman striding towards them, with a dark green cloak on her shoulders and a red-headed woman at her side.

“Miluda!” Gregory called, dropping from the back of his bird and pulling Teta down with him.

“Who's this?” Miluda asked, her eyes narrowing at Teta.

“Alma Beoulve,” Gregory said.

A flash of fire, terrible rage and hate, in Miluda's eyes. Teta took an involuntary step backwards. “Beoulve?” Miluda repeated, her hand resting against the hilt of the sword she wore on her hip.

“Easy,” Gregory said, holding out a forestalling hand. “We can't hurt her. We need her.”

“Need...?” Miluda turned her glare on Gregory. “You thinking of following Gustav's path, Greg?”

“No,” Gregory said. “I don't want a ransom. But as long as we've got her, her brothers can't afford to hurt us. We can keep the north until we figure out what the hell we're going to do.”

Miluda glared into his face for a few more seconds, then shook her head. “This isn't what we do,” she said.

“I know,” Gregory said. “But right now, it's what we *have* to do.”

Miluda shook her head again. “What are you doing here, Gregory?”

“We've been riding for two days,” Gregory said. “We need help.”

Miluda laughed. It was a harsh, terrible sound, like a cough, like breaking glass. “Look around, Greg. Do you think we have anything to give?”

Gregory stiffened—Teta saw it, his back going rigid—but then the moment passed and he continued, “We just need to rest, Miluda.”

“Plenty of room to rest,” Miluda said. “A whole plain, for the dead and the broken.”

Teta couldn't see Gregory's face, and she didn't know the man very well. But there seemed something a little slumped and defeated about his back. When he turned to face them, however, his face was calm. Almost confident.

“Scrounge up what you can,” he said. “Help if you need to, but get some rest. We're heading for Zeakden at dawn.”

“What do we do with her, Greg?” asked one of the soldiers, gesturing towards Teta.

“I'll take care of your prisoner,” Miluda said. “Radia. Show these boys around.”

The men moved out into the field, following the red-headed woman—Radia, apparently. pulling their chocobos with them and leaving Teta alone with Miluda. As the orange blaze of dusk gave way to cool evening shadows, she folded her arms around her body, looking in every direction at once. How many men were there like Foxe, eager to make her pay however they could? How would she be safe, without Gregory to stop them? Completely in the care of this woman who had looked her with such fierce and furious hate?

“Follow me,” Miluda said, and walked into the thicket of tents. Teta hesitated, then stumbled after—she couldn't give her captors any reason to hurt her.

Familiar and awful smells besieged her from all times—the smell of rot, and shit, and blood, thick and cloying and salty. Her mouth felt thick with saliva, and her stomach lurched and spasmed. She she would have vomited, if she'd had anything to eat.

And there were the noises, too. The wordless moans and groans, the animal whimpers, the frantic whispered prayers interrupted by pained cries. The thick, aching words with tears behind every syllable as dying souls struggle to share their last message with the world.

It wouldn't be so bad, if she hadn't heard and smelled and seen this all before. If it didn't conjure images of the plague camps, where the desperate and the ill flocked in droves so that the Healers might tend to them. Those figures in their red-and-white robes amidst a sea of ragged, dying souls, choking and coughing and wheezing and breaking as their bodies slowly suffocated under the weight of their disease. If this place wasn't so like the place where her parents had died.

But these people weren't dying of disease, were they? They were dying because of what had been done to them by other men. How could people do this to each other?

“Beoulve.”

The word was flat and carried all the acidic impact of a curse. Teta froze, the skin on her neck crawling. For a moment, she almost looked around to see if there was a Beoulve nearby. Before she remembered what she'd said. Before she remembered who she was supposed to be.

She turned slowly to see Miluda standing at the mouth of a small tent. She was watching Teta, but her face was masked by the gathering shadows.

“Not gonna answer me, Beoulve?” she asked. “Won't deign to speak with a commoner?”

“No, I-” Teta started.

“Oh, she admits it!” Miluda said. “An honest noble! That's a rare thing. Not like your brother.” She cocked her head. “Ramza *is* your brother, isn't he?”

How much did this woman know about the Beoulves? Did she know Alma was Ramza's sister? Would Teta be better off confirming or denying?

“See all these people?” Miluda asked. “Hear'em? Smell'em? Your brother did that, Beoulve.”

“Ramza wouldn't do that,” Teta said.

She snapped a hand to her mouth, her eyes widening. She hadn't meant to say it. She hadn't even thought about it. But Ramza wasn't like Delita. Hell, Ramza wasn't even like Alma. He always looked just as uneasy as Teta felt, and when they'd drunk their stolen wine in Ramza's room she'd learned that he was even trying to avoid killing on the battlefield. How could he have hurt all these people?

“No?” Miluda asked. “Come here.”

Teta hesitated, staring at the woman, looking around as though there might be help nearby. But how could there be? She was alone here. More alone than she'd been in her entire life.

She took a few hesitant steps forwards. Miluda turned away from her, back to the entrance of the tent. She had a lighting rod in hand, glowing with runes at the tip. She held it high, so it cast a little cloud of illumination around them. At the very edge of their circle of light, a ways inside the tent, was a blond-haired woman, breathing in a choked, crackling wheeze.

“Your brother did that, Beoulve.”

Teta stared at the blonde woman, transfixed by the lines of pain in her face and in the shadows of other injuries concealed by the thin blanket spread over her.

“What did he do?” Teta whispered.

“Lied,” hissed Miluda. “Told us we could be safe and led us right into danger. Made me...”

Miluda didn't finish. She trailed off, staring at the woman in the tent.

“She held them back, while we escaped,” Miluda said. “I...I couldn't leave her, but by the time I got back, they'd already...”

The hand holding the lighting rod slowly drifted towards the ground. Teta barely noticed: she was trying to make sense of what she was seeing, smelling, hearing. She longed for the return of that nightmare vertigo: she wanted this to feel surreal.

"How much are you going to take from me?" asked Miluda.

Rough hands grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around. Rough hands seized her by the throat, thumbs pressing against Teta's windpipe. The air went out of Teta's world. She choked in Miluda's wild-eyed grasp, clawed at the hands that were so rough against her aching neck. The world was turning darker and darker, and Teta's last breaths were wheezing whispers, and all she could think was that she was going to die, die like her parents, like Alma's parents, and there was nothing she could do for all her struggles Miluda was still glaring into her eyes and Teta had never seen such awful hate in anyone's eyes, how could anyone hate the way Miluda hated, how could anyone do this, how could Teta be about to die when there was so much life to live, how-

"Captain!" someone cried. "No!"

Miluda was wrenched backwards, and Teta spilled into the dust. She looked up to see Miluda facing off with the red-haired woman who'd been at Miluda's side earlier.

"Out of my way, Radia," Miluda growled.

"No, Captain."

"She's a Beoulve. She did this to us."

"She didn't do anything to," Radia said. "She was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"That didn't stop them from hurting Emilie!" shouted Miluda. "That didn't-"

"We're better than them!" Radia yelled.

A moment's taut silence.

"Then why are we losing?" Miluda asked.

She moved farther into the tent and knelt by the blonde woman's side. Radia grabbed Teta by the shoulders and pulled her firmly to her feet, leading her away.

"Thank you," Teta whispered.

Radia flinched. "Please, don't. What Ramza did to us was..." She shook her head. "I won't let her kill you," she said. "But I don't want to hear you..."

Violence, fear, desperation, and weariness mingled freely in the woman's voice, giving her a flat, dangerous lilt. Teta's throat still ached. Her chest and back were scraped and bruised from the falls she'd taken over the past several days. She needed to keep her mouth shut. She needed to stay alive.

"What did he do?" Teta asked, because as much as she needed to survive she also needed to know why Miluda's hands had been around her neck, why there had been such hate in Miluda's eyes and in Radia's voice, why there was a blonde-haired woman wheezing and dying in a tent far away, and what Ramza had to do with any of this that made his supposed sister such a target.

"Convinced us there was safe passage north," Radia said. "Told me he didn't want anyone to

die, and then he let us..." She shook her head. "How can anyone lie like that?"

Had Ramza lied? Had he done that?

They reached a small tent in the center of camp. Radia held the flap open. "You'll be safe here," Radia said. "I guarantee it."

Teta crawled inside, scraping her knees against stones and dirt. Radia sat cross-legged at the tent's entrance, her sword across her lap.

"He wouldn't do that," Teta said.

"He did," Radia replied.

"I don't know what happened," Teta said. "I wasn't there. But..."

But she remembered the last time she'd seen Ramza, drinking wine in Ramza's room, as Delita had jibed and jested. Ramza, refusing to kill anyone, risking life and limb because it was the only way he could make sense of this war.

"He doesn't kill," Teta said.

"He doesn't...what?" Radia shook her head. "He's a soldier."

"I know," Teta said. "And he hasn't killed anyone."

"You're lying," Radia said.

Teta said nothing.

"Would you do something like that?" Radia asked, as the silence stretched.

"No," Teta said.

"Didn't think so," Radia huffed.

"I wouldn't fight at all," Teta said.

"Why not?" Radia asked.

I don't believe in violence, Teta wanted to say, but that was foolish and naive, the sort of thing a child-hero says in the stories you tell to pretend the world makes sense. And the other problem was that she was not Alma Beoulve, so how did she sound like her without giving herself away? Was it safer to be Teta, or Alma?

Or safer to stick to the common ground between them?

"My parents are dead," Teta said. "Choking Plague killed them. And a lot of other people, too. There were camps like this all over Ivalice."

Radia snorted. "Balbanes Beoulve died in a tent, huh?"

"No," Teta said. "But my mom, she..."

Teta remembered Alma, tears in her eyes as she talked about clutching at her mother's cold hand, begging her to wake up. And Teta remembered her own mom in one of the Church's tents, Delita

crying out for a Healer who wouldn't come, Teta stroking her mother's damp forehead, holding her father's calloused hand. She remembered the smell, of rot and sweat and bile and thick mucus, the strangled breaths and wheezing, the shit and piss and blood. So very much like this hopeless camp.

"My mom wasn't noble," Teta said. "She died alone."

Teta stared at the wall of the tent. From the corner of her eye, she could see that Radia wasn't looking at her.

"So what?" Radia asked.

"So..." Teta closed her eyes. "So that happened. So people starved, and people got sick, and people died. Why do we have to hurt each other, too?"

"Because sometimes it's the only way," Radia said.

"To do what?" Teta asked.

"To make them listen," Radia said.

Teta shook her head. "Dead men don't listen."

"They weren't listening when they were alive, either," Radia said. "It was a King of Ivalice who got us into this war, him and all his noble friends. They wanted power, and they bit off more than they could chew, and they kept fighting. They let everyone else bear their burdens, and we did it because we love this kingdom, and they wouldn't even pay us."

Teta looked back towards Radia. She was an impressive-looking woman, wiry beneath her leather armor, perfectly at ease with the sword in her hand. Her dark eyes blazed from her smooth pale face. She hardly looked older than Teta.

"You didn't fight in the war," Teta said. "Look at you."

Radia flushed. "I...they...!"

"You weren't wronged," Teta said. "Were you?"

"What would you know, Beoulve?" snarled Radia.

"What would you know, Radia?" Teta asked.

She was surprised at her own venom, her own courage. But perhaps it was just that she felt safe here. She didn't feel afraid of Radia. Something about the woman set her at ease. She reminded Teta of Alma, and Ramza, and Delita.

"The things this kingdom did..." Radia shook her head. "They wanted justice, and they needed help."

"So you killed people," Teta said.

"I did," Radia said. "Because sometimes that's the only thing you can do."

"I don't believe that," Teta said.

Radia shrugged. "You don't have to believe me," she said. "You saw this place. Look how we've treated you. Look how your people treated Emilie."

Teta closed her eyes, feeling the weight of the night, the aching of her throat where Miluda had grabbed her, remembering the broken wheezing woman in the tent, Foxe's rough hands pulling at the hem of her dress. "I'm sorry," she said.

"It's not your fault," Radia said.

No, it wasn't. Just a vicious chain of violence, and no end in sight. What could Teta do now, except try to survive?

She must have slept at some point, because she was awoken, aching and spasming, by a gentle shaking on her shoulder.

"You're leaving," Radia said.

Teta crawled out of the tent and into the dawning light. The camp was dissolving, the bandaged, cursing, crying wounded staggering north and west. A few scattered tents remained, their occupants prone upon their backs. Teta thought one of them had the blonde woman inside of it. In the distance, she could make out Gregory and Miluda. Radia walked towards them. Teta hesitated, then followed.

"Why did you help me?" Teta asked, her mind alert again, wary of all the hostility and danger that surrounded her.

"We're better than the nobles," Radia said. "We have to act like it."

They reached Miluda and Gregory. Miluda did not look at Teta.

"It's cold in Zeakden," Gregory said.

"There's nowhere else to go," Miluda said. "We'll hold the pass as long as we can."

"They won't come," Gregory said. "It's too long a ride."

"They'll come," Miluda said. "They can't afford not to. You're taking the bitch?"

Gregory glanced at Teta. Teta felt a creeping, shameful weakness all along her skin.

"We have to," Gregory said.

"You don't," Radia said.

"Graffy will decide," Miluda said.

"Captain!" Radia exclaimed.

"It's not my call to make," Miluda said. "And she may have brought him this far." At last, Miluda turned those heavy eyes on Teta. Teta flinched, remembering how they had glared into her face while thumbs had pressed against her windpipe, choking her just like the disease that had killed her parents.

Miluda twisted at an odd angle. Teta heard the blow before she felt it: the *whumph* of the fist

hitting her stomach, a knot of emptiness filling her chest with nauseous fumes. She sank to here knees, gasping, and then Miluda grabbed her by the hair and pulled her upright by her burning scalp.

“Captain!” Radia shouted.

“I promised your brother I'd kill his family if he betrayed me,” Miluda whispered. “If I see you again, Beoulve, I'll keep my word.”

She shoved Teta towards Gregory, who held her upright and brought her staggering back to his chocobo as the world danced around her, stars in her vision, her breath coming in squeaking squeals. So much pain, so much terror, so much violence. And what was the point of it? Why...?

The questions hurt. The lies hurt. The truth would hurt. She was caught in a bramble of thorns, with every movement tearing at her, one way or another. She had to survive. She had to. No matter how she hurt.

She did not want to die here.

Chapter 17: In This Hopeless Place

When Wiegraf and Miluda had forged their band of commoners with dreams of glory, Miluda had commanded some forty Valkyries, pooling all their knowledge between them, training twice as long as any of the other sections of the Corps, refining their skills and strengths until they were one of the deadliest units on either side of the 50 Years' War. As the sun rose the day after Gregory had ridden north, Miluda commanded only six, and one of them was dying.

She stood at the edge of the plateau, staring down the way they'd come. The plateau was one of the easiest paths into Fovoham—and, in doing so, the easiest way to circumvent the Lenalian Mountains and take the Corps forts from behind—but then, easy was a relative term. It was a long, unfriendly climb northeast of Dorter, thick with shale and pebbles sloping down into the lower regions of Gallione.

But it was not the climb that had cost her. It was the nobles and their puppets. Just as it had been all along.

She'd known they were doomed the moment her sword and Wiegraf's had slipped through Gustav's chest. No, even *that* wasn't true: she'd known they were doomed the moment Gustav had betrayed their cause.

Oh, Gustav. So bitter and forlorn when he'd come to them. He couldn't have known how frail he looked, eating their chocbo and watching them with wary, weary eyes. His soul was brittle. He'd been pushed to extremes, and he was looking for salvation. Their righteous struggle had reforged him, so he stood straight and his eyes looked almost as fervent as Wiegraf's. In Gustav's transformation she'd seen the hope in their cause. And in his fall...

He'd had to die. She knew that. They hadn't made that decision easily. They'd all done things they regretted during the course of the War, and necessity had forced Gustav's hand more than most. There had been rumors coming out of Dorter for months, but Gustav had worked behind enemy lines before, and Wiegraf and Miluda trusted him. When they heard reports of him driving out rival criminal syndicates and seizing the property of merchants, they had to believe he was acting in their best interest.

But then came the message, smuggled out with the latest shipment of supplies. Of what Gustav had done, to the people who worked for him and to the people he was supposed to be protecting. Of what he might still do. And while they fretted and worried and argued, the Marquis had been taken.

To bring an army against Gustav might have destroyed the Corps, and would have advertised their weakness to all of Gallione besides. So Wiegraf had left Gregory in command to the north and

Miluda had trusted her Valkyries to hold the south, and they had gone together to put an end to the old friend who sullied the name of their cause.

They hadn't been the only ones chasing after Gustav and the Marquis, either. There had been a Beoulve on the case. A Beoulve Miluda had made the mistake of trusting.

“Captain,” Radia called. Miluda did not turn to look at her: she could just make out the red-headed figure from the corner of her eye. Radia was young and new to the cause, but damn useful. Her father was a former military commander of uncommon talents, and he had taught many of his techniques to his daughter, who had in turn taught them to the Valkyries as best she could. There was a time Miluda had envisioned a whole unit of such women, untouchable and invincible.

There was a time Miluda had envisioned a future that had hope.

She'd still had hope just a few weeks ago. Wiegraf and Miluda, blades wet with the blood of the men and women who'd followed Gustav's monstrous path, had fled north from the Cellar, trusting in the baking heat and inhospitable desert to guard them from pursuit. They'd already set up a tent in the lee of a dune to the north the previous night, certain that Gustav's men would never see them coming.

One living creature was waiting for them—a lean, muscular bird with sun-gold feathers and intelligent orange eyes. Wiegraf ran his hand over Boco's beak, and the bird crooned softly into his hand. They had found Boco's egg in occupied Limberry, in the clutch of an Ordallian Duke's prized racing chocobo.

“We should keep watch,” Miluda said.

“Boco will let us know if anyone's coming, won't you?” Wiegraf said. The bird chirruped, and almost seemed to nod. So they crawled into their tent, and rested their tired bodies in the baking shade.

“Are you alright?” she asked Wiegraf. Without a Ydoran sword and proper microrunes, the Bursting Blade was a dangerous technique. The first time Wiegraf had tried to use it, he had been laid up in bed for two days, practically immobile. Now he'd used it three times in the space of an hour.

“I will be,” Wiegraf said, though he no longer tried to mask the trembling in his hands and voice. “*We* will be.”

Miluda nodded. The look of disbelief in Gustav's eyes flashed through her mind, and she almost smiled. What did he think was between them, that would stay her blade after what he'd done?

“What now?” she asked.

“Hard to say,” Wiegraf admitted. “Limberry's certain to add their forces to the Hokuten now. Honor requires it.”

“And everyone will forget we let him go,” she said.

“We had to,” Wiegraf said.

“Why?” Miluda asked. “We could have weakened Limberry.”

“We would have weakened Limberry in the long-term,” Wiegraf said. “In the short-term, we'd have brought every man and woman who can carry a blade howling for our blood. Better to face an honor-bound army than the hate of all Ivalice. If the people are not with us, we have nothing.”

“But are the people with us, Graffy?”

“They will be,” Wiegraf said. “So long as we are better than the highborn and their ilk.”

“Is that all it takes?” Miluda asked.

“We give them an alternative,” Wiegraf said. “Just like we did during the War. We keep their interests close to our hearts. We serve justice, not ourselves.”

“Not like Gustav,” Miluda said.

“Exactly.”

It wasn't hard to be better than the highborn, was it? It wasn't hard to be better than the men and women who let the young, the weak, and the feeble starve and suffer so they could live in their accustomed comfort. They had made them bear the brunt of the fighting, and now they made them bear the cost of the peace. They took and they took and they never gave anything back. And if you dared to fight?

They had shown Emilie what kind of creatures they were.

“How is she?” Miluda asked, staring down the long climb up to the plateau.

Radia stepped closer. Miluda turned, and saw the tears in Radia's eyes. Her heart stopped as glaciers glided through her veins.

No. Not Emilie, who had been with her from the beginning. Emilie, dour and steadfast and resilient, not the strongest or the fastest but the most enduring, able to march farther under heavier loads, leap into battle after a fifteen mile march. Emilie, who with a wounded leg had held back twenty men so that Miluda could lead the survivors to safety.

Oh God, that battle. It was as bad as anything Miluda had seen during the war. One moment, they were following the river north, wary for any sign of the enemy. They had climbed the foothills and found a camp of Limberry soldiers, one among many, and they had come with their lances and their axes and their swords, they had come upon the backs of chocobos, they had slashed and stabbed and let their arrows fly, and Miluda and her Valkries and every man and woman that could hold a weapon fought for all they were worth but they were a scattered broken company, a straggling line, and this was a fresh and fearsome army.

So many dead. So many wounded. All because of that wretched Beoulve. Ramza, who had spoken of justice and sent her men into the slaughter.

And she had believed him! She had believed him, because what hope was there?

The night after that first meeting—the night after young Ramza had pleaded with them to return to Igros, to try and broker some pretense of peace that would likely have served as their public execution—Miluda and Wiegraf headed north towards the Plateau, with Boco loaded with their gear.

“We can't beat both armies, Graffy,” Miluda said, as the stars began to shine overhead.

“I know,” Wiegraf said.

Miluda swallowed. What had it all been for? Why this mad mission to kill Gutav and his criminal followers, if the Corps was to die today?

“But we don't have to beat them,” Wiegraf said.

She looked over. Wiegraf's eyes were blazing with the righteous fire that had made him such a fearsome leader, on and off the battlefield.

“Ondoria gets sicker by the day,” Wiegraf said. “And the Marquis is like to side with Goltanna. They fought the Ordallians together. The best Larg can hope for is that they stay neutral.”

“How does that help us?” Miluda asked.

“We can't beat the Hokuten,” Wiegraf said. “But we *can* wound'em bad enough that the Nanten could finish'em off.”

“Is that the best we can hope for?” Miluda asked. “Making sure someone else kills our enemies after we're dead?”

“If the world is better for my death, I'll pay that price,” Wiegraf said. Miluda shook her head: she did not want to lose her brother, who had fenced with her using sticks behind their parent's inn, who had believed in her and her Valkyries and given them all the support they needed.

“But I don't intend to die anytime soon, Milly,” he continued. “Dycedarg's a scheming cunt, but at least he's clever. He won't risk the Hokuten with war on the horizon. No, the *real* problem is Limberry. They owe a debt of honor, and their forces are relatively fresh. Once they link up with the Hokuten...”

Miluda considered for a long time. She felt shaky, hollow, and tired. She'd been fighting for so long. She'd killed Gustav, who had once been an example of what their cause could achieve, who had shared her bed. And there were so many others who'd died over the years. She didn't want to lose anymore.

“We need to hit them now, while they're weak,” Miluda said.

“We need to move out of southern Gallione,” Wiegraf said.

“We can't do both, can we?” Miluda asked. “Not before Limberry...”

“We can,” Wiegraf said. “If we draw their attention.”

He swung up onto Boco in one fluid motion, and looked down at Miluda. "Grab your gear," he ordered, and Miluda did so at once, shouldering her pack and adjusting her scabbard.

"You know where all our southeast units are, yes?" Wiegraf asked.

"I do," she said.

"Good," Wiegraf said. "Gather the Valkyries, and send word to everyone. Hit any Hokuten units nearby and retreat south. You choose the destination, but get an army together. It's important."

"They'll be slaughtered," Miluda said. "None of the smaller units can face full Hokuten brigades."

"They won't have to," Wiegraf said. "I'm sending units into Igros."

"You're..." Miluda gaped at him.

Wiegraf nodded. "If I start riding now, I can draw their attention and their forces. You hit the rest of their garrisons and gather a god damn army, and you punch north before Limberry can link up with them. Send any wounded farther north and hold the Plateau. If you-"

"Go!" Miluda shouted, smacking Boco on the rump, and the bird squawked and took off at a staggering gallop, and Wiegraf yelped, clinging on for dear life.

"You bitch!" he shouted.

"I know the plan!" she shouted back. "Stay alive, asshole!"

"You too!"

He was pounding up into the foothills and Miluda was heading south, because she could see the plan now. Wiegraf was on a racing bird, moving by himself. It would take awhile for messengers to reach Limberry, and for even preliminary maneuvers to begin. Wiegraf could reach Zeakden, and Gregory had been training units to cross the Lenalian mountains north of Igros, both mounted and on foot. The sudden threat to their capital would draw the Hokuten away from the south, and if Miluda acted quickly she could bring a whole damn army north. They would hold narrow chokepoints across the Lenalian mountains, safe from any attack. They could survive and endure, and wait for their chance to strike.

And now Emilie was dead.

"How'd it happen?" Miluda asked, staring into Radia's tear-filled eyes

Radia shook her head. "I don't know, Captain," she whispered. "There was a lot of damage."

Miluda knew that. Miluda had seen it. Unable to bear the thought of her friend suffering in Hokuten hands, she and the last of the Valkyries had moved down the pass under cover of night. There was no plan to figure out which of the enemy camps held Emilie, but there was no need for one. Emilie's screams filled the night.

There were 34 men in that camp. Six in the tent where Emilie had been tied down. None of them lived to see the dawn, but that couldn't save Emilie, shredded and bloody and broken. There were no healers in the ranks of the Corps.

“Was she asleep?” Miluda asked.

Radia nodded. Miluda wasn't sure if that was better or worse. Free of pain, but the idea of that marvelous warrior woman dying with her eyes closed rankled. She should have died on her feet, fighting for her cause. The highborn and their puppets hadn't even deigned to give her that much dignity.

No hope. It was taken from them, over and over. Just as it had been at the war's end, when their dreams of rising by virtue of their talent and valor had been dashed. Just as it had been when everything had fallen apart weeks ago.

Wiegraf had launched his raids from the north, and Miluda and her Valkyries had blitzed across the south. It was hard to say exactly how many soldiers the Corps had these days: Gustav's men had functioned like a criminal syndicate in Dorter, whereas the bulk of their veterans at Zeakden functioned more like a traditional army. Southern Gallione was riddled with small cells of varying sizes, usually commanded by one of the veterans of the war. These cells recruited and operated at their leader's discretion: some were essentially bandits now, whereas others commanded small, disciplined units. Gustav would have known what they had, but there hadn't exactly been time for a debriefing before they'd killed him.

The plan was to leave skeleton crews at key locations to occupy any Hokuten garrisons while consolidating their forces for the big push north, but that plan failed almost immediately. The Hokuten were nowhere near as weak as they were supposed to be, even after the retreat to fortify Igros. It took Miluda sometime to figure out why: some kind of Limberry/Hokuten unit was already in Igros, and had responded almost as soon as the raids had come down through the mountains. As a result, she had to leave more forces behind in order to keep the Hokuten occupied, and some units—particularly in eastern Gallione—she never reached at all.

She had known where she was going to consolidate her forces from the outset. Before Gustav had gone rogue, Miluda had occupied an old fortress in the southern swamps in order to protect the wounded members of the Corps. The idea had been to bring the full strength of the Corps there, but then the forces of Limberry had moved in. Everything was falling apart. There was no chance of punching north. She faced an impossible choice: either abandon the wounded and hope some hundred men could force their way through two enemy armies, or prepare for a last stand.

And then there was a Beoulve.

She remembered that confrontation. She remembered Emilie, standing tall at her side, and Radia, using her powers to disarm that arrogant bastard before he'd had time to loose his arrow. And she remembered the sincerity in Ramza's eyes. She hadn't wanted to listen, exactly, but what choice did she have? And besides...

It was hope, when she was starting to feel hopeless.

"Human, just like me," he'd said. And what kind of monster did this to their fellow humans? Sent them headlong into danger with dozens of wounded soldiers, slaughtered and tortured for the crime of dreaming of equality?

He had told her he dreamed of justice. But look where his lofty words had led. What fresh evil had he planned for them in Igros? What tortures would have been inflicted upon them, in the name of his justice? What...

Lost in thoughts of bloodshed and hopelessness, lost in thoughts of what had been done to Emilie, what might yet be done to her and what few Valkyries remained, she almost didn't see the chocobos climbing slowly up the pass. Four of them, with the same number of riders. A blonde head she recognized the moment she saw it. A purple chocobo she'd last seen far to the south.

Her throat went dry. Again she saw that brunette Beoulve with the wide terrified eyes, her shaking throat beneath her thumbs, struggling for breath. Sister to her betrayer.

"Beoulve," she croaked, and then louder, "BEOULVE!"

Radia tensed at her side.

Ramza stopped well down the winding rocky switchback, at a place where the path widened just a little. He stared up at her.

"Miluda, I-" he started.

"Shut your fucking mouth!" she cried. "I won't listen to anymore of your lies!"

"Please!" shouted the other one, with reddish-brown hair. "My sister-!"

Miluda stared at him. She stared at the Beoulve. She looked at Radia, whose eyes were wide.

"Your sister," she said, her voice low. "*Your* sister."

There were only four Beoulve children. Miluda had known the names of Dycedarg and Zalbaag, of course—how could she fail to learn the names of her enemies?—and she had added Ramza's name to that ghastly list. She had seen the fourth. Had tried to *kill* the fourth. But this young man could not be Zalbaag or Dycedarg, so who the hell was he? And if he wasn't a Beoulve, who the hell was the woman they'd had in their camp?

"Who are you?" Miluda asked.

"Delita Heiral," Delita said.

Miluda shook her head. "I've never heard of the Heirals," she said.

"You wouldn't," Delita replied. "My parents were farmers"

Radia gasped. Miluda didn't notice: her eyes were trained on the other man's young, serious face. He was supposed to be a minor noble. He should have been, with the company he kept. With the two bastards, the one who wore his hate on his sleeve and in his glaring eyes, the other who hid it behind high-minded words like justice. He was supposed to be one of them. The girl she'd tried to strangle was *supposed* to be one of them.

They weren't supposed to be...they shouldn't be...

"Are you mad?" she asked.

There was silence. The wind moaned and howled along mountain passes and shale, rustling the scrub grass. Everything felt cold and distant.

"Are you mad?" Miluda asked again. "Are you...you know what these monsters do!"

"Oh for Ajora's sake!" spat the other one—the tall, acne-ridden whelp. "Would you shut your whining mouth!"

"Beowulf!" said the tall woman Miluda had never seen before.

"No," Beowulf said. "I'm tired of it. You didn't get paid, so you started murdering children. You think—"

"Gustav," Miluda whispered, remembering what the man had been, remembering how he'd died with disbelief in his eyes. "Gustav killed children, and we stopped him. We stopped him, even though you killed far more."

"When did we—" Beowulf began.

"You ever tried to buy food without gil in your pouch?" Miluda asked. "My parents ran an inn. They should have been wealthy. But the Ordallians burned too many farms, and the farmers could barely feed themselves, and then the army rode in and took what they needed. 'For the good of Ivalice'." She said the words with mocking sophistication, remembering the royal proclamations that had tried to justify the men, women, and children starving in the streets.

"Oh, but they tried," Miluda said. "They tried. They still had their contacts. Their inn became the hub of a small black market getting food where it needed to go. Yeah, they profited, but that's not why the Hokuten took them."

She remembered that night: the Hokuten breaking down the door, hauling their shrieking parents away in the night. Wiegraf and Miluda had been old enough to look out for themselves, and the inn was theirs.

"They took them for the same reason that they can't stand us now," Miluda said. "They can't

stand the idea that the commoners could stand just as tall as the nobles. They can't stand the idea that the only thing that separates the powerless from the powerful is the boot they keep upon our neck. They'll take our food, they'll take our money, they'll take our freedom, and they'll spit on us if we ever try to get up. They'll take and they'll take and they'll *take*."

The other Valkyries were all around her now. Five of them left, of what had once been a squad of forty. Five of what should have been an army of righteous revolutionaries fighting to make a better world, holding the north so that the Hokuten could not take anything else.

"You..." she glared at Delita. "You know what they are. They'll never give anything to you. They'll take and they'll take."

"Please," Delita whispered.

Miluda looked down the line of women around her. There was Radia, so young and bright, using her art to try and make the world a better place, keeping Miluda on the right track. There was Arlette with an arrow nocked, a hunter who could hit a fleeing hare from a hundred yards. There was one-eyed Beatrix, who she'd once seen duel five Hokuten knights to a draw. There was Dametta, with her gargantuan axe and her broad shoulders, who always went for firewood no matter how hard she'd fought or how long she'd marched. And there was Justina with a satchel of javelins at her feet, smiling in that strange bemused way that always preceded her killing.

Five of the best women Miluda had ever known. Emilie should have there, but she wasn't. Because of the men below her, and all their monstrous ilk.

"Your sister's at Zeakden, Heiral," Miluda said. "She's pretending to be a Beoulve. I hope they find out she's not. I hope they treat her *exactly* the way traitors like you should be treated."

"It's not her fault!" Delita cried.

"It's not her fault?" Miluda demanded, jabbing her finger towards Ramza. "They take from us. They lie to us. They betray us, and still you fight with them! What would you have me do? Stand aside? Go with you? I have seen what happens to those who surrender to your care. I have seen what you do to those you promise mercy." Her voice was rising along with her rage. "If I am to die, I will die on my feet with my weapon in hand and a curse upon my lips!"

The Valkyries roared in agreement around her. Miluda had found her position, in this hopeless place. She still believed in Wiegraf's cause, and she believed in paying evil unto evil.

"No one dies today!" Ramza shouted, and in one fluid motion had drawn a strange-headed arrow and loosed it towards her. Miluda moved with all her speed and training and desperate fury, spinning on her heel, catching the arrow between two fingers, using its momentum and her own to finish her spin so that the arrow hurtled back down towards the Beoulve and his bastard friends.

She would hold this pass. She was Miluda Folles, Captain of the Valkyries, leader of a revolution. There were things in this world worth fighting for. There were things in this world worth dying for, even if there was no hope left.

Chapter 18: The Valkyries

...while the Bursting Blade has been carefully preserved by the nobility of Ivalice, the history of the Draining Blade is far more elusive. The Draining Blade is at once a more difficult and more attainable art. Unlike the Bursting Blade, it requires little in the way of equipment, since it takes advantage of the natural magical field every living soul possesses. However, the Bursting Blade merely amplifies a user's magical powers for destructive ends: mastery is difficult, but the basics are easily understood. The Draining Blade requires long and careful training to use your innate magic in unconventional ways, co-opting an opponent's magical field and absorbing and redirecting their power. Practiced Vampire Knights can exhaust enemies from afar and even absorb and reflect enemy magical attacks, but sadly the art is largely confined to single lines of master-student relationships...

-Alazlam Durai, "Sword Arts of Ivalice"

She caught the arrow.

Ramza loosed it one fluid move, hoping to end this fight before it began, to make it through the Plateau without blood on his hands. Miluda spun like a dancer, caught it and redirected it in one fluid motion, and he could *see* his arrow coming back towards him, designed to choke and blind and make easy targets of any who inhaled its soporific smoke. Ramza had always used it to win without killing, but they were surrounded by women with every cause to hate and hurt.

Another choice that conspired to catastrophe. Like trusting Argus, or leaving helpless captives in the hands of the Hokuten, to be beaten and tortured for information.

They were tired enough already. They had left the Beoulve Manor and ridden through the night, resting only for a few hours here and there. Delita wanted to urge their birds to charging speed, but there was no chance of relief mounts, so they proceeded at an easy trot, and every delay made Delita more of an anxious, angry wreck.

Across the rolling plains, with the mountains looming larger and larger, eating sparingly from their packs, napping for a few short hours here and there, riding through the Limberry lines with Argus' bitter grace.

So here they were, tired, hungry, and facing Ramza's mistake. A woman who hated them, with all that remained of her army. An arrow that would leave them gasping and blind, easy prey for the sharp weapons of their hateful enemies

And then fire exploded into the world.

A long stream of white flames burst up from his right, obliterating the arrow and racing towards

Miluda. She threw herself to one side, and the fires blasted this way and that, sweeping across the plateau, sending the women upon it scampering for cover. Ramza's head jerked to his right and he found Reis, her arms spread wide to either side, her chest puffed up, her mouth open and exhaling that terrible blaze. The shadow of colossal wings seemed to stretch out behind her.

Ramza had seen magic before, but not like this.

He forced his gaze away as Beowulf and Delita shouted and urged their birds up the hill, under the cover of the flames. He started to follow, but then one section of the flames along the ridge of the plateau parted down the middle, like a cascade of water divided by a boulder. Two women burst through, wreathed in shimmering force that shed fire around them. Miluda and her red-haired lieutenant.

“Ramza!” Reis called from behind him, breathless and panting. “Don't let them touch you!”

“Don't-” For a surreal moment, Ramza was bewildered. He almost laughed. Did Reis understand how fighting worked? The whole point was to make sure the enemy didn't touch you. That usually meant death.

But then the pieces clicked together: how the red-haired woman had drained the very strength from Argus' arms, and how the two women had just cut their way through a wall of fire. This was some art or magic Ramza didn't know, something that could hurt him if he let them get close.

And how to avoid it, without letting them get to Reis?

He found out the question was moot when Reis burst past him atop her bird. She spread her arms wide and gestured downwards, and both she and her mount burst into the air in a rush of a wind and a terrified squawk. Again, Ramza got the fleeting impression of vast, leathery wings. Both Miluda and her lieutenant craned their heads to stare at the woman above them, and Ramza seized the moment. He urged his mount past them, leading it off the winding path so its taloned feet scrabbled for purchase on the hillside.

He felt an impact against the birds flank, and his mount gave a whimpering shriek. The chocobo slumped forwards as red blood poured down its side and flowed down the slope. It staggered on a few more steps, then slumped over just as it reached the plateau with a feeble wailing cry that left Ramza feeling sick inside. He stopped to run a hand over its head, tried to think of what to do, and...

And there was a towering woman moving from the corner of his vision, her axe already swinging.

Ramza threw himself backwards, and the axe whisked by overhead, stirring his hair with the wind of its passage. He stumbled away as the axe came sweeping through the air again. The long-haired woman advanced, face set in a firm grimace, broad shoulders flexing with every terrible swing.

He ducked away, frantically looking around the Plateau. Reis was standing over her chocobo, which was crumpled to the ground with its leg twisted beneath it. Beowulf was still atop his purple bird, dodging between javelins flung after him by a smiling woman. Behind him, a woman lay bleeding upon the ground, clutching a bow in her dying hands. Closer to Ramza, Delita and a one-eyed woman were a frenzied storm of clashing blades, with a bloody chocobo at Delita's back.

Just a flash, a glimpse of the chaos and the madness. Then his eyes were back on the colossal woman in front of him, and the executioner's axe she swung with such terrible strength.

So Ramza lunged forwards, beneath the swinging axe. He saw the woman's eyes flash wide, and then his shoulder slammed against her chest, knocking her backwards and sending aching bolts down to the tips of his fingers. He ducked back and grabbed at her axe just beneath its head, trying to wrest it from her powerful grip. She was gasping, wheezing, fighting him, pulling at that axe so its razor's edge jerked closer and closer to his head.

From the corner of his eye, he saw movement. Miluda and her red-haired lieutenant had crested the slope, and were turning their staggering climb into a stumbling charge, straight towards him. Ramza's heart leapt into his throat and made it hard to breathe.

He twisted back towards the axe-wielding woman, slammed into her again, knocked her backwards with a kick to her stomach and then danced away. His hand flashed to the sword at his waist, and closed on nothing but air.

Because the sword was with his chocobo, of course. Where he'd left it.

He cursed under his breath, his eyes on the three women in front of him: the woman with the axe rising to her feet, Miluda and her lieutenant closing in. He was unarmed and surrounded by warriors with every reason to kill him.

Then, all at once, there was a purple bird in the thick of them.

It was oddly comical: the giant squawking bird plunging into their midst, catching every one of them off-guard. Ramza jerked backwards and fell: across from him, he saw the red-headed woman do the same. The woman with the axe swore and dropped her weapon. Only Miluda kept her feet, jabbing at Violet and dodging between Beowulf's flailing slashes. A javelin whizzed past Violet's head and bit into the earth near Ramza's right foot. He could have prodded the weapon with his toe.

"Gotcha!" Beowulf cried, and his other sword lashed out like a snake, and suddenly there was blood on the axe-wielding woman's chest. She fell to her knees.

"NO!" shouted Miluda, driving towards Beowulf as Violet charged off in the direction from which the javelin had come.

A moment's strange, empty calm. Ramza sat flat on his ass, staring as Miluda chased the bird

that chased the woman with the javelins. Delita and the one-eyed woman continued their clanging, clashing interchange. And the red-headed was rising with her sword in hand, moving towards Ramza.

The moment was over. This was a fight for his life.

Ramza scrambled to his feet, charged to the side and grabbed his sword from his fallen chocobo. He turned, raised his sword defensively, then remembered Reis' warning and threw himself backwards. His feet caught on the flank of his dead bird: he fell again, and rolled to the side as the red-headed woman's sword slashed into the dirt where his head had been. He sprang upright and...

And what? What could he do that didn't leave this woman dead?

She came at him again. Ramza moved towards her, because he didn't know what else to do. Again, he tripped over the bird, this time its scabby orange feet. He pulled himself along its still-warm bulk. He could hear her closing in.

He slashed, and his sword tore through flesh and leather. He grabbed the bag from the chocobo's side, tumbled away in a cloud of bloody feathers, fumbled inside the bag and tried to find his way through the tight bundles of cloth until-

There.

He hurled one of the arrows towards the woman's face, and slapped his chest at the same time. The runes flickered to life, and his head swam dizzily. Sleep-deprived, and he'd used the runes too recently, but they worked: he could still breathe as the choking white fog engulfed them. He moved forwards and knocked the blade from her hands as she gasped and wiped at her tearing eyes. Then he threw her over his shoulders, carried her from the cloud, and hurled her to the ground.

She hit hard, gasped harder. Her eyes stared up at him, but there was very little pain or fear there. It was a strange sort of dawning disbelief.

"You're-" she broke off coughing, and tried again. "You're not...you're really-"

Ramza stared down at her. She stared up at him. There was something he could see in her eyes, something he almost understood. What was he seeing? What...

"Ramza!" cried Delita.

Ramza turned just in time to see the blade threshing towards him. He lifted his own sword, and the blades clashed together with such terrible force that Ramza's arm went numb. He stumbled backwards, barely able to parry as Miluda rushed after him, a frenzy of slashing steel. Her glaring eyes transfixed him.

"Bastard!" she howled. "Beoulve!"

She was just as fast and just as strong as she had been in the Desert, but now there was an awful fury that whetted her blade. Something more than death hung on the edge of her sword: something like

oblivion, something like hell, something like *vengeance*.

The blade did not slash: the blade was a hurricane, threatening to engulf him. She did not walk: she thundered, like a storm given flesh. She didn't seem human anymore. She was something terrible and righteous, like Ajora punishing the sinful world by suffusing it in cataclysmic catastrophe. He was face-to-face with a force of nature, and that force of nature wanted him dead. And Ramza was weak, Ramza was tried, and Ramza knew that she wasn't wrong to hate him, because she had put her trust in him and the people she cared for had been destroyed as a result.

He parried, but only just. He dodged, but only just. His arm was numb. His feet tripped over themselves. He felt gangly, and clumsy, and wrong.

She stabbed towards him. He struck at the outthrust blade, and she slammed forwards, drove an elbow into his throat. He gasped, his vision going black around the edges, almost didn't see her twisting so she could thrust her sword into his unguarded belly. Ramza kicked out, caught her legs, and they fell to the ground in a heap of flailing limbs.

He pulled away from her. She lifted her blade. Ramza lifted his metal-edged greaves up in a cross-guard, caught the blade and his arms shuddered and he felt his bones shake and his knees sank into the dirt as he struggled for breath. He tried to rise, and-

And Miluda shimmered, like heat on stone. And suddenly it felt as though Ramza's body had fallen asleep, legs and arms and brains, and his chest felt tight and he could barely see and there was Miluda, towering above him, sword rising for the killing blow, and Ramza could not will himself to stand.

Thhkt.

It was the sound of sharp metal tearing through flesh, clothes, leather, and armor. It was the sound of a killing blow. It was the sound of death by the sword.

It was just sound. Ramza felt no pain. He didn't feel anything, except flecks of something warm and wet splashing across his face.

He blinked up at Miluda. She looked different than she had a moment before. It took Ramza a few seconds to understand why. To see the sharp, bloody swordpoint protruding from her chest. To see Delita standing behind her, his eyes wide, his mouth open, his face pale.

Miluda slumped forwards, falling to her knees and gasping as Delita's sword slipped from her back. Her blood dripped from its point and into the dust. She lifted her hands to the wound, then stared up at Ramza. Her mouth opened, then closed. She fell to one side with an uneven *thumph*, and rolled onto her back, wheezing. Blood began to pool beneath her.

Ramza stared at her. His mind felt just as sluggish as his body, every thought weak and distant.

He couldn't quite understand what he was seeing.

Miluda's eyes flickered towards Delita. "K-kill..." she started. "Kill for them...all you like...they'll never...you and...and your sister..."

Her eyelids were fluttering. Her face was very pale.

"...oulve..." she whispered.

And then her eyes snapped open, blazing with rage, spearing Ramza and dispelling his mental stupor in one fierce sharp shock.

"When the world is done with you, Beoulve, you'll pray for the mercy of a death this quick!" she roared, as blood trickled from her lips. "You'll pay, Beoulve, you and all your monstrous kin, and-"

She took in a deep breath, her eyes blazing brighter. Then all at once the fire was gone, and she exhaled a rattling sigh. Her body went slack.

Ramza stared at her body. He lifted his eyes to Delita, still standing behind her, looking not at Miluda or at Ramza but at his bloody sword. Somewhere far away, Ramza could hear other voices. Reis and Beowulf.

"Are you alright?"

"Fine. I'm fine."

"Your chocobo..."

"It was my fault. I hadn't used that spell before, I didn't think-"

"I'm just glad you're safe."

"What about you, Wulfie?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine."

"You're bleeding."

"I'm not...LOOK OUT!"

Ramza jerked upright and then collapsed to his knees again, his legs still prickling with numbing needles, unable to bear his weight. The red-headed woman was staggering towards them, but she had no sword in her hand. She was coughing and wheezing, rocking from side to side with every step. Her eyes were red, but now devoid of tears. She tripped to a halt just a few feet away, staring down at her dead captain. Her narrow face was devoid of emotion.

She turned away, and limped past Delita. Ramza's head turned upon a creaking, reluctant neck to follow her path. Beowulf and Reis stood in Radia's path. Beowulf reached towards his sheathed swords.

"No!" Ramza cried, and his voice sounded far louder than it should have. It took him a moment to realize that Delita had shouted, too.

The red-headed woman kept moving as though she could not see the danger in front of her. Beowulf hesitated, and then Reis grabbed his hand and pulled it away from his sword. The Valkyrie staggered past without looking at them.

Ramza turned his head back to Delita. Delita's eyes flickered towards him, but he did not quite meet Ramza's gaze.

“She wasn't...” he started. “She didn't have to be...why...”

His bloody sword slipped from his hand, and clattered to the ground. Ramza pushed his hands against the ground, but they too felt asleep, weak and noodly, unable to bear his weight. He turned his head slowly from side to side to see the fallen women, and lifted his head to watch the red-headed woman, still staggering on as the wind howled.

We won, Ramza thought, and almost felt like crying.

Chapter 19: Funeral Pyre

...I confess, I am daunted. Every scrap of research shows me just how much we do not know. Even now, centuries after the Golden Age of King Delita, we have not fully recovered what was lost in the Fall! The Ydorans were experts in every field—genetics, engineering, metalworking, magic, magitek, and countless others. They synthesized their knowledge into incredible forms—including those bloodlines of unique magic, the powers the Galthenas were heir to, and the semi-mythical Dragoners. How did they do it? How did they give ordinary men and women latent powers that would allow them to echo and invoke the strength of the long-dead dragons? I do not know if we can ever equal the wonders of the Ydorans. I suppose I simply hope that that, by studying these records and echoes, we can find new threads to weave into Ivalice, and build something from the ruins.

-Alazlam Durai, "Letter to the Professor of Ydoran Studies at Gariland University."

They were too tired, too wounded, and too weak to advance any further that day. They had survived against difficult odds, and not without cost. Beowulf had taken an arrow in the shoulder, and Delita had taken more than one wound in his fight with the one-eyed woman. Ramza was a long time healing from the strange magic Miluda had used on him. Reis alone was unwounded, and even she was exhausted from the difficult magic she'd used to save them from an impossible situation.

They huddled together around Violet, treating their wounds as best they could. Reis would finish the job during the evening, after she'd had time to rest and restore her powers. Once they were done, they took stock of their surroundings. They moved through the Plateau, gathering what material they could find, examining the other dead. Men and women missing arms and legs, with wounds in chests and stomachs. Men and women who had died in their own piss and shit. In one tent, they found the blonde woman who had faced them so audaciously in the south. When Reis had tenderly lifted the thin blanket from her body, Ramza staggered out of the tent and vomited, bile rasping down his throat.

"Did we..." Ramza whispered. "The Hokuten...?"

"Must have been Limberry," Delita said, and there was no energy in his voice. The restless, half-crazed man who had driven them on from Igros was gone. This Delita was a stumbling zombie, barely looking at any of them.

"We can't leave her like this," Reis said. "We can't leave *any* of them like this."

"We can't bury them," Beowulf said.

"We can burn them," Reis said. "Put the tents we don't need all together. I'll start the fire."

That was how they spent the rest of their day: grabbing tents, blankets, and weapons, setting

aside what they needed, putting what was flammable in a pile. The bodies were the worst: either they stank, or they were still wet with blood. Ramza was still weak, but he could not bring himself to stop. He kept moving, even though he felt dizzy and distant, as though he might collapse at any moment. He would have carried Miluda, but Delita shouldered him aside and cradled her body himself.

By the time the day was giving way to a clear, gorgeous dusk beneath a sky blazing amber and rose quartz, they'd gathered the dead and made a makeshift pyre amidst tents and blankets, scrub grass and saplings. The Valkyries they'd slain had place of honor atop the pyre.

"This won't tire you out too much?" Ramza asked.

"Not if we're staying here tonight," Reis said.

"We have to," Delita said, in that same dead voice. "The Lenalian Mountains get too cold at night. Two to a tent, for warmth."

"Shouldn't we set a watch?" Beowulf asked.

"What's the point?" Delita asked. "Allies behind us. Enemies ain't coming."

He wandered off into the dark. Ramza stared at Miluda's slack, white, bloody face. At the faces of all the woman who'd died as they chased after Teta.

"What's his problem?" Beowulf asked. "We won."

"How can you ask that?" Ramza said, staring at the tall, gangly boy.

"This is war," Beowulf said. "It's what we trained for."

"They were only hurt because of what I did, Beowulf," Ramza said. "Because I promised them safety, and-"

"And Argus betrayed you," Beowulf said.

"And I trusted the wrong person," Ramza said, shaking his head.

"And it's your fault?" Beowulf said. "It's your fault he was a monster? It's your fault these women got hurt? It's your fault they wanted vengeance?"

"I don't...that's not..." Ramza shook his head. "It's not that simple."

"It's exactly that simple," Beowulf said.

"He's not wrong," Reis said.

Ramza looked towards her. Reis had a hand on Beowulf's uninjured shoulder. "You step onto a battlefield with sword in hand, you accept the price," she said. "You did the right thing. It's not your fault it got fucked up."

"What's the point of trying to do the right thing if you can't succeed?" Ramza asked.

"Oh, that's bullshit!" Beowulf spat. "That's like asking, 'What's the point of fighting if you lose?' You fight because you have to, Ramza."

Ramza shook his head. "I don't believe that."

"Smarter people than us have argued about this," Reis said. "Not sure they ever found an answer. But there's one thing we can agree on." Reis turned back to the pyre. "These women deserve our respect."

She spread her arms, and the air around her flickered with the premonition of flames. She exhaled, and embers sighed out of her mouth, floated along the breeze like dandelion seeds. The shadow of the dragon around her was fainter this time, and gone almost as soon as Ramza noticed it. But the seeds of fire slowly blossomed into a full, roaring inferno, rising to consume the fallen.

"Thank you," Ramza said, as they watched the blaze. "We couldn't have...we'd be dead without you. Both of you."

"Well, hell," Beowulf said. "A desperate charge right into enemy territory? I should be thanking *you*."

"I should really find a man with less drama," Reis said.

"Please, woman," Beowulf said. "You'd be bored within the first day."

Ramza didn't understand how they could be so unaffected by what had happened. He envied them.

He turned away, his heart, head, and body all aching in unique ways. He wandered off after Delita, found him at the very edges of the firelight, staring down the long, winding climb they'd taken to get here. Ramza stood besides him, and they stood in silence as the sky steadily darkened.

"Wasn't she right, Ramza?" Delita asked.

"She was," Ramza said. How could he deny it? The people she cared for her had been hurt because she'd misplaced her trust. She'd believed Ramza could offer her a safe path, and Argus had...

But Ramza should have known. He should have known better than to trust Argus.

"About everything," Delita said. "About..."

Silence. The flames crackled behind them. The wind howled. From this far away, Ramza couldn't smell the bacon-in-the-pan scent of the bodies burning.

"If it were Alma," Delita said. "We'd have an army out here, right? It wouldn't just be us. It wouldn't..."

Ramza stared out with Delita, out down the rocks, out to the distant flickering fires of the soldiers of Limberry. The moon had waxed far above, and everything was illuminated by its ghostly light, stark and white and beautiful. They'd ridden all this way, after Teta.

And if it had been Alma, every one of those Limberry soldiers would be on the Plateau right now. Delita was right.

"I thought if I was the best," Delita said. "I thought if I...if I excelled. I could be just as great as Balbanes, or your brothers, or..." He shook his head, and dropped his gaze. "But I couldn't. They always hated me. Madoc and them, they..."

"They were assholes," Ramza said.

"If everyone's an asshole," Delita said. "You've got to ask yourself...what if it's you?"

"Del, this isn't your-" Ramza started.

"I know," Delita said. "Not my fault. How could it be? I wasn't there to protect her. I was with you. Pretending I could be a knight. Pretending I could..." He looked up at Ramza, and there were tears in his eyes. "Ramza. Remember when I defended discharging the Corps? Remember how I..." He looked down at the ground. "The way she looked at me, Ramza. I can't get it out of my head. She didn't hate me. She pitied me."

He was shaking now. His voice was weak.

"I'm nothing."

Ramza reached out to pat his friend's shoulder. Delita shied from his touch, and Ramza withdrew his hand as though it had been burned.

"I'll take first watch," Delita said. "We're leaving at first light. They're not taking Teta from me."

Ramza hesitated, his soul and body too exhausted to find the right words to comfort Delita. The sheer scale of the injustice around them...the sheer, awful weight of the things they had done and the blood on their hands...

The Valkyries were dead. Alma had been beaten, and Dycedarg stabbed. Teta lay in enemy hands. All because Ramza had dreamed of mercy. All because Ramza had imagined he could stand anywhere near as tall as his father and brothers.

Ramza headed back towards the fire, but stopped to stare up at the sky, tracing the familiar patterns of the Zodiac and half-remembering old stories about the Braves. "Delita," he said. "Thank you for saving me."

Delita said nothing. Ramza felt a pang in his chest, but shrugged it off and kept walking.

"Ramza!" Delita called.

Ramza turned back towards Delita, who was looking away into the night. "If it was me," he said. "If she'd been about to kill me, would you have...could you have...?"

Ramza's throat felt very dry. He swallowed.

"I think so," Ramza said, and felt a stab of fierce cold guilt rising up from his stomach against his heart. Because 'think' hadn't been the word he'd wanted to say. The word he'd wanted to say was

'hope.'

He turned away from Delita.

Chapter 20: By Nobler Means

Colder and colder with every hour they rode. Farther and farther, as men and women staggered and slumped into the dirt. Some rose again. Many didn't.

Teta, her body a bundled mess of bruises and dirt, watched them from her place in front of Gregory, with the bird bobbing beneath her as its feathers traced a pattern on her thighs. She chafed and ached from the constant up and down of their journey. Higher and higher they climbed, riding along the long high plains of Fovoham, with windmills churning away here and there in the distance.

It was slow going, of course. Gregory and his riders were the healthiest of the group, stopping here and there to keep the straggling line in motion. At times, Gregory was the *only* rider: he would send his fellows in different directions, making contact with other members of the Corps, setting up camps where they would try to sleep through the cold, chilly nights. But there weren't enough blankets and never enough food, and the moans of the wounded made it so hard to sleep, and there were always a few who went to sleep and never woke up the next morning.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" Teta asked one stark morning, staring at the body of a huddled man who looked younger than she was. Her voice was weak and her stomach ached with hunger. She shouldn't have spoken—that wasn't how she survived—but she was so tired, and it seemed so wrong that someone so young should die alone in the cold.

"Now you care?" Gregory asked.

Teta didn't know what to say, so she said nothing. She didn't know how many men and women had set out from the Plateau, but by the time they reached their destination, at least a fifth of them had been left cold and motionless on the road they'd taken.

Their destination was a small farm that straddled a high mountain pass, with the heavy shadows of the Lenalian mountains looming overhead. A windmill spun above them, and the creaking of its churning gears could be heard long before they reached it. The air was cool and crisp, unexpectedly pleasant after their frosty struggle. But farther to the south, Teta could see heavy snowclouds among the mountains.

There were other men and women of the Corps waiting for them in the shadow of the windmill. Teta had a hard time thinking of the ragged band they'd led out of the Plateau as soldiers, but the word seemed much more fitting here. The men and women waiting for them looked just as strong and capable as the Hokuten guards who staffed the Beoulve Manor. They had set up numerous tents and worked at steaming pots set over numerous fires. Cries of relief echoed across the lines of the wounded.

Gregory rode through the ranks of the soldiers until he had reached a heavy wooden door at the base of the windmill. He dismounted, and led Teta inside. She'd never been inside one before, and in spite of her aching fear and gnawing hunger she found herself slightly fascinated by the gears turning around her, a constant rumble she could feel in her teeth. Wooden crates and piles of hay were scattered haphazardly around the gigantic wheels of the central column.

"Stay here," Gregory ordered, shoving her onto one of the patches of hay. "You leave this room, I won't be responsible for what happens to you."

He left the room and headed back outside. The heavy wooden door slammed shut behind him, and Teta heard the *clink* of a key being turned in the lock. Teta had not wasted time protesting, and she didn't waste time investigating the crates, either. There would be time enough for that latter. The pile of hay had a dusty, musty scent, and it scratched awfully against her ankles, but it promised warmth, and she dug herself deeper, huddling in on herself, closing her eyes against the aching of her stomach.

She was still alive. She was still alive.

She didn't know how she slept. All at once she was awake, and she heard voices outside the door.

"...not happy, Greg," said a high, nervous voice she didn't recognize.

"What choice did I have, Drew?" answered Gregory.

"So why is she still here?"

"You're not seeing the bigger picture."

The key turned in the lock again. Teta shut her eyes tight, and huddled deeper into the straw. She forced herself to breathe, slow and deep and regular. She didn't know where the conversation would lead, but it was her first chance to hear Gregory unguarded, and even the smallest scrap of information could make a huge difference. Learning about Eugenia's bed-wetting at school and dropping the information in an isolated moment had made sure the bitch kept her hands to herself in all future encounters.

"Then tell me, Greg," said Drew.

"One sec."

She heard Gregory moved towards her, kept her breathing even, her eyes closed. He slapped the straw next to her, and she gave a low grunt of surprise and rolled away from the sound, huddling deeper in on herself.

Gregory moved away. His footsteps were shifting back and forth across the room. Was he pacing?

"How bad is it?" Gregory asked.

"It's bad," Drew said. "Wiegraf's got raiding parties hitting their flanks, but we're outnumbered and they've got all the supplies they need. They're coming."

"Zeakden's still holding?" Gregory asked.

"Zeakden's still...Greg, they're *heading* for Zeakden?"

Gregory snorted. "Of course they are," he said. "They take Zeakden, and they can take the whole north. Every other fort, all without a real fight. And we've got nowhere to run, right? That's what she's for."

"What she's..."

"Who's leading the assault, Drew?" Gregory asked.

"Who's leading...who leads the fucking Hokuten, Greg?" Drew's voice cracked.

"And whose sister do I have here?" Gregory asked.

"That's..." Drew trailed off. "That's the Beoulve girl?"

"Exactly," Gregory said. "She got us out of that Manor. She got us through the Limberry lines. I don't care how much they hate us, Drew, they're not gonna let us slit her throat. They'll bargain. Buy us time to figure something out."

"Figure what out, Greg?" Drew asked.

The door swung open. There was the skidding, squealing sound of boots pivoting on their heels. There were audible gasps.

"He doesn't know, Drew," said a deep, male voice that sounded vaguely familiar to Teta's ears. Did it sound a little like Miluda?

"Wiegraf!" Drew squeaked.

Wiegraf? Wiegraf Folles? Leader of the Death Corps?

Teta forced herself to keep breathing slow and steady. She couldn't be noticed now.

"Sir," Gregory said, his voice tight with fear. "It's good to see you."

"I wish I could say the same, Gregory," Wiegraf said. "But that would be a lie. You're not my sister, first of all. Where is she?"

"She remained behind to hold the Plateau," Gregory said.

"With what?" Wiegraf asked. "Six women?"

"Five," Gregory said.

"Braves save us," Wiegraf whispered. "Who'd we lose?"

"Emilie," Gregory said.

"That's a damn shame," Wiegraf said. "She was quite a soldier. Unlike you, Gregory."

"Sir-" Gregory began.

"A hostage, Gregory," Wiegraf said. "You've seen what I do to the men who resort to such disgraceful tactics."

"I'm not Gustav, sir."

"Oh, I'm well aware," Wiegraf replied. "Gustav, for all his many faults, had a plan."

"Sir--"

"Lieutenant Levigne," Wiegraf said, and there was murder in his voice. "I sent you south because you and your men were the best-trained to make the crossing over the mountains. You were supposed to threaten Igros and tie up the Hokuten. What did you do instead?"

"I know I failed, sir--"

"Gregory, you attempted to kill Prince Larg's foremost military advisor," Wiegraf said. "I don't care that you failed. I care that you made the attempt at all."

"I would have shown the world that such men can be killed!" Gregory declared, fire in his voice.

"He's not Elidibus, Gregory," Wiegraf said. "The world knows he can be killed. Who gives a damn? Our goal was to threaten the Hokuten and make it clear that we could exhaust them. It was to prove to Gallione that the men who claim to be looking for their best interests can't even protect their capital. It would have discredited and demoralized them, all while distracting them so we could evacuate the south."

"Instead, you drew their ire. Instead, Zalbaag Beoulve is marching north with the full force of the Hokuten. Thank God you *didn't* kill him, Lieutenant. Dycedarg may be a snake, but at least he's a clever snake. He won't let the Hokuten kill themselves on a mission of vengeance that serves no purpose. Of course, it's serving its purpose. I don't know how we stop that army from killing us."

"The girl, sir," Gregory said. "She--"

"Even if I deigned to use her in such a disgraceful fashion," Wiegraf said. "She could only buy us a little time. And using her like that...do you have any idea what that would do to our cause?"

"Who gives a damn, sir!" Gregory shouted. "They're winning!"

Silence in the room. Teta's heart was pounding, but she did not allow her inner panic and anxiety to break her pretense of sleep.

"Gregory..." Drew whispered.

"Oh, what!" Gregory shouted. "What does it matter now? How many men and women are dead in the south? How many of us are gonna live through the next week? I'm giving us hope, and he thinks he can tell me--"

There was the sound of rapid footsteps. Teta couldn't help herself: she slitted her eyes and saw a

blonde, strong shape crossing the room. Gregory flinched backwards, but the blonde shape—Wiegraf?—merely rested his hands upon Gregory's shoulders. She shut her eyes quickly.

“Gregory,” Wiegraf said. “You're not Gustav. I know that. You're not a monster. You're just frightened. I understand. I don't want to die, either. But I would rather these noble fuckers visit the worst horrors they can imagine on me than ever allow myself sink to their wretched level.”

“What does it matter if we're all going to die?” Gregory asked, and there were tears in his voice.

“It matters, Gregory,” Wiegraf said. “Say the worst comes. Say we all die. If we die like bandits, with our sword at the throat of an innocent who never wronged us, that's how we'll be remembered. But if we die like heroes? If we die fighting for our cause and refusing to dirty our hands? They'll remember.”

“They won't,” Gregory said.

“If they don't,” Wiegraf replied. “Their brothers will. So will their mothers, their fathers, their sons, and their daughters. They'll know that the blood on their loved one's hands is nobler by far than the so-called noble blood in their veins.”

“And we make them pay dearly for every inch,” Wiegraf said. “We fight clean, and we fight better, and we make them fear what people like us can do. Fear us the way they fear a panther stalking them at night, because that fear is the first step on the path to respect. When they know we can tear their throats out, they'll know better than to piss on us. Fear for our strength and admiration for our good deeds...even in death, from such simple things we may raise a brighter future from our ashes,”

The words touched something in Teta, something young and painful. She had visions of the quiet torments of the Preparatory Academy, the whispers and mockeries, the second-hand dresses shredded and burned while she was out of her room, the fingernails that had cut into her thighs during class, daring her to make a sound and draw the ire of the teachers. The Corps were bandits and marauders, who'd hurt the Hokuten and hurt convoys and merchants and hurt her and Alma and Dycedarg, had taken Teta hostage and threatened her and beatne her, but in Wiegraf's words she saw an end to that kind of nasty, low cruelty, inflicted on her just because she was beneath them.

“So, we're going to let the girl go,” Wiegraf said. “Because otherwise, we're no better than they are.”

Footsteps moving towards her. “Uh, sir,” Drew said. “She's asleep.”

“Oh, please,” scoffed Wiegraf. “The girl's been awake since before I entered the room.”

Teta stiffened in surprise, her heart beating so fast that it felt like it might burst from her chest. Wiegraf chuckled. “It was well-done, child,” he said. “But you didn't even move when I burst in. Either someone drugged you, or you're a masterful actress who missed a beat. It's an easy mistake to

make.”

Well, no point in pretending now.

Teta sat up at once, opening her eyes and taking in the room. High-voiced Drew had lank brown hair and a double-chin. He towered over Gregory and Wiegraf. As for Wiegraf, he had a prominent jaw and blonde hair, and blue eyes that were surprisingly kind. He knelt in front of her.

“Alma, is it?” he said. “Alma Beoulve. I met your brother and his friends. They're impressive, for ones so young.”

Teta swallowed. “Thank you, sir.”

Wiegraf smiled. It softened his rugged face. “Have you been treated well?”

Teta hesitated, then looked towards Gregory. He was staring at her with a curious absence of emotion on his face. “Yes,” she said. “He's looked after me and been very reasonable, all things considered.”

“Who choked you?” Wiegraf asked, gazing down at the bruises on Teta's neck.

Teta said nothing. Gregory jerked out of his vacant reverie and cleared his throat.

“Ah, sir,” Gregory said. “That was, uh...”

“Miluda,” Wiegraf said, eyes closed. “Yes, well...I cannot blame her for her rage. I heard...” He studied Teta and asked, “You know what happened to the Valkyries?” Teta nodded, and Wiegraf asked, “It struck me as rather strange. Would your brother really do such a thing?”

Delita or Ramza? But that question was irrelevant, because the answer was the same. “No, sir.”

“Well,” Wiegraf sighed. “Whatever his guilt, his sins do not rest on your head. Milly's anger blinds her to that reality. I will not ask you to forgive us, but I do ask that you understand.” He stood up. “We'll leave you here with food when we depart,” he said. “The Hokuten won't tarry far behind, but if you don't feel like waiting you might be able to make it to the Limberry lines past the Plateau. Though with the snow, you might...”

He trailed off, because there was a mounting sound of shouts of alarm and panic. The shouts were getting louder with every moment, and Wiegraf turned towards the door.

It swung open, and Radia stumbled through the doorway. Her red hair was greasy, her clothing torn and ragged and burnt, and her tired eyes were underscored by dark bags. She staggered into the room, with soldiers crowding around behind her.

“Radia?” Wiegraf said. He attempted to grab her by the shoulders, but she shuddered at his touch, ducked past him and sank against a crate, without looking at him or anyone else in the room.

Wiegraf stared at her. He looked around the room—even at Teta, who barely noticed. Because the last time she had seen Radia she had been proud and strong and fierce and above all else kind even

in her anger. Because in the thick of a dangerous place where Teta had been terrified and hurt, Radia had been a moment's rest and comfort and security.

Now she looked broken and hollowed out. She looked like the wounded on the Plateau, the dying in the Plague tents. She looked like a woman who'd lost everything.

Wiegraf knelt in front of Radia, but made no move to touch her. Radia's eyelids were fluttering.

"Radia," Wiegraf said. "What's become of Milly...of Captain Miluda?"

Radia's eyelids flickered open. There was silence in the mill, broken only by the creaking of the gears. She stared at Wiegraf for a long time, blinking slowly.

"Dead," she croaked.

A ripple of gasps. Wiegraf didn't move.

"How?" Wiegraf asked.

Radia looked over Wiegraf's shoulder at Teta. She didn't seem to see anyone else in the room. Wiegraf craned his neck to follow her gaze.

"Brother," Radia sighed. Her eyelids were fluttering again. "Her...broth..."

She slumped where she sat, her eyelids closed. Her breath came in the even metronome of sleep.

Wiegraf stood up slowly. Teta felt ice in her veins. She stared at his impassive back, her eyes flickering towards the door crammed with soldiers. No way out. No safety. No hope.

"Gregory," Wiegraf said. "Take Radia with you to Zeakden when you go. She's had a long few days."

"Yes...yes sir," Gregory whispered.

"I'll get everything ready," Wiegraf said.

Wiegraf turned towards the door. Teta still couldn't see his face.

"If anyone touches the girl," Wiegraf said. "I'll have whatever it was that did the touching."

He left the room. Teta sat alone in the room, filled with the low rumbling of the ever-turning mill. Gregory's eyes were on her.

"Your brother, Beoulve?" he said. "How? Zalbaag's heading towards Zeakden from the south, and I don't think you've got a Healer who can fix what I did to Dycedarg that quick."

Teta shook her head, barely looking at Gregory or Drew. Her eyes were on Radia, her heart aching in her chest. Radia still thought Teta was Ramza's sister so...so didn't that mean Ramza had killed Miluda? And she'd been so sure...

And how was she supposed to feel about the death of Miluda Folles? About the woman whose hands had been around her neck, left her with bruises she could still feel? How was she supposed to

feel when she heard the pain in Wiegraf's voice? When she recognized that pain, because she felt it roaring to life in her own heart, an inferno that threatened to consume her?

Ramza had killed Miluda, but what had become of him afterwards? What had become of Delita? Was he dead? Was he...

She'd lost her parents. Did she have to lose her brothers, too?

There were angry eyes on her from all sides. She should have felt in mortal peril, whatever Wiegraf's words of protection. But she was lost now, lost in questions. What the hell had Radia seen?

Gradually, the soldiers filtered out of the room. Gregory stayed behind longest, glaring at her, but Drew pulled him from the room, and soon it was just Teta and Radia.

Teta rose from her seat, pulling her blanket with her. She draped it over the sleeping woman, who turned, grunted softly, and then resumed her easy breathing. Teta moved back across the room, folding her arms protectively across her chest to try and ward off the hold. And the grinding mill turned on, and on, and on.

After awhile, the door opened again. Wiegraf entered the room, and made straight for her. Teta stiffened, but did not pull away.

"Your brother," Wiegraf said. She could see his face now, lined and craggy, as imposing as the mountains off to the south. There was no trace of kindness in his eyes.

"I'm sorry-" she started, because she didn't know what else to say.

"She choked you," Wiegraf said. "You're sorry?"

Teta opened her mouth, unsure of what she intended to say. Miluda had hurt her worse than any of her captors, but Wiegraf had still lost a sister.

While she searched for words, Wiegraf said, "Here's the problem I'm having. There are four Beoulve children, and the three I'm met were blonde and fair. Your hair and skin are darker. Now, *maybe* I'd buy it's because Alma Beoulve was from a different mother, but so was Ramza Beoulve, and I'm having a hard time believing that he can look like his brothers while you look like none of them. You follow me?"

Oh, Teta followed him, alright. Her heart was beating rabbit-quick in her chest, and her throat felt very dry, and her fingertips felt fuzzy with weakness.

"You're not a Beoulve, are you?" Wiegraf asked.

What was she supposed to say? Cling to the lie that had kept her alive thus far? Tell him the truth, now that the truth was exposed? But his sister was dead and there was a blade on his hip and he could cut her down so easily and-

"It's alright," Wiegraf said. "It got you this far, didn't it?" He studied her for a moment, then

asked, "Who are you?"

"No one," she croaked.

"I doubt that very much," Wiegraf said.

"I...lady-in-waiting," Teta said. "I...I guess."

"For the real Alma Beoulve?" Wiegraf asked.

Teta nodded. Wiegraf pursed his lips and looked over his shoulder at Radia. "Did she know?" Wiegraf asked.

The pieces clicked together. Wiegraf had solved the mystery, but not for her sake. He was looking for the answer to a question. Who was her brother?

"No," Teta said. It was true, of course, but she still felt a pang of guilt. She was betraying Ramza. She was betraying Alma. But if Delita was still alive, she didn't want to turn Wiegraf Folles upon him.

"I see," Wiegraf said. "So it was Ramza, after all." He stood up and turned to go.

"Wait!" Teta called.

Wiegraf stopped. Teta swallowed. It felt like her whole body was trembling.

"My brother, he..." Teta said. "He...he looks like me. Please, don't..."

"I met him," Wiegraf said. "He's funny." He studied Teta for a time, then said, "I can't make any promises. But I'll try."

"Thank you," she said. "And I'm...really. I'm sorry." And she was surprised to find she meant it. Whatever Miluda had done to her, Wiegraf didn't deserve to lose his sister.

Wiegraf nodded. "It must've been hard," Wiegraf said. "But you did well. You're safe now."

He left the room. Teta sank back against the hay, ignoring it as it scratched at her. She still felt so feeble, so weak. Attacked, and betrayed, and betraying. It was so hard to stay alive. It was so...

She must have slept again. This time, she was awoken by a rattling *boom* that thundered even over the grinding mill around her. She blinked the sleep from her eyes as the door swung open and Gregory entered the mill, with Drew and Foxe at his side. Drew moved towards Radia, slinging her over one shoulder.

"Get up," Gregory said.

Teta stared at him, her brain lagging sluggishly, struggling to make sense of what she was seeing and hearing.

"What?" she said.

"I won't ask again," Gregory said, and drew his sword.

Teta's heart lurched, bolts of fear bringing her fully conscious and alert. She pulled herself back

against the hay, staring at him. A part of her didn't understand. A part of her understood all too well.

“Wiegraf said-” she started, though she had so little hope.

“Wiegraf?” Gregory repeated. “Your brother killed Miluda, and you...” He moved towards her, half-raising his sword. His eyes were wide and wild. He looked so pale and so frightened, not at all the commanding man who'd attacked the Beoulve Manor and kept his men in check.

“I'm not dying,” he said. “*We're* not dying. And if you fuck with me, I'll lock you in here with Foxe.”

Foxe leered at her over his shoulder. “Could do it anyways,” Foxe said. “Give me a little-”

Teta rose to her feet and moved to the door, trying to marshal some pretense of calm or control as she felt her thoughts shrieking, her body tinny and distant and empty. She was...she was so close! She could have...she...!

Stay alive stay alive stay alive

Stay alive for what? So that Foxe can have his way with you when their resentment finally boils over? So they can slit your throat when they try and bargain with your life and find out who you really are? How does this end? How do you possibly survive this?

She walked outside on her own power, because that was all she could do. Because she would not be carried or manhandled, because even that small pretense of control was something to cling to. And maybe there was a little bit of those childhood stories, the idea that she could seize the moment and escape if she just kept her wits about her.

After all her time in the mill, the sunlight hurt her eyes. The tents were gone—the soldiers had ridden off. No trace of the wounded remained, save for a few burning pyres hosting the smoldering dead.

Thunder sounded again. No, not thunder: more like cannon fire, or the booming blast of Dycedarg's magic shattering masonry in the Manor. On a hill to the south, she saw a flash of bright light, and saw a portion of the hill explode up into a rain of dust and dirt. She shielded her eyes against the bright and burning sun, struggled to make out the human figures fighting atop that broken hill, and-

And saw that it was Wiegraf's sword against Delita's.

Her mouth opened. Her veins thrilled with electric relief. “DELITA!” she cried, and started to run towards him.

He looked away from his duel. “TETA!” he roared, his voice loud in spite of the distance.

Before she could move any further, an arm pulled across her shoulders, and a sword gleamed just below her eyes.

“Shout again, and I'll take your tongue,” Gregory said.

Ice radiated out from Teta's bones. Gregory pulled her in an awkward shuffle towards the chocobos, who were fretting and balking at the sounds of battle in the distance. But as Gregory tried to haul her atop the bird, she twisted in his grasp.

“I warned you-” Gregory snarled

“Do it!” she cried, forcing fire and fury into her voice, pretending to be the noblewoman she claimed to be, because her brother was right there, so close, because for the first time in days she had reason to hope and because she was so outraged that this coward had the unmitigated gall to try and take that hope away from her. “Do it!”

Gregory stared at her, his face pale, his mouth slightly open. His grip weakened, just for a moment.

Then his sword hilt rose high and hammered down against the top of her head. The world exploded into a hot, star-spattered darkness.

Chapter 21: The Wheels of History

...the Ydorans spread their rule by the edge of their blades, and imagine they are invincible because all kneel before them. But men who are compelled to kneel learn to move on their knees, so they may strike when their enemies feel safest. Only when all men stand and speak as equals can there be true peace. Only when all men recognize their part in God's Kingdom can His Kingdom be realized.
-Germinas' Gospel, "Ajora's Sermon in Goug"

Wiegraf was waiting for them at the crest of a hill.

They knew they had been spotted. Reis had spied the scout who'd seen them, watched him dart back behind the hills. Ramza, Beowulf, and Delita had loosened their swords, but as they drew closer to a little prairie dominated by a turning white windmill and littered with the refuse of a small army, they found only a single man waiting for them. Only the brother of the woman they'd killed.

So many dead behind them. Gustav, slain for his crimes by the man in front of them. Miluda and her Valkyries, burned upon a funeral pyre. And all the wounded who had fallen dead along the winding rut they had followed, that led them to this place. They had come so far, walking on aching legs besides Violet, heaped high with their gear. They had seen so many corpses, as the chill wind blew out of the mountains.

"Beoulve," Wiegraf said, his naked sword in hand and his glaring eyes fixed on Ramza. "I hear you killed my sister."

"He did no such thing," Delita said.

Wiegraf eyes widened in surprise. "You?"

"Me," Delita said.

Wiegraf stared at Delita, then looked towards Ramza. "Is this true?"

"No," Ramza said. "It was-"

"Ramza!" Delita barked.

Wiegraf sighed, the point of his sword lowering. "It *is* true," Wiegraf said. "And you were still going to take the blame, Beoulve?"

"Your men took his sister," Ramza said. "What choice did he have?"

"Choice?" Wiegraf repeated. His eyes drifted dreamily between them, finally settling on Delita again.

"I spoke with your sister," Wiegraf said, looking at Delita. "She's quite remarkable." He jerked his head to the mill behind him. "She's to be left there, when the last of my men depart."

Everything felt strange and surreal, like a fever dream. Ramza was tired, and his legs and arms ached. Wiegraf was letting Teta go? Had their long ride been for nothing? Had their fight against the Valkyries been for nothing?

“Thank you,” Delita said.

Wiegraf grimaced. “I will not accept the thanks of my sister's killer,” Wiegraf growled. “I didn't do it for you. The act disgraced us. I do not intend to treat people as pawns. I won't sink to the level of your brother, Beoulve.”

Ramza stared at him. He remembered the disbelief and quiet resignation with which Miluda and Wiegraf had looked at him in the Cellar. When Ramza had tried to convince them to come with him to Igros, because his brothers could broker a peace.

“What do you mean?” Ramza asked.

Wiegraf looked up to the sky. The corners of his lips twitched. “My sister's killers want a lesson in politics,” he mused. “How did I get here?”

“Your sister tried to kill us,” Beowulf said, stepping forwards with his swords drawn.

“You sent her and her soldiers into the reaper's scythe,” Wiegraf retorted. “What would you have done, in her shoes?”

“Argus is as a fucking bastard,” Beowulf growled.

“Who?” Wiegraf asked.

“The blonde asshole,” Delit said. “With the bow.”

“Ah,” Wiegraf said. “He's responsible?”

“Ramza asked for a safe route,” Delita said. “He trusted Argus when he gave him one.”

Wiegraf shook his head. “Even if I believe you,” Wiegraf said. “Does that absolve you of killing her?”

“She was a soldier,” Beowulf said. “She attacked us. She knew the risks.”

“She was my sister,” Wiegraf said.

“Sister or not,” Beowulf said. “If she didn't want to die, she shouldn't have tried to kill us.”

“Wait,” Ramza said. “Wait, just...” He didn't understand. This fight felt more fruitless than even the battle with the Valkyries. Teta was just beyond them, answers were just beyond them, peace was just beyond them, if Wiegraf would just listen...!

“What, Beoulve?” Wiegraf said.

“Please,” Ramza said. “What...what exactly did my brothers do?”

Wiegraf studied Ramza. Ramza looked at him, hoping to hear the answers he needed.

“How did Gustav take the Marquis?” Wiegraf asked.

“He...” Ramza shook his head, puzzled. “What?”

“How was it done?” Wiegraf asked. “How did the Marquis Messam Elmdor, a warrior of renown, traveling covertly to discuss joint operations with Prince Bestrald Larg under the escort of a cadre of knights, fall into the hands of Gustav and his men?”

“He was taken by men disguised as Hokuten soldiers,” Delita said, while Ramza tried to piece together the larger meaning behind the question.

“Exactly right!” Wiegraf said. “A clever plan, too. Gustav was once a member in their ranks, after all. Perhaps he remembers their patterns, their disciplines, and their modes of operation. Knows enough to secret himself into their ranks to achieve his black aims. It's a plausible story, as long as you don't look too closely.”

“What do you mean?” Reis asked, her voice calm.

“Do you know how long Gustav and his little band were attacking caravans?” Wiegraf asked. “Taking what they needed, while they tried to find the Marquis?”

“How could we-” Ramza started.

“Three weeks, right?” Beowulf said. His brow was furrowed in concentration. “Like...like one a week for a few weeks?”

“Something like that,” Wiegraf said. “About a month, all told. Slaughtering caravans in Hokuten cloaks. And here, the lie falls apart.”

“What lie?” Delita asked.

Wiegraf held up his free hand, ticking off his fingers as he made his points. “One man using his knowledge of the Hokuten to infiltrate their ranks...difficult, but possible. A band of thirty wearing Hokuten cloaks, operating in Hokuten territory, for over a month? Were they never challenged? Did no friendly passing knight ask them their orders? Did no true Hokuten notice them? Why not? The whole of Gallione swarmed with Hokuten knights and their lackeys, trying to put a stop to the Death Corps, but one man steals thirty Hokuten cloaks, plays pretend while killing merchants and minor nobles, and the Hokuten are blind to it?” He shook his head. “This ploy could not have functioned without the help of the Hokuten. Not one dissatisfied member, either. This was a conspiracy that had to extend to the commanders of the Hokuten itself.”

Ramza and Delita exchanged shocked looks. They'd talked about this, hadn't they? They'd wondered who among the Hokuten had stolen thirty cloaks to serve Gustav's aims. But why had the larger points escaped them?

“You're...you're saying my brothers...” Ramza couldn't bring himself to finish.

Wiegraf sighed. “Why were the Corps discharged without pay, Beoulve?”

“Gallione had to pay its part of the war reparations,” Ramza said uncertainly, and the words felt like lies as he spoke them. “It was either...either pay the Corps or...”

Or what? The line had always been the protection of the kingdom—keep the orphanages open, keep the people fed and protected. But had that really been true?

“You're not entirely wrong,” Wiegraf admitted. “It was a question of priorities, as it is with all rulers. Do you value your own pleasure, and make yourself a hedonist without parallel, wasting your wealth on wine and women? Are you a man of the people, who guarantees the well-being of your subjects whatever the cost? Or are you a prince of ambition, with your eyes on a loftier throne?” Wiegraf smiled, though there was no trace of humor in it. “The Corps was discharged so that the Hokuten could be preserved. So that Prince Larg would have his personal army intact.”

“He wouldn't do that,” Beowulf said.

“Why not?” Wiegraf asked. “His infant nephew is heir to the throne, and King Ondoria grows weaker with every day. Illness or his wife's poison, it doesn't matter: Queen Louveria is already in control of the capitol, and will be in control of the country before long. The Larg family will rule Ivalice, so long as they are strong enough to deny all challengers.”

“What does this have to do with my brothers?” Ramza demanded.

Wiegraf chuckled. It was a grim, awful sound, like rocks scraping against each other. “You're not stupid, Beoulve,” he said. “You know.”

“It's not true,” Ramza said. He wasn't sure what he was denying, but whatever monstrous accusation Wiegraf was making, it couldn't be true. It couldn't.

“It is,” Wiegraf said. “It was Dycedarg that had the Corps discharged, Dycedarg that made sure his Hokuten were paid and loyal while Gallione starved, Dycedarg who painted us as bandits when we fought for what was promised us, Dycedarg who gave Gustav the tools he needed to take the Marquis!”

“No!” Ramza cried, because each accusation seemed to crack his world. Dycedarg, faithful servant of their liege lord, keeper of the family who made difficult choices? No, he couldn't be...surely...

“Why?” Delita asked.

“Why, killer?” Wiegraf asked. “You know why. East Ivalice has the weight of numbers, but they were the frontlines of the War. It'll be hard enough for them to make a challenge against Larg and his sister, but harder still if the Marquis is killed by bandits. Limberry will fall to pieces struggling to pick an heir, and the only man strong enough to challenge him will be crippled.”

“Duke Goltanna,” Delita said.

“And his loyal Nanten,” Wiegraf agreed. “The Corps were an inconvenience, making Gallione appear weak since Dycedarg refused to fritter his men away on those he consider beneath him, so he tried to kill two birds with one stone. Let the Corps kill the Marquis, and let Limberry tear us apart in the name of vengeance. A fine plan, no? The wheels of history would put an end to Limberry and Corps alike.”

“Stop it,” Ramza whispered.

“Stop what, Beoulve?” Wiegraf asked. “Are you so weak of will that you cannot even bear the truth?”

“My brothers...they...” Ramza tried to find the words, tried to express that sense of awe, of always falling short. Surely Dycedarg wouldn't do such things, sacrifice justice and service in the name of greater power, surely...

But didn't it all make sense? Dycedarg's rage when they'd returned home with the Marquis safe and sound, Dycedarg's confusion over Ramza refusing to kill...

“You've a big heart, Beoulve,” Wiegraf said. “But a narrow gaze. The Corps was no threat to Gallione. It was a threat to Larg and his Hokuten. It was a threat to the men who will cling to power, whatever the cost. And your brother plays that game better than most.”

Ramza did not have the energy or will to protest. He still ached, from battle and from marching. And the idea that Dycedarg had enabled Gustav...that Dycedarg had been responsible for the Corps' rebellion in the first place...

“Now,” Wiegraf said. “My quarrel is with my sister's killer. The rest of you may stand aside. You may even take his sister with you, once my men have left.”

“I fought her, too,” Beowulf said, stepping in front of Delita.

“As did I,” Reis said, stepping besides Beowulf.

“Both of you, get back,” Delita said, shouldering his way between them. “Save my sister. Please. It's pointless, otherwise.” He raised his sword. “I deserve this.”

“For fighting in a battle?” Beowulf scoffed. “We're soldiers. This is what we do.”

“You are the armed, ignorant thugs of a regime that would grind the rest of this kingdom beneath its heel so it could stand upon their broken bodies,” Wiegraf said. “Soldiers? Ha! *We* were soldiers.”

“Big talk,” Beowulf said.

Ramza remained where he was. Everything felt fragile and flimsy, like the color had left the world. Hopeless. Powerless. Pointless.

“Enough,” Wiegraf said, and swung his sword. It shimmered, and that shimmering was

transfigured into a burst of white force. Ramza's instincts took over where his reeling mind could not: he flung himself to the ground, as fragments of stone and clods of dirt rained down around him. Somewhere, he heard a strangled squawk.

As the ringing in his ears faded away, Ramza heard the clashing of metal against metal. He lifted his head from the earth and saw Delita, blade locked with Wiegraf's. Delita's armor looked singed, but otherwise he seemed none the worse for wear, in spite of the smoking crater Wiegraf had left in the side of the hill. They blurred against each other, so the air was filled with the ringing of sword against sword

“Violet!” Beowulf cried, somewhere behind Ramza.

Ramza craned his head to look: Beowulf was by his chocobo's side, stroking its head. The side of its neck was soaked in flood, and it was warbling softly, its big glassy eyes rolling in its face. A sliver of stone was buried in its neck, spilling blood into Beowulf's lap.

The bird cooed miserably, tried to lift its head, and slumped back to the ground, motionless.

“Damn you!” Beowulf cried, and flung himself away from the bird.

“Wulfie, no!” Reis shouted, lifting a hand to stop him, but he was already beyond her grasp. He pounded up the hill, one sword in each hand.

“A soldier!” Wiegraf shouted, kicking Delita away. Delita lost his footing, slipped and rolled down the hill. Ramza cried out and rushed towards him. “Who offers no pity for my sister, but mourns his fallen bird!”

Delita stopped rolling. Ramza reached him, helped pull him to his feet. Delita was staggering, and now that Ramza was closer he could see that Delita was more badly hurt than he'd realized—one sleeve had been burned away entirely, and the skin beneath was red and blistered.

“We should run,” Ramza mumbled.

“Can't,” Delita said. “She's...she's close.”

“I've seen your kind before, boy!” Wiegraf bellowed. Ramza turned to look, saw Wiegraf driving Beowulf back across the smoldering hilltop, step by step. Beowulf struck with all his strength, slashed wildly, but Wiegraf's solitary sword kept him at bay, precise and perfect. “You're a child playing at war! You've never thought of the lives you cut down as human! They're just characters in your story! It never even occurred to you that you would die, did it?”

“I'm a warrior!” Beowulf yelled, but there was something pitiful about it—something in the ragged, out-of-breath way he protested, a whine of desperation in his voice.

“You're playing pretend,” Wiegraf sneered. “But this is a battlefield, boy. There's no place for pretenders.”

Wiegraf twisted, his sword darting out, and Beowulf staggered backwards with a bloody wound in his chest.

“No!” cried Ramza and Delita together.

“NO!” howled Reis, and the shadow of those vast wings appeared around her once again, and a jet of flame smashed towards Wiegraf. In answer, Wiegraf raised his shimmering sword, and blasted back her flames with bright, booming force. Another spout of broken earth, stone and flaming grass and smoking dirt raining down around them, and perhaps Ramza would fall just as Violet had fallen, victim of a casual sliver of stone, but he was running without thinking because Beowulf was tumbling through the air, and Delita was charging towards Wiegraf again.

Ramza caught Beowulf before he hit the ground. The taller boy was awkward in his arms, his face pale, his lips flecked with blood. He was mumbling something, but Ramza couldn't understand him through the ringing in his ears. Beowulf breathed in ragged, rabbit-quick gasps between his mumbled words.

As Delita and Wiegraf clashed again atop the hill, Ramza retreated to Reis and Violet. Reis was panting, but she grabbed Beowulf from Ramza's arms, cradled him as he lowered him to the earth. She rested his head in her lap, held one hand palm out just above his head and crooked the finger of her other hand. She slashed down with the crooked finger, just as she had when she'd healed them after their battle with the Valkyries: Ramza got a vague impression of scales and claws, and there was a shallow gash in Reis' palm. She lowered the wound to Beowulf's lips, and the blood that dripped from her hand into Beowulf's mouth glittered with colors Ramza couldn't quite describe as it fell.

“He'll be alright,” Reis whispered. “He will.” It sounded like a prayer.

“DELITA!”

Ramza's head jerked away from his injured friend. The voice was distant, but unmistakable. He had known Teta since he was a child.

“TETA!” Delita roared, and for a moment he was faster than Wiegraf, stronger than Wiegraf, driving the older man back across the hill in a flurry of expert slashes, a better swordsman than he'd ever been upon the Academy training grounds. Ramza circled around below the hill, until it was no longer between him and the distant windmill.

A small tableau of distant figures, clustered around a small flock of chocobos. Ramza couldn't quite make out her face, but he knew it was Teta at once—that long, clay-red hair left no mistake. She struggled in the grasp of her captors. A sword-hilt rose and fell, and Teta slumped unconscious in one man's grasp. He flung her over the side of his bird, and the small band began to climb onto their mounts.

“NO!” Delita shrieked, all rage and anguish.

“You're not going anywhere!” Wiegraf spat, and the clashing of their swords accelerated again, faster and faster. Ramza threw one look over his shoulder, saw Delita being driven back up the hill.

“Ramza!” Delita shouted. “Please!”

Ramza nodded, pushed his exhausted, aching body into a stumbling sprint, faster and faster, because Teta was so close, and they had fought so hard and risked so much to get here, because he could still feel the anguish in Delita's voice mirrored inside Ramza. He could taste hot metal at the back of his throat, but every stride took him closer to Teta.

But they were mounted, and the chocobos began to run, and Ramza reached back for one of his arrows, but they were in the saddlebags still slung around Violet's corpse, along with his bow, and he was close, so close he could see the livid bruise forming on Teta's head, but then the chocobos were pushed to full sprint and Ramza couldn't catch them, no matter how hard he tried.

They pounded off, leaving dust behind them as they raced towards the Lenalian mountains. Ramza kept running long after he should have given up, hoping that one bird would stumble, that Teta would slip from her captor's mount. But no such miracles occurred. The small band got farther and farther away from him. There was another bird riding towards them, a solitary chocobo and its solitary rider.

And Ramza turned away, his chest aching, icicles stabbing down into the depths of his lungs, his legs trembling with effort, but he kept running, because he might not be able to save Teta but he could still save Delita. And Delita needed saving, because his momentary surge of vigor faded, and now his sword was clumsy, barely keeping Wiegraf back as Wiegraf drove him up the hill with frenzied thrusts and slashes, and Ramza didn't want to kill anyone but Delita had killed Miluda to save him and now Wiegraf was out for his blood and Ramza wasn't going to lose his best friend.

He charged up the hill, his sword drawn. Wiegraf and Delita were fighting at the crest of the hill, fencing between the two craters Wiegraf had carved into the earth. Delita was flagging and failing, his face pale, his blows slow. He stumbled backwards before Wiegraf's onslaught. The sword dropped from his fingers, and he dodged away from Wiegraf's stabbing blade.

“WIEGRAF!” Ramza shouted, with all his frustration and confusion, with all his rage that for all they'd done and all they'd been through they still couldn't save Teta.

Wiegraf turned, and snapped up his blade. Wiegraf was visibly tired—he had wounded Beowulf and driven Delita to the brink of exhaustion, but he had not done these things without effort. His dark blonde hair was limp with sweat against his forehead, and his sword was not quite as fast as Miluda's had been when she had nearly killed Ramza. But there was still that faint shimmer to Wiegraf's blade.

Ramza watched it warily, afraid of any sudden spark of white that might blast him into ruin like the craters on opposite sides of the hill. Perhaps Wiegraf was too tired to use the strange technique, but there was always peculiar force behind his blows: those shimmers would intensify, sparks of white that gave his sword the weight of an axe or a hammer.

The blade dropped with one of those forceful shimmers, and sent Ramza's sword flying down the hill, leaving his hand tingling with the aftershocks. Wiegraf stabbed towards him, and Ramza twisted, kicking Wiegraf in the side. The man stumbled down the hill, and Ramza rolled away.

"Ramza!" Delita shouted, tossing his sword. Ramza caught the blade, spun around, and parried Wiegraf's rising slash.

"You warned me, Beoulve!" Wiegraf hissed, as they dueled across the hill. "Why?"

"I don't want to kill you!" Ramza said.

Wiegraf halted, his sword raised defensively. "Another child playing pretend," he growled.

"You don't deserve this," Ramza said, on guard himself. "Neither did she. Neither did anyone!"

And was Dycedarg really responsible for this? For the discharging of the Corps, and the taking of the Marquis? Could all this really be laid at his feet?

Wiegraf snorted. "Justice and Service, eh, Beoulve? Noble goals, but how to seek them, when ambition and greed rule the hearts of the powerful? Your precious words require champions quite unlike your brother. I think your father really might have been one of them. Do you intend to be the same?"

Ramza shook his head. "I'm not like my father," Ramza said. No doubt about that. If it were Balbanes, he wouldn't have believed Argus. If it were Balbanes, he would have found some way to defeat Miluda without killing her.

"He's a hard example to live up to," Wiegraf conceded. He pivoted on his heel, looking between Ramza and Delita, unarmed at the top of the hill. "But you're not like your brothers, either. Where does that leave you, Beoulve?"

Ramza didn't know.

"Sir!"

The shout was tinny with distance, a new voice that Ramza didn't recognize. He hesitated to take his eyes off of Wiegraf.

Wiegraf seemed to have no such concerns. He turned his back on Ramza and Delita at once. Ramza hesitated, then tossed the sword back to Delita, underhand and hilt first. Delita caught it, and Ramza retreated down the hill to grab his sword.

“Report!” Wiegraf ordered, while Ramza and Delita rearmed themselves.

The source of the shout was the lone rider in a green cloak who'd been coming from the same direction that Teta's captors had ridden. He halted a little ways away, eyeing Ramza and Delita nervously.

“Sir?” the rider said quizzically.

“Report,” Wiegraf repeated firmly.

“Hokuten forces have nearly reached Zeakden,” the man said. “Zalbaag Beoulve leads them.”

“Damn, already?” Wiegraf hissed. “They don't waste time, do they?” He whistled, and there was an answering cry from behind the windmill turning on one side. A golden chocobo slipped out from behind the mill and began trotting towards them.

“What are you doing?” Delita said.

“I would like vengeance,” Wiegraf said. “But I would rather see the Corps survive, and my men won't reach safety if the Hokuten take Zeakden.” He turned to face Delita. “I'm sorry. I gave orders for your sister to be left behind.”

“Like I believe you!” Delita snarled.

“Believe or not,” Wiegraf said. “The truth does not require your belief.” The bird was closer—a fine, tall, golden creature, with intelligent orange eyes. “Gregory rides for Zeakden,” Wiegraf said. “And he still believes his hostage to be a Beoulve. He won't kill her.”

“Wait!” Ramza said. “You're not...my brothers...it's not true!” It couldn't be true. The world wouldn't make sense, if it was true. Or would the world make too much sense? Would all the pieces he hadn't quite understood align and click together, if they weren't the shadows who he'd always feared he could never live up to?

Wiegraf sighed and shook his head. “You've a big heart, Beoulve,” he said. “But the world isn't like the stories. Justice and Service do not win out just because you believe. They require champions with open eyes.”

The bird had drawn close enough: Wiegraf swung up onto its back in one fluid motion, and rode away at a brisk trot, and Wiegraf and the messenger headed towards the mountains. Ramza stared after him, his head spinning from what Wiegraf had said, his heart pounding and chest heaving as he struggled for breath, feeling weak with the after-rush of adrenaline still drizzling through his system. He looked towards Delita, whose swordpoint had drooped to the earth. He looked like he was barely keeping his feet.

“Are you-” Ramza started, and Delita turned away from him, staring off in the direction his sister's captors had ridden.

Ramza shook his head and moved back down the hill towards Reis and Beowulf, sheathing his sword as he went. The front of Beowulf's shirt was soaked in blood, but the wound had already clotted. He was still pale, but his breathing wasn't nearly so labored.

"Is he alright?" Ramza asked.

Reis stroked Beowulf's hair. "He will be," she said. "But he can't...he can't go any farther."

Ramza looked at Delita, standing atop the hill and staring pointedly to the south.

"Reis," he said. "I think we have to--"

"I know," Reis said. "Don't worry about us." She lifted her voice. "Delita!" Delita didn't move. Reis sighed and said, "Ramza. We've got to get Beowulf until he's ready to move."

Ramza nodded, stumbled up the hill as his legs burned in protest. "Delita," he said. Delita didn't answer, and Ramza tried to clasp his shoulder. Delita shook off his touch, taking a few staggering steps down towards the mountains.

"Del!" Ramza shouted, grabbing him and wheeling him around. Delita tripped backwards, then lifted his sword so it was pointed towards Ramza's throat. Ramza froze, staring at that sword, his mouth open. The world cracked again: he thought it might break to pieces any moment.

Delita's eyes widened, and the sword dropped from his hand and clattered on the cratered hill. He buried his face in his hands. "I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Ramza said. But of course, it wasn't okay. That sword had been pointed at him. Delita had pointed a sword at him. Wiegraf had tried to kill them while sharing more of himself than Ramza's brothers ever had. He'd let them go, because justice and righteousness were more important than vengeance. Teta had been so close....!

"It's okay," Ramza repeated. He slung an arm around Delita's shoulders, pulled his friend close, and guided him back down the hill.

Reis, in the time they'd been talking, had set Beowulf up on a bedroll and started pulling bags off of Violet's corpse. Ramza and Delita helped her unload. Ramza couldn't resist stroking the feathers on the dead bird's face. She'd served them so faithfully, from the Academy to the Cellar to here. Ramza couldn't fault Beowulf for his rage.

They left Violet on the hill, and together hauled Beowulf inside the windmill the Corps had abandoned. Delita looked around, his eyes watering. "She was here," he muttered. "She was..."

"I know," Ramza said, as the gears churned ever on.

They finished packing their own bags and helping Reis adjust the gear they were leaving with her. Beowulf had not stirred through all their efforts.

"How is he still asleep?" Ramza asked.

"I did that," Reis said. "Should help him heal faster."

Ramza and Delita finished packing their bags with food, tents, and other gear. They turned to face Reis. Ramza wasn't sure what he wanted to say.

"Hands out," she said.

Delita and Ramza exchanged confused looks, but obeyed without questioning. The whisking, scaly claw slashed again: lines of fire burned up their palms. Ramza hissed through his teeth. Delita made no sound at all. Reis extended her own hand, cut open the clotting line there, and clasped hands with each of them, pressing cut against cut.

Ramza felt the tiredness wash out of his bones, the tinny hollow feeling of hard exercise and hard fighting replaced with substance and strength. Reis wobbled unsteadily on her feet.

"Are you..." Ramza started.

"What?" Delita said, at the same time.

"Bit of strength," Reis said. "Keep you...on your feet. Won't need sleep. She's close." Reis was pale, but her eyes were set in a determined glare. "Get her back, boys."

Ramza nodded. "Take care of him," he said, nodding towards Beowulf.

"Like I'd ever do anything else," Reis said.

Ramza hugged Reis, and she hugged him, and they remained like that for a moment, both barely on their feet, both reeling, taking comfort in each other. But Delita was already halfway out the door, and Ramza had to hurry to catch up. They strode past the smoldering fires with the half-burned bodies, and the refuse and latrine pits, the stinking legacy of a camp of the sick, the desperate, and the dying.

"Ramza," Delita said. "I'm...I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Ramza said. "If it was Alma-"

He cut himself off, too late. He saw Delita stiffen, from the corner of his gaze. Ramza felt the same strange, confused hurt gnawing inside him. If it was Alma, the Hokuten would have been here, riding down her captors. Because the Beoulses were men of such power and influence. The men who fought and killed for the cause of Justice and Service, and not petty ambition or greed. Never men who would betray their oaths and hurt the weak for the sake of convenience and power.

Right?

Ramza and Delita didn't speak, as they left the mill behind them, and trudged towards the shadowy bulk of the mountains, grey with the promise of weighty snowclouds.

Chapter 22: Cycle of Vengeance

The darkness did not hold her long. In spite of the pain, and in spite of her fear, she fought her way free, because there was a hope of escape and freedom, tantalizingly close.

But by the time Teta was conscious again, the windmill was gone from her sight. She was splayed across the back of Gregory's chocobo, her legs and ankles bound again, a rough length of cloth tied around her head and clenched between her jaws, so she could taste the smothering dust and must of it. The air was brisk, and afternoon was giving way to evening.

What was she supposed to do now? Roll free? Idiotic, she'd just hurt herself, and they'd be on her in moments.

She felt like crying. She'd been so close. She'd been so fucking close, and now-

No. Just like the Academy, there was no time for self-pity. Weakness would be seized upon, if she showed it.

And what if Delita were dead? What if there was no rescue coming? What if...

No no no no no. Stop it. Survive. A moment will come, if you are vigilant, and you are careful. If...if Delita is dead...

He's not he's not Wiegraf said he would try he said.

That didn't matter. Think of the facts, Teta. If Delita is alive, he will still come after you. If...if he's not, than Wiegraf is alive, and he'll see you free.

You selfish bitch.

Selfish. Her brother could be dead, and all she could think about was her own skin.

I can't save him.

No. She was so powerless. For the first time in her life, she really understood Alma. She wanted a sword in hand, power enough to put an end to all these tragedies.

And what would spring from that act of vengeful righteousness? Assassins raiding the Beoulve Manor? Ramza Beoulve killing Miluda as he tried to save her? How much violence would be born from one swing of her blade? How many more brothers, sisters, fathers, daughters, mothers, and sons would be left grieving?

So hard to keep ahold of her thoughts. Drifting away into the darkness. It was so hard to breathe, her mouth stuffed with cloth, her nose struggling to take in the air she needed.

She drifted in and out of the dark, and then in between gradients of night as the sun set and the heavy snowclouds blanketed the stars. The air kept getting colder, so Teta was shuddering with it, so that her joints felt achingly tight with the promise of frost on the air.

“Who goes there!” called a voice from the pre-dawn twilight, startling Teta so much she almost rolled off the chocobo.

“Gregory Levigne!” shouted Gregory.

“Ride on!”

They rode farther, and Teta could hear the distant crashing of the ocean against the cliffs. As dawn broke, their destination loomed ahead. A fortress of crumbling black stone, with cannon ports pressing out towards the sea. Planks of wood and metal had been plastered here and there to reinforce the ruined fort.

Gregory slid off the side of his mount, then grabbed her by the shoulders and threw her to the ground. She hit against her shoulder, hard: fire scorched out, down her arm and into her throat. She screamed into the gag.

Rough hands pulled the gag away from her mouth. She gasped, in pain and in gratitude for the sweet freedom of breathing, and cold air flooded her lungs and throat, and Gregory pressed his foot against her chest.

“He called you Teta, Beoulve,” Gregory said. “And you answered to it.”

Teta's blood felt colder than the winter air.

“Who are you?” Gregory asked, his sword in hand, his eyes wild.

What to say? She wasn't supposed to be here. Wiegraf had told her...this man was...

But the promised protection of the powerful meant nothing if your protectors weren't there when you needed them. She'd learned that lesson in the Academy, when the others had come for her where Alma couldn't see. Why was she still alive, right now?

“Alma Beoulve,” she whispered.

“Yeah?” Gregory said. “So why'd you answer when he said Teta?”

“I...” Teta closed her eyes, searched for the right words. The words that would keep her alive.

“He's my lover,” she said. She almost gagged. Calling her brother her lover, but...but why else would he cry out her name so fiercely? And why else would she respond in kind? It was the only thing she could do to hide.

“And he doesn't know your name?” Gregory said.

“That's what he calls me,” Teta said.

“So what's his name?” Gregory asked.

“Delita,” Teta said. “You heard me say it.”

“What is he?” Gregory asked. “Duke? Baron? Maybe you decided to dirty yourself with a knight? Take a walk on the wild side?” His words were jagged, just like his eyes. He looked so rabid

she could almost see the foam dripping from his jaws.

“He's not...he's...” This was a difficult lie to keep up, and her head still hurt.

“Foxe,” Gregory said. “Make her talk.”

Teta felt nauseating fear rise up in her like a fog. Foxe blinked in consternation behind Gregory, his eyes flickering between his commander and Teta on the ground. “You sure?” he said.

“If she wants to change her story, let me know,” Gregory said.

Foxe's mouth spread into a leering grin, and he moved towards her with purpose, hands already reaching for her. Teta curled back against her bonds, shying away from him, as though there were any hope of escape now that even the feeble protection of her false name had been ripped away and-

And there was a shimmering, and Foxe dropped to the ground, moaning, and a red-headed woman towered over him.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” Radia asked, in a voice at once sleepy and dangerous.

A moment's precarious silence. No one moved.

“Whoever this woman is, she's lying to us,” Gregory said. “She tried to run.”

“Yeah?” Radia stepped over Foxe's body, and glared into Gregory's face. “It's funny. I was awfully tired, but I *thought* I heard Wiegraf order you to leave her.”

Gregory's face spasmed with guilt. “You...you weren't awake!”

“I'm not like you,” Radia said. “I keep my senses. See, I'm a soldier. Not a coward who kills and rapes because they're scared.”

“I didn't-!” Gregory hissed.

Radia turned away from him, and kicked Foxe in the stomach. Foxe moaned in pain, curling in on himself, and Radia reached down and drew his sword.

“I'm taking her inside,” Radia said. “Any of you fuckers try anything, you die.”

She moved towards Teta, and cut her free of her bonds. Teta gasped in pain as blood rushed back into her wrists and ankles. Radia helped her to her feet, and Teta was forced to lean on Radia as they hobbled towards the fort. Through all this, no one moved to stop her.

“Thank you,” Teta whispered.

“Least I could do,” Radia replied.

Radia helped her up a series of sloping rock steps, worn and broken from age and inattention. She led Teta across a rickety wooden bridge. A fat snowflake drifted down out of the sky as they crossed that creaking bridge. It landed, cold and wet, upon Teta's forehead. She shuddered at its touch.

Radia led them off the bridge, through the heavy wooden door secured with iron fastenings. A

soldier lurked within, staring at them with confusion. Radia brushed past him, ignoring questions that Teta couldn't hear. Everything seemed to be fading into a mental fog. Her head pounded where Gregory had hit her.

They were in a closet of some kind, empty of anyone else, heaped with crates. Teta couldn't recall how they'd gotten there. Radia was speaking, but Teta couldn't hear her.

She broke down crying all at once, and pressed her face into the stinking leather of Radia's chestplate. Radia patted her awkwardly, and Teta barely noticed the feeble attempt at reassurance, because Foxe had been closing in and her shoulder hurt and her head hurt and Delita had been right there and she was supposed to be free right now why was she here *why was she here?*

She stopped crying at some point, pressing her damp and sticky face into the place where Radia's neck met her shoulder. The other woman smelled like fire and sweat and dirt and blood and something else, something that brought all those scents together and made them pleasant, like memories she hadn't made yet. She followed that scent back to calm, and back to thoughts that clicked together and made sense. Radia had her arm curled around her, fingers stroking her upper arm.

"Heiral, huh?" Radia said.

Teta stiffened, tried to pull away from Radia, and found that Radia wasn't letting her go. It wasn't a threatening gesture: Radia's grip around her tightened in comfort and companionship, and pulled her close.

"It's okay," Radia said.

No it wasn't. Nothing was okay.

"Teta," Teta whispered, and felt something crack in her. She'd disavowed the name for so long. Wiegaf's discovery had been a shock, but then, the threat had been in her mind. Now it was real. Its shadow still hung over her.

"And your brother?" Radia asked.

"Delita," Teta said.

"He's the one who killed Miluda," Radia mused.

Teta couldn't see Radia's face where she was, but there was no malice or anger in her voice. It was just like it had been back at the Plateau: for whatever reason, Teta felt safe here.

"I'm sorry," Teta said.

"Me too," Radia said.

"How'd you find out?" Teta asked.

"He told us. Told us who he was. Who you were." Radia chuckled. "Made a lot of sense, all at once. Why you were so..."

Teta didn't know what Radia intended to say. She didn't ask.

"The Beoulve," Radia said.

"Ramza?" Teta replied.

"He didn't kill me," Radia said. "He didn't kill anyone."

Teta said nothing, though her thoughts were sparking in a dozen different directions. First to Ramza and the day in the old Beoulve estate nearly Lesalia, then back to Wiegraf, back to the Plateau, back to Alma, back to the Academy.

"You really wouldn't?" Radia asked. "Even...even now?"

Harder now, wasn't it? When Foxe had loomed over her, and Gregory's sword had been pointed at her throat?

"Maybe I would," Teta admitted. God, the idea of slicing Foxe's throat, or plunging a blade into Gregory's chest...the idea of fighting her way free of this place, however bloody that path might be...it was a powerful temptation.

"But I..." She closed her eyes and buried herself against Radia's chest. "I shouldn't."

Because look what had happened, from so little? How enraged Wiegraf and Miluda had become, and Delita had come for her, and she had been taken by Gregory, and on and on and on, so many men and women hurt by this small fight, how many men and women and children killed and suffering in wars like this across Ivalice, across the world. How small was her pain and terror, beside it all.

"I don't know if I believe that," Radia said.

"I know," Teta said. "I...I don't blame you."

Things didn't seem quite as clear as they had on the Plateau. Teta still couldn't accept the horrors violence could wreak, but she could much better understand why such horrors might be necessary. So where did that leave her?

Radia left for a little while, locking the door behind her. She returned with a bowl of lukewarm oatmeal, and Teta ate it gratefully, shoveling the tasteless mush into her mouth until her stomach ached with it. The wind howled somewhere outside, and there was the low whispering hiss of snow upon stone.

"Sounds bad out there," Teta said.

"It is," Radia replied. "Should buy us some time, actually."

Teta chuckled, and then laughed harder at the baffled, almost indignant look on Radia's face.

"Sorry," Teta said. "It's just...I'm probably hoping they keep marching, and you-"

Radia gave a low grunt that might have been a repressed snort. She seemed torn between anger

and amusement.

“Why's this fort so important?” Teta asked.

“Lotta reasons,” Radia said. “This powder room's one of them.”

“Powder...?” Teta repeated. The word tickled some part of her mind, but she couldn't quite remember what it meant.

“Gunpowder,” Radia said.

Teta jerked away from one of the crates, her head filled with tales of terrible explosions, of cannonfire and forts laid to ruin. Radia laughed. “Don't worry,” she said. “These crates are sealed tight. You probably couldn't start something if you tried.” Radia shrugged. “Stuff doesn't get used too much, since a mage can use it and blow their enemies to hell. But the fort's well-protected, and I guess it was supposed to do...something. If the Romandans came. We wanted the fort for the walls, but there's a lot of this stuff that got left behind.”

“Mainly, though,” Radia continued, with a forlorn expression. “It's...it's the only way through the pass between Gallione and Fovoham. Nowhere else to run, if we lose it.”

And how was Teta supposed to feel about that? About the idea of her kidnappers, tormentors, and would-be rapists slaughtered by the Hokuten? How many Foxes were in the ranks of the Corps? How many Gregorys? How many Miludas? How many Wiegrafs?

How many Radas?

There was a knock upon the door. “Radia-” came Gregory's voice, and Teta shied back from the door as a flash of electric fear numbed her fingers and toes. She scrambled against the far wall.

“I'll take the hand that opens that door!” Radia shouted, grabbing for her sword.

“It's Wiegraf,” Gregory said.

Radia's eyes widened. She looked in shock at Teta, who felt her thoughts moving slow and sluggish. Gregory, who'd loomed over her with his sword pointed at her, who'd left the aching goose-egg atop her skull, was standing outside. But it was Wiegraf he wanted to talk about. Wiegraf, who'd treated her with such kindness, even after his sister's death.

Teta nodded slowly, and Radia unlocked the door in one swift move, and stepped back with her sword pointed towards the door. “Nice and slow!” she called.

The door creaked open, and Gregory came through with his hands raised.

“What do you want?” Radia demanded.

“We just got word,” Gregory said. “Wiegraf's joined up with the units fighting to hold the pass. The Hokuten brought mages with them. The snow's not slowing them down.”

Even Teta knew that wasn't good. No one risked their mages in the field if they could help it,

but...but these people had attacked Dycedarg. Jesus, had they killed him? Was that why the Hokuten were hunting them like this? Was Dycedarg dead? Wretched woman, not even sparing a thought to him after he fought to keep you safe, after-

“He sent word,” Gregory said. “Your powers work on mages, too, yeah?”

“Most of the time,” Radia said. She shot a cautious glance at Teta, then looked back to Gregory. “If I leave, she's coming with me.”

Gregory laughed. It was an awful sound, jagged and wrong, like metal scraped against the grain. “Feel free,” he said. “Take the noble bitch out into a blizzard, and hope the Hokuten don't kill her 'cause they think she's one of us.”

Would the Hokuten really do that? No, stupid question, of course they would. Fighting their way through a blizzard, attacked on all sides...why wouldn't they? They'd have to assume anyone in front of them was an enemy. Hell, they might even kill her in the name of rescuing her.

“He's right,” Teta mumbled. “It's...it's okay.”

Radia looked back at her and locked eyes. Radia looked every tired, and a little bit scared. Scared of what, though? Or maybe that was a stupid question. There was an awful lot of be scared of.

Radia looked back at Gregory and nodded. “She stays in here,” Radia said. “Foxe comes with me. No one touches her.”

Gregory arched his eyebrows. “You want Foxe watching your back after what you did to him?” Gregory asked.

“I trust him out there more than I trust him in here,” Radia said.

Gregory shrugged, and Radia turned back to Teta, placing her hands on Teta's shoulders. “I'll be right back,” she said. Teta nodded, and Radia pushed Gregory out of the room and locked the door behind her. As they walked away, Teta heard Radia say, “Tell me *exactly* what I'm dealing with.”

Teta pressed her fingers to the faded runes on the wall, tried to remember the lessons they'd learned at the Royal Preparatory Academy—how to treat your inherent magic as a separate limb, how to imagine it moving and working in ways that normal limbs couldn't. The rune flickered, embers of light glowing for a moment along its curving length, and then faded again. Teta shook her head and curled back into the dark, her arms around knees.

Sometime later, the lock clicked, and Teta barely had time to take her feet before Radia entered the room, with a canteen in one hand and a bucket in the other. She put the bucket in the farthest corner, then offered the canteen to Radia

“Not much food left for anyone,” Radia said. “Water's a little easier, but you can't exactly step out. Stay in here as long as you can. I think...” Radia closed her eyes. “One way or another, it's

almost over.”

Teta moved forwards, and wrapped her arms around the taller woman. Radia stiffened in her grasp, then relaxed. She buried her face in Teta's shoulder, and they held each other, weak and tired and frightened.

“Good luck,” Teta said.

“You too,” Radia replied.

Radia left the room again. Teta was alone.

She drank a little water. She used the bucket. She paced this powder room, wondering what had become of Dycedarg, Wiegraf, Ramza, Radia, Delita. She tried and failed to get the old runes working again. And eventually, tired and anxious and hungry, she slept.

She awoke to the sound of the key turning in the lock. She raised her head and shielded her eyes as the door swung open, the light blinding her, so all she could see were blurred shadows, but something was wrong, that wasn't Radia, that wasn't-

She cried in fear and rushed forwards, trying to slam the door closed, but Gregory shouldered past her and shoved her backwards. She stumbled, and hit the ground hard, adding a new aching bruise to the medley across her body.

She scrambled back as far as she could. Gregory didn't follow. His eyes were wide, the dark circles under his eyes emphasized by how pale and weak his face looked. Patchy stubble pattered his jawline.

“They're here,” Gregory said.

Teta didn't know what to say, so she said nothing.

“The Hokuten,” Gregory said. “Your brother, he...he's looking for you.”

Delita? She couldn't fight the fierce shock of relief that warmed her insides, her sleepy, panicked brain forgetting everything in that moment. But her instincts took over, and she remembered the lie that had kept her alive. It had to be a Beoulve who had come.

“Let me go,” Teta said, trying to speak with that careless confidence Alma and the other girls had, the easy authority that comes from living in a world that has almost always obeyed you. “I will see he treats you fairly.”

Gregory laughed. It sounded like an animal being strangled. “If you were in my shoes, Beoulve,” he asked. “Would you trust you?”

Teta opened her mouth to answer, and then remembered the woman wheezing and dying in that tent on the Plateau.

“You're never going to let me go,” Teta whispered, and she started shaking, so hard she could

barely stand. She slumped against one wall, trembling.

“If they stand aside-” Gregory said, with desperation in his voice.

“After what you did to Dycedarg?” she asked. She stared at his pale, miserable face. “You brought them here. You're the reason for all of this.”

Gregory's face spasmed into a hateful glower. “I didn't send us home with empty pockets!” he shouted. “I didn't take the Marquis! I didn't bully and rape and torture my way to-” He cut himself off, shaking his head. “This isn't my fault,” he muttered. “It's not...I didn't...”

He trailed off, and there was silence in the room.

“Radia?” Teta asked.

Gregory shook his head. “Never came back,” he whispered. “No one came...fighting in the night, and the Hokuten are here, and-”

Gregory kept talking. Teta couldn't hear him. Radia, gone. Wiegraf, too. Who knew what had become of Delita and Ramza?

“Gregory!” someone shouted outside the door. “They're coming!”

Gregory stopped talking, and locked eyes with Teta. Teta swallowed. Her only hope for escape lay in Gregory's hands now. Everyone else was dead.

She nodded, and Gregory stepped back, and let her past him. She half-considered running, and almost laughed. Run through a fortress she didn't know, filled with who knew how many enemies, on the off-chance she could find her way through the snow to Hokuten soldiers who wouldn't cut her down as a suspected enemy. Hopeless. It was all so hopeless.

The woman who'd called out to warn them was standing in an intersection a little ways down from them. Her arm was bandaged, and she was leaning heavily on a crutch, and every part of her ragged clothing seemed crusted with old food or old blood or something worse. “Left here,” Gregory said, and left they went, past other wounded men and women, some slowly organizing supplies, some on bedrolls with glazed eyes, and it felt so much like the plague tents again, so much like those old scenes of violence and pain.

She reached the large door through which Radia had led her (When? When had that happened? How long since she'd been taken?), and Gregory shoved it open, and the cold rattled through the door and into her bones. Teta shuddered, and Gregory wrapped an arm around her shoulders and his sword was out, gleaming just beneath her eyes.

“Coming out!” Gregory shouted, and shoved her outside, and the bright sunlight burned into her eyes and it took her a moment to see...

There, on the other end of the rickety wooden bridge, was Zalbaag, with his shining bastard

sword drawn and a heavy brown cloak hanging down over his black armor. Argus was at his side, furs draped over his shoulders, an arrow nocked to his bow. Two men in Hokuten cloaks stood just behind them. The skies were grey overhead, and crisp snow drifted down from on high, slow and steady.

So close. She hadn't known rescue was so close.

"No closer!" Gregory shouted. "Or your sister's blood hits the snow!"

Argus raised his bow, and Zalbaag thrust a warning hand in front of him. "It's over!" Zalbaag called. "Let her go!"

"I want you gone, Hokuten," Gregory said. "Pull your men back from this fort."

Zalbaag shook his head. "You're up against the wall. Put down your sword and surrender. I'll see you're treated fairly."

"I've seen what you people do to your prisoners," Gregory said. "And we both know you're not gonna try anything with your sister's life in the balance. If you do, I'll blow a crater in the side of this god damn mountain. Back off."

"TETA!"

The cry took her by surprise: she twisted a little in Gregory's grasp, even as he cursed at her and struggled to pull her back. There, down beneath the bridge, she saw Delita and Ramza, swords in hand.

"An ambush!" Gregory cried, so loud it stung her ear. "You'll pay for this, Hokuten!"

"Argus, now!" Zalbaag cried.

Teta was struggling to keep her feet as the bridge creaked beneath her. She almost didn't hear the twang of the bow. Pointed lightning burst somewhere along her throat, and suddenly Teta was falling, tumbling through the air, tumbling through the whirling snow, hot and cold and dark and light and-

Chapter 23: Nightmare

...the historian always faces the same dilemma: what is history? It is undeniably a record of events, but which events, and how to record them? Even if we accept that all change is the providence of great, invisible forces, these forces act on men, and men react to them. It is a story: a tale of actors on a stage, performing for an audience, supported by many invisible hands, by long chains of events we can never fully grasp that led them to that moment, that action. Perhaps the historian's task is simply to make their best guess as to how that stage was set: to record the event, while recognizing the human and inhuman forces that led the actor thus.

-Alazlam Durai, "Letter to an Adjunct Professor at the College of Dorter"

This had to be a dream.

The feeling was familiar. We've all had dreams like that, right? The monster is closing in from behind, and you can't run fast enough to get away: you've slipped and fallen from your place atop the island in the sky, and now you plummet towards the ground with no hope of salvation from an airship of the long-ago. Death is closing in on you, horror and tragedy beyond what you've imagined, and in that moment of lurching, terrible fear you spasm into gasping, frightened consciousness, with your nightmares draining away into the night.

This had to be a nightmare, too. Watching the arrow fly, as Zalbaag's order echoed across the snow. Watching it strike Teta, so she slumped in her captor's arms. Watching the captor gasp and stagger backwards, so that all at once Teta was falling from the wooden bridge and tumbling down, down, down...

Delita caught her. How had Delita caught her? He'd been standing right by Ramza's side just moments ago, but there he was, his sister in his arms, his teary eyes raised to Ramza's.

"Ramza!" he cried, and Ramza was jerked from his vertigo unreality, staggering towards Delita, and with every step and every bitter, moaning gust he felt the reality sink in a little more, because no nightmare had ever felt this clear or real. From the corner of his eye, he saw Argus loose another arrow: saw Teta's former captor stumble backwards with an arrow in his chest.

"Bastards!" shrieked the man who'd taken Teta. "You miserable-"

Another arrow in his chest. The man squealed, and crawled backwards, into the shadow of the door.

"Help!" Delita cried, as Ramza pressed his hands into the bloody wound, stared into Teta's pale face and glassy eyes, listened to her labored breathing-

Listened as she breathed no more.

The wind kept moaning. The snow kept falling. There were voices Ramza could almost hear, almost understand (“Reggie, get the rest of the troops in here. Lars, hold that door.”). Teta's blood was on Ramza's hands. Teta, who he'd known for so long, his first shy kiss in the old estate outside of Lesalia under the heady influence of old wine. Teta, of the sound advice and the quiet strength and...and...

“Teta,” Delita whispered. “Teta, please...”

And she was dead.

Delita pulled her closer. Ramza stared at her corpse as her blood dripped onto Delita's armor.

Delita set her gently down into the snow. He brushed an errant curl of hair from where it was plastered with blood against her forehead. He rose to his feet, and began to walk—towards that little rise that separated them from Zalbaag and Argus.

“Delita,” Ramza mumbled, rising to his feet but unable to tear his eyes away Teta's dead face.

“Stand down, cadet!” barked Zalbaag.

The words jerked Ramza away from Teta, sent him stumbling after Delita, crunching his way through the snow. Zalbaag had descended a set of jagged steps near them, his bastard sword in hand. Delita kept moving, his own sword drawn. The sword Zalbaag had commissioned for him. It's twin was in Ramza's hand. When had Ramza drawn it?

“That's an order, cadet,” Zalbaag growled, his face pale, and he raised Justice defensively. Justice, ha. What Justice would have needed Teta's death?

“Delita-” Ramza starting, not sure what he intended to say, and Delita whirled on him with his blade drawn, his face contorted in rage and grief with his eyes two livid flames in his tear-strewn face as the snow kept sighing down around them and Teta's corpse steamed beneath the bridge where she had fallen and the sword in Delita's hands was pointed towards Ramza.

“A mad dog,” Argus grunted, and Delita whirled away and there was Argus on the lip of that higher ground, an arrow nocked to his bow, the arrow trained on Delita.

“There's no need for that,” Zalbaag said, his voice shaking.

“How could you?” Ramza asked, staring between Argus and Zalbaag.

“She should never have been here,” Argus snapped.

“So you killed her?” demanded Ramza.

“We're not negotiating with the men who cut down our brother,” Zalbaag said, his eyes wide and bright and strange. “With the men who tried to take our sister. Or-”

“She was my sister,” Delita whispered.

Delita was facing Zalbaag, His swordpoint had drooped to the ground. He seemed like he might collapse at any moment.

“She was my sister,” Delita repeated. “And you...why?”

“Because we do not sell out the honor of the Hokuten for a common girl,” Argus said.

“MY SISTER!” howled Delita, turning towards Argus with the blade lifted, and Argus pulled back his bowstring with his arrow trained on Delita and-

“Stand down, both of you!” Zalbaag said. “Argus, do not goad him! Delita, it was my order!”

“Why!” shouted Ramza

“This is war!” Zalbaag shouted back. “People die!”

“You ordered-” Ramza started.

“You killed her!” Delita shrieked.

“I’d do it again,” Argus said. “With or without the order.”

They were interrupted by a thunderous explosion and distant shouts of alarm. Ramza's head jerked towards the sound of the blast, and saw smoke rising in the distance. The shouts were getting closer.

“Delita!” cried Zalbaag, and Ramza's head jerked away in time to see Delita hurtling towards Argus, and Argus loosed his arrow and Delita cut it from the air without missing a step, so the broken haft slid through the snow in front of Ramza, and in one bounding motion Delita had clambered up the stone wall that separated their dry moat from the higher ground where Argus stood and Argus was running and Delita was chasing him.

Zalbaag moved to follow. Ramza stepped in front of him.

“Out of my way,” Zalbaag ordered.

“You killed her,” Ramza said.

“I don't have to explain myself to you,” Zalbaag said. He tried to move past Ramza, and Ramza stepped in front of him again.

“He cannot kill the Limberry Liason,” Zalbaag said.

“Argus deserves to die,” Ramza replied.

“Move!” bellowed Zalbaag.

“Or what?” Ramza asked.

Zalbaag half-raised his sword. Ramza started to raise his own.

“Commander!” came a distant shout. “Commander, the Corps-GAAAAAIE!”

“Keep them out of Zeakden!” roared the resounding baritone of Wiegraf Folles.

Ramza and Zalbaag snapped away from each other and raced up the steps, almost in sync.

When they reached the higher ground above the dry moat that surrounded the fort, they found Wiegraf waiting for them, a Hokuten knight's corpse steaming at his feet. The sounds of battle were very close now.

“You should be dead,” Zalbaag said.

“I had a war to win,” Wiegraf said. “I can't afford to die.”

“Your rebellion ends here,” Zalbaag said.

“Does it?” Wiegraf asked.

“Ramza, with me!” Zalbaag shouted.

But Ramza was not looking at his brother. He was looking at the footprints in the snow. The footprints Argus and Delita had left in their wake?

“Ramza!” Zalbaag hissed.

“What path do you choose, Ramza?” Wiegraf asked.

Ramza didn't have to choose. He was already moving, away from Zalbaag and Wiegraf, through the falling snow, chasing his friends as they tried to kill each other.

“Ramza!” howled Zalbaag, moving to follow, and there was the resounding clash of clanging steel.

“Your fight is with me, Beoulve!” shouted Wiegraf, and bright light and cacophonous booming blasts rent the air and Ramza was running for all he was worth, trying to reach Delita before he lost another friend.

Chapter 24: A World Gone Mad

“A sword again a bow, and you've the gall to think you can win!” called Argus, loosing another arrow. Delita rolled aside, and the arrow buried itself in the snow behind him. “Blood will tell! Common idiocy from a common man.”

“I don't want your words!” Delita cried, plunging towards him, zigzagging with each step so it was damn near impossible to get a bead on him. “I want your blood!”

“As if I'd bare my throat to you, dog!” Argus shouted. He loosed another arrow, and ducked behind the corner of the fort.

No, Argus Thadolfas was not going to die today. Not when the glory and power that were his by right were finally within reach. The long, black road from oblivion was behind him: the last scion of House Thadolfas was the trusted right hand of the Marquis in a major military operation, and victory would see his grandfather's sins forgotten. Everything would be restored to its rightful place. The world would make sense again. No more Death Corps. No more Delitas.

It was rabies. That was obvious to any man of sense, wasn't it? How the infection had spread, slow and sure? The common man spat upon his God-ordained place and tried to break the divine order that protected kingdom, king, and commoner alike. They tore the world apart and then had the unmitigated gall to act righteous when divine will turned against them. They barked and growled and snapped when their masters pulled tight upon their leashes, trying to rein them in.

Like Delita, now. Barking and braying, hounding him through the ruin of Zeakden. Argus loosed another arrow, and Delita snapped up a hunk of scrapwood so the arrow sank into his makeshift shield. He hurled this plank at Argus: it fell far short, but masked Delita in an explosion of snow, and Argus darted away again, stepping nimbly through the frost.

Of course, Delita was only a symptom of this problem. The dog didn't know better. It couldn't. A dog was always the reflection of the master. So what did such a dog as Delita say about Ramza Beoulve?

Ramza. A well-meaning idiot ill-deserving of his good fortune. A bastard Beoulve whose father had been kind enough to make him a full-fledged member of his proud house. And how magnificently he failed to live up to his responsibilities. Taking to the battlefield and refusing to kill the rebels who had tried to kill the Marquis. Promising them safety and security when they had tried to tear all Ivalice apart and remake it in their blasphemous image. And letting his dog act the part of a man. Letting him imagine himself the equal of the company he kept. He rubbed elbows with the Beoulves, he boasted as his comrades a Daravon and a Thadolfas, and did he act grateful? No. He

acted entitled. He spoke down to Argus, to Beowulf, and even to Ramza, and Ramza let him do it! Allow a dog a seat at your table, and you have no one but yourself to blame when he eats your food.

Argus slipped onto a crumbling parapet, crouched slow against the snowy stone as Delita plunged around the corner. Argus loosed another arrow, but gave himself away in a shower of snow from his hiding place at the last moment. He cursed to himself as Delita whirled towards him: the arrow intended for his throat instead plunged into his shoulder, and Delita screamed with more rage than pain and sprinted towards him again, kicking up geysers of snow with every step. Argus leapt down, hugging the wall of the fort as he circled away from Delita.

The Thadolfas family had learned these lessons the hard way, hadn't they? When that common squire had cut his grandfather's throat, and been made a knight for it. What choice had they given that dog? Dishonor or death. What did you expect of a cornered dog, except to fight? Fool that his grandfather was, he'd forgotten that rule. Never give the dog a hope of fighting. Never give it reason to turn. He imagined his grandfather was someone like Ramza, ignorant of the dangers that surrounded him, of how easy it was to slip and fall.

Argus knew. Argus knew all too well. Knowing who he was, knowing the storied blood that coursed through his veins, and having to beg for so much as a role as the Marquis' squire. That was no place for a man of House Thadolfas, shouldering his way through commoners who looked at him as though he were beneath them.

Delita was the worst of all. The condescending tone he took, as though he understood Argus' struggles. The way he equated them. Argus still remembered Dorter: Delita had the unmitigated gall to *forgive* Argus for his anger, as though that were his place. And his reasoning? That Delita would have done the same, were it Ramza. That somehow he and Argus were equals. *Equals*. A nameless commoner and the son of House Thadolfas, equals, and what could Argus say when he needed what little grace Ramza could provide just to keep looking for the Marquis. So he'd had to bite his tongue and make nice, and the man could fight and he was smart enough but he had made the same mistake as his father, and as Ramza. Treat a dog like an equal, and it forgets its place

The world had stopped making sense, but it could still be fixed. Look around. The dogs were being put down. Argus was the Special Limberry Liason, trusted with the will of the Marquis. So close now, and he would do whatever he had to to keep climbing, just as he had by pretending Delita didn't sicken him.

Just as he had when he'd loosed his arrow into Teta's throat.

He regretted that. Why deny it? She was uncomfortably familiar with her betters, but that was not her fault when Ramza and Alma encouraged such appalling behavior, and she behaved with the

grace and deference befitting her station and the company she kept. He had actually enjoyed her company, that raucous night in Igros those months (lifetimes!) ago. He wished she hadn't had to die.

But the mission of the Hokuten—this divine mission to civilize and bring order to the disparate, lawless rabble who refused to be grateful for all that was done for them—brooked no argument. Beside, it was the fruit of the master's idiocy again. If they had not allowed their dogs to forget their places, Teta would never have been here. There would have been no hostage.

He crouched low, and loosed another arrow as Delita rounded the corner. Delita hurled himself to one side, just too late: the arrow sank into his thigh, and Delita hit the snow in a spray of blood and cursing. He lunged to his feet, limped towards Argus, and Argus loosed three arrows in quick succession.

Delita cut the first from the air: the second found his sword arm. The third found his chest.

The sword dropped from Delita's numb fingers, as his steaming blood hissed down into the snow. Argus reached back for another arrow, and found his quiver empty. That just about figured, didn't it? Delita didn't even have the decency to die properly.

Argus drew the short sword from his side, and made his crunching way towards Delita. Delita, who acted like they were equals, who refused to understand his place in the world, who had tried to kill him just like that damn squire had killed his grandfather, one of those criminal madmen who would upturn the natural order for their bizarre, blasphemous purposes and see families like House Thadolfas laid low. He wondered what his grandfather's killer had looked like. Like Delita, he imagined. All that rage and self-righteous gall.

“Bastard,” hissed Delita, trying and failing to rise from his kneeling position, as blood trickled down from his wounds. “You...fucking...monster...I'll...kill...!”

Argus laughed. “You'll kill me?” he repeated. “You can't stop me. You couldn't save her. You're sitting at the feet of the Beoulses, and you think that makes you one of them. You do what they allow. And that's why you're going to die here, just like your sister.”

Argus raised his sword.

Thhkt.

What a curious sound. Like a sword slipping through flesh and fur. Why did Argus feel so much colder? Why...

He was face-up in the snow, and did not remember falling. Something ached, deep inside him. It was hard to breathe, and Ramza was standing above him with a bloody sword in his hand. Whose blood? Whose...

“N...no!” gasped Argus. “How...how!”

Argus tried to rise, and his back exploded in spasming pain. He fell back into the snow, gasping, staring at Ramza. No no no no no that wasn't right Ramza was a fool and a coward but he couldn't be such a monster he couldn't choose a commoner dying in the cold over a fellow noble that didn't make sense *that didn't make sense*.

“You...!” hissed Argus, and Ramza was stepping over him, moving towards Delita, stepping over him like he was nothing, and Argus Thadolfas was not nothing, Argus Thadolfas had tumbled into a broken world and been parented by two broken people, by a father who hunted because he could pretend to still be a man of talent and influence when his arrows found a stag and by a woman so lost in misery that she would rather drink herself to death than protect her son, and he had clawed his way back to his rightful place, seizing every opportunity, fighting even from the brink of death as the Death Corps had stalked around his rock and he had rescued the Marquis where even the mighty Hokuten and failed and now he was one of the Marquis' most trusted men, and the name of Thadolfas was going to be restored to glory so how could Argus die here?

He grabbed at Ramza's leg. Ramza jerked in his grasp (and fresh fire flowed from the wound in Argus' back as he clung to Ramza), nearly fell, then righted himself and turned to stare at him with wide, terrified eyes.

So scared, so uncertain, so lucky and so ignorant of it. Men like Ramza would ruin everything: would treat the dogs like men, until their teeth found their throats. Thadolfas. Beoulve. Maybe all Ivalice, brought to ruin by such fools. There were tears in Argus' eyes now.

“You...child...!” Argus sobbed. “You...stupid...”

It hurt to talk. It hurt to breathe. The world was wrong. The world was...

Chapter 25: Collapse

...those forts were marvels, you know. Zeakden, Fovogard, Rhanagun. When it seemed the Romandan navy—the uncontested rulers of the sea—might bring their full might to bear against Ivalice, we rebuilt and refurbished those old constructs, outfitting them with the latest cannons and gunpowder in mere months. But like so many other wonders of the war, they were forgotten. They decayed, and fell by the wayside, and became another threat to the peace in those days when the lions growled at each other. It's an important lesson: the past is potent, and if you do not watch it warily, its arrows may find you yet.

Alazlam Durai, "Larger Consequences of the 50 Years' War"

"You...stupid..."

Argus' glaring eyes glazed over. He exhaled one rattling, blood-flaked breath, and slumped motionless into the snow. Ramza stared down at his former friend, with his armor and furs shredded and soaked with the same blood that was now pooling beneath him, pouring from the wound Ramza had carved into his back.

I didn't have a choice.

Ramza had stumbled around the edge of the fort and found Argus standing over Delita, sword raised for the kill, and Ramza had been moving forward with his sword still drawn and his mouth opening to shout something—a protest, an order, maybe just a scream of fear, he didn't know—and then through the cold and the wind and the clanging, shouting medley of the battle all around he had heard those words-

...die here, just like your sister.

And he had driven his sword into Argus' back, his mind black with rage.

I didn't have a-

He'd had a choice. Just as he had fighting Wiegraf and Miluda, just as he had when they'd found Ivan Mansel, just as he had when they'd faced the Corps upon the Plains with Argus bleeding upon his rock.

He'd saved Argus. He'd *killed* Argus.

He killed Teta. He was going to kill Delita. He led Miluda and the others...he...

He'd been Ramza's friend. They had laughed together, fought together, drank together, saved each others' lives, and now...

The sword fell from Ramza's numb fingers. He made no move to pick it up. He kept staring

down at the man he had killed. The friend he had killed.

He heard crunching in the snow behind him. He raised his head, and found Delita standing next to him, staring down at Argus' corpse. His eyes were glazed, as blood dripped from his arrow wounds.

"Should...should treat you," Ramza said.

Delita turned on his heel and limped back the way he had come, tracing his way through the bloodstains and the churned snow, leaving a wake of fresh blood behind him.

"Delita," Ramza said, but Delita kept stumbling. Ramza took a step after him, then hesitated, looking back at Argus' corpse.

Teta, dead. Argus, dead. Maybe Beowulf, too if Reis couldn't save him. If it were Balbanes, this wouldn't have happened.

Zalbaag gave the order.

He could feel the world coming apart around him. Everything felt shaky and unstable. Everything...

Ramza stumbled, as the shaking increased. A cacophonous *boom* sounded through the air, and fire and smoke rose up from one section of the fortress.

Magic? Gunpowder? Hadn't Gregory said something about...

"Delita!" Ramza shouted, sprinting after his friend, and there was another explosion, another plume of smoke as the roof of the fortress sank in, sending stones clattering to the ground in little puffs of snow, and the acrid smell of gunpowder was on the air, harsh and cloying against Ramza's nose. A section of wall in front of him blasted outwards, a horizontal column of fire and fury. Ramza raised his hands to his mouth, coughing as he stumbled through the dust and nearly fell over fallen debris, his face too warm from the heat of the explosion, his back chilled by the falling snow.

Tears still streaming from his eyes, struggling to breathe through the cloying fumes, he found Delita limping on in front of him, every footprint he'd left rimmed by fresh-fallen blood. Ramza followed as best he could, coughing his way through the smoke. More and more of the fort gave way in bone-shaking blasts that exploded upwards in brilliant columns of fire: the ground quaked so that Ramza could barely keep his feet.

There, just ahead: Delita knelt in the snow. For a moment, Ramza stared, unable to make sense of what he was seeing. Then the moment passed, and in the mirage shimmer of heat, Ramza saw her in her brother's arms. Teta, peaceful, as though she were sleeping. Teta, whom he'd failed to save.

The snow kept falling, even as the fortress crumbled. Delita was bowed in the snow, his sister's corpse in his arms. Ramza stayed where he was, cold and hot and useless.

"Delita," Ramza said. "We can't-"

The section of fortress above them gave a rumble, like thunder on the horizon. The rickety wooden bridge snapped, and collapsed downwards. It landed at an angle in a spray of snow, just between Ramza and Delita, forcing Ramza back a step.

“Delita!” Ramza shouted, and then the fortress in front of him exploded outwards in a gargantuan geyser of fire and rubble. A wall of heat and force smashed into Ramza, carried him off his feet-

And Ramza thought no more.

Chapter 26: Nasty Little Words

...of course, each of the seven states maintained their own armies, but by the time of the War of the Lions the Hokuten and the Nanten were the undisputed powers of Gallione. Barinten's Khamja and the Church's Templars might have been the strongest warriors in Ivalice, but they could not match the vast war machines of the White and Black Lions. The last army to come close to rivaling them had been the patchwork Haruten, with commanders and recruits gathered from Limberry and Zeltenia, but hard fighting exhausted their ranks and the last shred of their power was broken when the King censured them at War's end for their hands in atrocities in both Ivalice and Ordallia. Of curious note is that the Haruten were condemned for war crimes even in areas where they did not operate—areas principally controlled by the Hokuten and the Nanten...

-Alazlam Durai, "Larger Consequences of the 50 Years' War"

Everything hurt.

That was the first thing Ramza was conscious of. His joints felt hollow and weak. He could feel his neck protesting the slightest motion, taut and tense. The muscles in his shoulders and thighs trembled and groaned at the simplest adjustments. And his chest...nothing was right there, weak and broken, deep pains throbbing out at him with every little motion

And that was before he remembered.

His eyes fluttered open—he knew better than to try and sit up—and found an unfamiliar cottage all around him. He was reclining against several pillows atop a large bed against one wall, so he was almost sitting up. The place was spread out before him: heavy stone walls and hand-me-down furniture. A little dining room was just in front of him, with an alcove to one side that might have been a kitchen tucked just out of view. Beyond the dining room was a salon, with sunken couches and chairs. To one side was another little alcove—the bathroom, Ramza assumed—and to the other was a heavy wooden door he assumed led outside.

Ramza did not know this cottage. He did not know how he had come to be here. The last thing he remembered was the final, spectacular collapse of Fort Zeakden, Delita and Teta lost among the rubble and the flames.

He thought about rising, and the very idea sapped what little energy was left from his aching bones. He sank against the rather luxurious mattress—this thing felt ever better than the one he'd had back in the Beoulve Manor—and a wave of nausea rose up from an aching spot in the back of his head. He shut his eyes as the world spun, trying not to gag.

Hurt. Where was he? Where was anyone, everyone? Where...

The door creaked open. Ramza opened his eyelids, then started, jerking backwards in the bed so his body ached and his head spun, and Ramza fought that feeling as he cast his head from side to side, looking for a weapon, and-

"Easy, Ramza," said the red-headed woman who'd fought against him at the Plateau. "Easy." She dropped the sack she was holding and lifted her hands to show they were empty. "What do you remember?"

"I...I don't..." Ramza shook his head. Other memories were intruding onto his thoughts, like shadows against a bright sun, hazy and blurry. "Zeakden and...what?"

"It's okay," she said. "It's your head. Part of the fort hit you, when it blew. Bandage on the back. Feel it?"

Ramza lifted a protesting arm and hesitantly put his fingers against the back of his head. He met the soft linen of a bandage.

"I'm not much of a healer," she said. "I did the best I could, but I think you're having trouble...you've been in and out of consciousness."

In and...yes, it was coming back now, in snippets and flashes. He remember a shoulder digging into his chest, as the snow sighed down around them. Someone had slung him across their shoulders. He remembered a campfire, and hands probing for damage as he moaned in protest. He remembered...

So hard to remember. But it was her face, watching him in the firelight, making sure he wasn't dying.

"Thank you," Ramza whispered.

She shook her head. "It's...it's what you'd have done, right?" Radia asked.

Ramza didn't answer. How could he? He'd killed a man—not just any man, but Argus Thadolfas, who he'd saved upon the Plains, who he'd comforted in a moment of weakness in the dark of the Mage's Mystery. He'd done it to save Delita's life, and now...

"Did anyone..." Ramza cleared his throat. "Anyone besides...us?"

"I don't know," she said. "I...don't wanna ask too many questions, y'know? Have people wondering..."

"I...yeah." Ramza trailed off, staring at the woman who'd been part of a revolutionary army, who'd tried to kill him, who he'd last seen stumbling away across the Plateau with all her companions dead by the hands of Ramza's friends.

"I didn't see," she said. "Did...did you rescue Teta, or—"

Ramza saw her falling again, with that arrow in her neck. He shut his eyes and shook his head.

“Oh,” she sighed, and said nothing else. Ramza kept his eyes shut, trying not to see Teta falling, or Argus collapsing into the bloodsoaked snow, or the fort falling around Delita...

Ramza didn't realize he'd fallen asleep until a loud curse woke him. He blinked awake and found the red-headed woman in front of the fireplace, stirring a black pot set over the fire and sucking on a burnt finger.

“Are you...” he slurred, fighting off the crushing wave of exhaustion. “Okay?”

“Yeah,” the woman mumbled around her thumb. She kept stirring the pot. “Stew for you. Thin. I don't want you throwing up again.”

“I...” Ramza trailed off. “Again?” She nodded. Ramza felt a creeping flush of embarrassment in his cheeks. “I'm sorry,” he said.

“It happens.”

Silence, as she ladled the soup. The fire cast her wiry figure in sharp relief. A long green tunic hugged the contours of her body, pulled tight around her waist by a leather cord. It was odd, not to see her in her armor.

“You knew...?” Ramza started, and found he couldn't say Teta's name. It caught in his throat and felt like it was choking him. “Her?” he finished.

She nodded. “I...we talked, before you guys...” She closed her eyes. “Before.”

Before the Plateau, and Miluda. So much lost.

“Who are you?” Ramza asked.

She looked up at him at last. “Radia,” she said.

Ramza's throat felt very dry. There, on a little table near him, was a ceramic mug. He reached out with a clumsy hand, focused on his fingers and managed to wedge them under the handle. He lifted the mug from its resting place, pressed it against his lips in one swift move, and drank greedily. Water dribbled down his chin, staining his bare chest.

“I think your brother's alive,” Radia said, rising from the fire with a steaming bowl in her hands. “I'd probably have...people would be talking, if he wasn't.”

Ramza should feel glad about that, right? That Zalbaag was alive. That the man who had ordered Teta's death was...

Radia brought the stew to Ramza and helped him to sit up, readjusting the pillows so he was entirely upright. He took the bowl in his weak hands, felt them shaking with the effort. He sipped a salty, savory broth, felt a chunk of some vegetable he couldn't identify bumping against his nose. He ate too fast, choked, coughed, and spattered food across his blankets.

“Sorry,” he mumbled miserably.

"It's fine," Radia said, grabbing a cloth, wiping his face and the blanket clean. "Eat."

He ate, slowly but steady, and when he set the empty bowl down upon the nearby table he felt a little stronger for it. Radia sat at the foot of the bed, bracing herself on her knees.

"What happened?" Ramza asked. "How did you...find me?"

Radia shrugged. Ramza felt it in his feet. "I was helping Wiegraf fight the Hokuten," Radia said. "Hitting them as they came through the pass, trying to make them...but then the fortress was blowing, and...and I ran back, trying to..." Her hands tightened into fists. "You were the only one I found."

Silence. Ramza stared past her, at the fire. Radia stared straight ahead, at the wall.

"What happened to her?" Radia asked.

Again that awful vision, Teta tumbling through the snow with her hair wild in all directions. "Shot," Ramza croaked. "Shot by...by my friend, and he didn't even, it wasn't, it was Zal, he ordered-!"

Faster, faster, faster, and there were tears in his voice, and he shut his eyes against them. He didn't want to cry in front of this woman, who'd already seen him so weak and so pathetic.

"Did you see Wiegraf?" Radia asked.

"Fighting my brother," Ramza said. "I don't know if..."

"Yeah," Radia said. "What about...what about her brother?"

Ramza closed his eyes against that terrible guilty grief. "They were...they were right by the fort, when it..."

Silence again. Their faces loomed against the darkness of Ramza's eyelids. Delita, as he'd looked at the end, hollow with grief. Teta, confused and then calm, as death had taken her. Argus, cursing and raging with blood on his lips. Zal, with those wild, strange eyes. Wiegraf, calm and resolute.

All gone? All dead? Was there anyone left?

He heard the click of a key in a lock. He felt sudden movement, the bed shifting as Radia rocketed to her feet. He opened his eyes.

The man who entered the room was dangerous.

It was the first word that leapt to Ramza's mind. It was not the armor he wore (a mesh of chainmail and dark plate) or the sword at his side that made him seem so fearsome. He was small—shorter than Ramza, a little shorter than Radia, too—but stocky and obviously fit. He wore an expression of genial confusion. Lank white hair was stuck to his forehead, and a prominent handlebar mustache of the same ivory white gleamed on his upper lip beneath a bulbous nose. The lips smiled

easily, but the eyes...

Those green eyes *boiled*. There was an intense intellect behind those eyes, appraising everything they fell upon, showing not the faintest hint of surprise. And the way he walked...he rolled from step to step with the languid grace of a panther, a predator who could burst into sudden, terrible movement at any moment. Together, eyes and stride gave the impression of a dangerous beast momentarily at ease.

The man stopped walking, but those hunter's eyes were fixed on Ramza.

"I am bound by blood to welcome you back," said the man, a Limberry brogue rolling his syllables together. "Whatever foolishness you do. But I will not welcome your fugitive friends. Get out." He was in the kitchen now, and there was a knife in his hand that Ramza was quite sure hadn't been there before.

Before Ramza could say anything, Radia had shifted, so her body was between the man and Ramza.

"He's not from the Corps, Dad," she said.

"Oh?" Radia's father replied. "So he's just a strange man you brought home without asking."

"What if he was?" Radia asked. "I'm old enough--"

Her father laughed. "Old enough," he scoffed. "Old enough to risk open rebellion against the crown, and for what? What cause were you willing to kill for?" He shook his head. "You're a child yet, Radia."

"I'm not-!" Radia started.

"But you are not the topic of discussion." Radia's father looked past her, back to Ramza. "Not an idiot rebel, so who the hell are you?"

"Ramza, sir," Ramza said.

"And how do you know my daughter, Ramza?"

Ramza had no idea how to answer.

"Beoulve, Dad," Radia said. Ramza glanced towards her, saw her watching her father warily.

"Ramza Beoulve."

Surprise broke the dangerous fire of her father's eyes. He blinked, stared first at her and then at Ramza and then back again.

"Beoulve," he muttered. "Beoulve?" He shook his head. "By the Saint," he said. "You rebelled against Larg and you brought a Beoulve *into my house*?"

He hurtled over the counter, faster than Ramza would have believed possible, and Radia moved towards him and there was that strange shimmering magic and Radia sank to one side, trembling, and

her father was moving towards Ramza with that knife in hand and Ramza half-raised his aching arms in defense and then let them drop away, because what was the point of fighting back after everything he'd done and everything he'd failed to do?

Radia's father stopped suddenly in front of him, still within easy striking distance of that black knife.

“Defend yourself, boy,” he said.

Ramza shook his head, barely aware he was doing so. Radia's father gave him a puzzled once-over.

“He saved me!” Radia cried weakly, from her place slumped against the wall.

“More the fool he!” her father snapped, but his mouth was twisted thoughtfully to one side.

“You saved her?” he asked.

“No,” Ramza said.

“Ramza!” shouted Radia.

“No?” repeated her father.

“No,” Ramza said. “I just...I didn't want to kill her, and...and when her captain, I didn't...”

Her father considered Ramza for a little while, then took a step back, glancing towards his daughter. “This seems like a story worth the hearing,” he said. “But not sober.”

He dug around in a pantry until he found a glass bottle, and began pouring drinks. Radia rose unsteadily towards her feet, eyes flickering between Ramza and her father. Her father dragged two chairs to the edge of the bed, shoved a glass into Ramza's hand, and took a seat.

“How do you know my daughter, Beoulve?” her father asked.

“I...” Where was Ramza even supposed begin?

“The fort a little ways north of here,” Radia said, standing just behind her father, her fingers curling and uncurling.

“Ah, that business in the swamp,” he grunted, shooting his daughter a venomous glance. “Of course you were there.” His eyes returned to Ramza. “And why is she under the mistaken impression you saved her life?”

Slowly, hesitantly, Ramza tried to tell the story. He failed: he kept losing track and having to go back, and he found he still could not bear to repeat Delita or Teta's names. He called them “my friend” and “his sister.” But the more he talked the harder it was to stop, until he was going back further, to that first meeting with Miluda and Wieggraf, and that took him to his second meeting with Miluda and his first meeting with Radia in that boiling swamp, to that frightful duel with Wieggraf and the frozen hell of Zeakden and Ramza's sword in Argus' back.

At some point during the story, Radia's father had pulled out a pipe and packed it tight. It smelled rather sweet as he puffed and listened, his eyes glittering.

“What say you, Radia?” he asked. “Any holes in his story?”

“None I know,” she said. “And what Teta told me...”

“Teta,” he repeated. “The girl.” He puffed his pipe. “You're an odd one, Beoulve. A man who spares his enemies and kills his friends.”

“Dad-” Radia said.

“My daughter protests,” her father grunted. “Do you?”

“No,” Ramza said. He could have subdued Argus, punched him or wrestled him to the ground as he'd done the soldiers of the Corps, but he hadn't wanted to. He had wanted to tear into the man who had sunk an arrow into Teta's throat. Who had feathered Delita with arrows, and drawn his sword to finish the job.

And now they were all dead, ash in that great fire.

“When are you going home, boy?” her father asked.

It took a moment for Ramza to make sense of the question. He understood the individual words, but lost the larger meaning. “When am I...” He felt a flash of bright rage that knocked the cobwebs from his thoughts. He straightened up in bed, his anger giving him a surge of strength that blasted away weakness and pain. “Never,” he whispered.

“Never,” repeated Radia's father. “Why?”

“After what they did?” Ramza demanded.

“And what precisely did they do?” her father asked.

“It was Dycedarg's plot that started this!” roared Ramza, his throat aching with it. “And Zal gave the order! He killed...she was one of us!”

Radia's father took another puff on his pipe. “No, Ramza,” he said, after a moment's consideration. “She was not one of you. She was a ward of your father's, of a station too lowly to truly be your sister's lady-in-waiting. Only a fool would hold an army hostage for such a ransom.”

“After everything-” Ramza growled.

“Lucavi take me, boy,” the older man sighed. “How can you be a Beoulve and be this sheltered? What manner of man takes to the battlefield with blade in hand and tries not to kill? Did you really think your family would sacrifice their interests for the sake of a servant?”

Ramza didn't answer. Radia's father set down his pipe and glanced towards his daughter. “I take it he doesn't know our name?” he asked. Radia looked down at her hands and didn't say anything. Her father sighed again and rose to his feet. He offered Ramza his hand. “Geoffrey Gaffgarion,” he

said.

Ramza stared at the man in front of him, smiling a little beneath his imposing mustache. His eyes flickered away from the older man to Radia, still staring fixedly down at her hands.

“Gaffgarion...of the Haruten?” Ramza said.

“Formerly,” Gaffgarion said. “Then again, no one's of them these days, eh?”

“You...” Ramza pulled away from the man, shaking his head. “The things you did-”

“First of all, boy,” grunted Gaffgarion. “*I* didn't do anything. I was charged with knowingly aiding war criminals in avoiding justice. Which is absolutely true, but it brings me to my second point, which is why I got off with a discharge and am not rotting in prison.”

“What do you...” Ramza started, trailing off as he realized he was unsure what he was asking.

Gaffgarion smiled again. “How many stories have you been told now?” he asked. “About your brothers, and the Corps, and the Hokuten?”

Stories like Gustav being responsible for the taking of the Marquis, all by himself. Stories like discharging the Corps without pay to protect the interests of all Ivalice, not just Larg and the Hokuten. Stories like Zalbaag doing anything to get Teta back.

“Someone in Ivalice had to take the fall for what we'd done during the war,” Gaffgarion continued. “It was the only way to broker a peace with the Ordallians. So the Haruten command took the fall for every crime Ivalice stood accused of, at the behest of king and country.” He chuckled.

“And of course, at the promise of gil and favors, when things had settled down.”

“You let them dishonor you for money?” Ramza asked.

Gaffgarion guffawed. “Dishonor!” he exclaimed. “You don't really believe that tripe, do ya?”

“Of course I do!” Ramza shouted. “I'm a Beoulve!”

“So're your brothers,” Gaffgarion said. “Do they seem honorable to you?”

Ramza felt his anger collapsing in on itself. The pain and dizziness surged in like the tide, and he sank back against his pillows.

“What are you doing, Dad?” Radia demanded.

Gaffgarion shrugged. “I have some contracts to straighten out nearby” he said. “Thought I'd check on the place, make sure it was still standing. I didn't expect-”

“No, Dad,” Radia hissed. “What are you doing to him?”

Gaffgarion laughed. “Doing?” he asked. “Besides letting him sleep in *my* bed?” His eyes glittered. “I'm making a point.”

“What point?” Radia growled.

“The same point *you* keep refusing to hear,” Gaffgarion retorted. “This idiot notion that there's

a right cause to kill for—or, worse, that there's a way to fight on a battlefield without blood on your hands.” He turned baleful eyes on Ramza. “What you call honor is a nasty little word designed to keep idealistic fools like you in line,” Gaffgarion said. “Your brothers use it so the men who follow them can pretend their hands are cleaner than the men they fight. What are those fancy swords of yours? Justice and Service?”

Ramza didn't answer. Gaffgarion's eyes blazed. “The powerful do not serve those beneath them,” Gaffgarion said. “They are served *by* them. Mind, it's a mutually-beneficial arrangement. Under the aegis of their powerful protectors, their servants are safe. The rulers command the obedience of those they rule, and the ruled benefit from the power and authority of their ruler. Ruler or ruled, all the world runs on one principle: you use, and are used. Service is a nasty little word that pretties up that unpleasant truth. And do you know what you call it when you're used in the way your ruler wants?” Gaffgarion chuckled. “Honor. Nasty little word, eh?”

“You're wrong,” Radia whispered.

“Am I?” Gaffgarion sneered. “I've been keeping tabs on you and your friends, oh daughter mine. One of your commanders had a nice racket going in Dorter, didn't he?” Gaffgarion snorted. “I bet he called it justice. Revenge against the kingdom that had wronged him.”

“He was wrong!” Radia barked.

“Only because he got too big for his boots,” Gaffgarion countered. “Took the Marquis, and his death warrant was signed right there, because the nobles won't let you kill one of their own. They can't. Their order demands that any uprising be crushed, because it threatens their power. The rulers can't exist if the ruled won't stay ruled. 'Course, it's no different than what the Corps aimed to do.”

“That's...what?” Radia breathed, her eyes wide.

“Your *justice*,” Gaffgarion spat. “Killing soldiers just like you so you get the power you deserve.” Gaffgarion shook his head. “Justice is a nasty little word you use to pretend your violence isn't violence. That it's better somehow. Cleaner. It's not.” He grabbed at his glass and took a swift pull. “Killing's killing, whatever word you use.”

Through all of this, Ramza was silent. The words echoed across some vast gulf inside of him—the gulf that had been torn into him when Teta had been taken, that had widened when he'd heard of Argus' betrayal, when Miluda had died in front of him and Beowulf had bled on the side of the hill, that had yawned open to a gaping chasm when Teta had fallen from that bridge. Nothing felt right anymore. Nothing made sense. Justice. Service. Honor. Was Gaffgarion really wrong?

“So what do you believe?” someone asked. It took Ramza a moment to realize that he was the one who'd spoken.

Gaffgarion shrugged. "I believe I'm good at killing," Gaffgarion said. "When I kill, I don't call it justice. When I get used, I don't call it service. When I get paid, I don't call it dishonor. That makes me valuable. The rulers pay me well, because I won't pretend I'm not getting used."

Ramza shook his head. "That's not...how can you live like that?"

Gaffgarion grinned. "I'm still alive is *because* I live like that."

"You're wrong," Radia whispered.

"Am I?" Gaffgarion asked. "Look around you, Radia. Look what your so-called justice bought you. Far as I know, you're the only survivor of Zeakden. And were your friends really so honorable? So honorable? How many were rapists and murderers? Which doesn't really do much to distinguish them from the Hokuten-" He gestured towards Ramza. "-as your noble friend here learned. All your talk of honor and justice, and what did it get you?"

Radia closed her eyes, her jaw clenched. Gaffgarion studied his daughter for a long time, then shrugged, and turned back to Ramza.

"So what matter honor?" Gaffgarion asked. "You were born to good fortune, boy. Don't throw it away over a matter of childrens' stories. Go home."

"I..." Ramza closed his eyes again, remembered his time in Dycedarg's room, after Teta had been taken. Promises from Dycedarg and Zalbaag alike, to keep Teta save. And Zalbaag's wild justifications in the murderous snow around Zeakden. He couldn't go home, to his traitorous brothers. He couldn't wander those halls where Teta and Delita had once roamed with him. He couldn't face Alma, and admit he'd failed.

"I can't," Ramza said.

Silence in the room. Radia, watching her father with a mixture of hate and grief. Ramza, staring at Gaffgarion. Gaffgarion, not quite looking at either of them.

"You don't want to go home," Gaffgarion said. "So what do you want to do?"

"I..." Ramza shook his head. "I don't know." All his quests had ended in failure. His attempt to fight without killing. His attempt to spare the Death Corps, and see justice served. His attempt to save Teta, and when he'd failed there, to save Delita. Pointless. All of it, pointless.

Gaffgarion pursed his lips thoughtfully. "I see," he said. He closed his eyes, and exhaled through his nose. "He saved you?" Gaffgarion said.

Radia jolted, then gave a little nod. "Yeah."

Gaffgarion nodded slowly. "Alright," he said. "Alright." He opened those dangerous eyes, and studied Ramza for a moment. "Idiot my daughter may be, but I'd still rather her alive than dead. You have my thanks, Ramza. Stay here as long as you like."

Ramza stared at the man in turn, met his green eyes. This cruel man, who'd aided and abetted criminals and torturers and rapists, who spat on the notions of honor and justice, and who now offered him a place to stay.

“Thank you,” Ramza said.

“But I didn't pay all that gil for that bed so a spoiled noble bastard could sit his fat ass on it,” Gaffgarion grunted. “I want you well enough to sleep on the floor by week's end.”

Chapter 27: The Unknown World

...at what point was the Zodiac Brave Story added to the myth of St. Ajora? At what point in his service in the Ydoran army and his revolutionary preaching across Ivalice was he supposed to be a legendary warrior wielding artifacts given unto him by God himself? Yes, I can point to the Glabados Conclaves that incorporates these apocryphal accounts, and rest smug and satisfied on my secular throne. But the timeline is even more muddled than common sense would suggest. Yes, the legend of the Zodiac Braves predates the official Church account, and the evolving Glabados Church made a conscious choice to incorporate elements of this older story into their religious text. But even early versions of the Ajora Gospels feature references and allusions to his time as one of the Zodiac Braves. How much is political artifice? How much the inevitable bloat of myth over time? And how much is accurate historical account?

-Alazlam Durai, "On the Origins of the Zodiac Braves"

By week's end, that had been Gaffgarion's order, but the next day the white-haired mercenary was bustling around the kitchen, packing supplies for the road.

"Contract work," he explained, to Ramza's sleepy questions. "Just got word of an especially lucrative job." He pointed with one gauntleted hand. "I still want you out of my bed when I get back."

Razma nodded. Gaffgarion left without another word.

When the pressure in his bladder or his bowels got too strong, Razma would rise from his resting place and stumble towards the bathroom. He couldn't help but admire it: it was Ydoran-style construction, smooth and clean and convenient as any of the lavatories in the Manor. Work like this cost a fortune, just like the bed. Exactly how much gil did Gaffgarion have?

Ramza heard the door creak open. He tensed upon the toilet.

"Ramza?" Radia called. Ramza felt a flush rising in his cheeks, a wave of hot shame in his chest.

"Just...just a moment!" he called back.

"Take your time!" she said.

Right, take his time with the beautiful woman who'd tried to kill him and the woman who'd successfully saved him sitting right outside the door. Make as much noise as possible.

But he didn't exactly want to limp back to bed still feeling this uncomfortable.

He tried to finish without making any noise. He failed in one ghastly gaseous spattering splash, and his cheeks felt hotter, and his chest felt tighter.

He finished, flushing the toilet and cleaning himself up with the bidet. He stepped out of the bathroom, trying not to make eye contact with Radia, who was busily cooking in front of the fire again.

"You're walking better," she said, stirring something in a broad black pan.

"I guess," Ramza muttered. He didn't feel any stronger: every step seemed to make his joints creak, and he was lurching awkwardly from side to side.

"You can walk," she said. "So that's a start." She raised herself away from the fire and scooped out a steaming pile of scrambled eggs, half in one bowl, half in another. "Sit," she said, gesturing to the circular dining room table of bright polished wood. Ramza sat in one of the rickety chairs, feeling it bow a little beneath his weight, and Radia slid the bowl in front of him. "Eat," she said, sitting opposite him.

Ramza ate. The eggs were slimy in some places, charred in others, but wonderfully seasoned. Ramza ate greedily, then felt saliva thick in his mouth as bile rose in his throat. He sank back against his chair, taking slow, deep breaths to quell the queasy feeling.

"Don't eat too fast," Radia said.

Ramza nodded, and looked around the cottage again. Small, but ornately furnished.

"Your father's away a lot?" Ramza asked. Radia nodded, her eyes closed as she ate, slowly but persistently. "Who looks after the place?"

She swallowed and said, "No one."

"No one?" Ramza repeated, looking at the mattress, the table, the furnishings. Fully-stocked and totally unguarded? How was that possible?"

Radia shrugged. "Part of it's his rep," she said. "Everyone knows this is Gaffgarion's house."

"What's the other part?" Ramza asked.

She set her fork down and studied him. "You strong enough to go outside?" she asked.

"I...I think so."

"Okay." Radia got to her feet, grabbed a light blanket, and wrapped it around Ramza like a shawl. She led him to the heavy wooden door, and shoved it open. A chill breeze rattled the door on its hinges, carrying with it the heavy tang of sea salt: Ramza felt goosebumps racing down his arms and legs.

A thick layer of mist hung heavy in every direction, rimming the little stone house. Somewhere nearby, he could hear the crashing of the ocean against rocks. From where he was standing, Ramza could see what almost looked like a wooden shack, off to one side.

"What's that?" he asked, raising his voice a little to be heard over the crashing surf.

"My room," she said. "Dad added it on when mom died."

She walked slowly around the side of the house, towards a slope. Ramza followed, stumbling as he went, the back of his head pounding, his knees croaking in protest.

He reached the crest of the slope and hunched over in the mist, panting as his lungs and muscles burned with the effort. Every breath seemed to make his head spin worse, and he teetered, about to fall. Radia's arm wrapped around him, helped him to his feet. She kept him stable as he breathed, and the spinning in his head lessened.

“You good?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. He turned cautiously, wary of any fresh spins. Surrounding this remote cottage was a wide expanse of empty green, hidden by the mist that ghosted between rolling hills. Behind them, a jagged cliff overlooked the wide grey expanse of the churning sea. Farther down the coast, Ramza could just make a tall shape, tapering to a point at its apex, with a fire burning at that highest point.

“What...” Ramza said, gesturing towards that distant shape.

“Midnight's Deep,” Radia said.

“Midnight's...” Ramza trailed off and stared at her. “Elidibus' tomb?”

Radia snorted. “Tomb?” she repeated. “They never found his body, Ramza. Plus he built the place himself.”

“He...” Ramza squinted his eyes, trying to make out that grand structure through the mist. He'd heard tales of the Deep, straddling that peculiar border between Lionel and Gallione, a towering construct built into and atop the cliffs. It functioned, first and foremost, as a lighthouse, to warn incoming ships of the treacherous coastline. And there were other stories, odder stories, about Ydoran wonders and ancient treasures and ancient secrets spirited away by the wizard...

But he'd never heard anything about the legendary mage building it himself.

“Was he really that powerful?” Ramza asked.

Radia shrugged. “Dunno. He died when my father was a kid. I thought Balbanes knew him?”

Ramza gave her a surprised look. “He did?”

“He never told you?”

“There...” Ramza shook his head, fingering the ponytail he wore in the style of his father. There was so much he'd never asked. So much he'd never learned.

They stood together, her arm wrapped around him, staring at the lofty relic of a bygone legend.

“Wait,” Ramza said. “We're...that's Midnight's Deep?” He turned to stare at her. “We're that far south?”

“Yep,” Radia said.

“How...” Ramza trailed off. They'd been on the north side of the continent, straddling the border between Fovoham and Gallione. How the hell had she managed to get them this far south?

“Wasn't easy,” Radia said. “But it's the only safe place I know.” She almost smiled. “That's why we were hiding out in the swamp, y'know. I used to go hiking around there, when I was younger.”

“How old are you?” Ramza asked.

“Seventeen. You?”

“Sixteen.”

They kept talking: that afternoon, and over the many days to come. Ramza got stronger, moved more easily, helped Radia clean and cook, helped her restore the runes and the magic of the place. He learned about the cottage he'd come to: built where a Ydoran lighthouse and stood, before the Fall. The house's plumping connected to an ancient Ydoran system built right into the cliffs, and retained enough of its magic to be quite comfortable. The closest village was a few miles southwest, running along the fringes of the swamp where Ramza had first met Radia.

Gaffgarion had built the house well before the Haruten had been disbanded, finishing it in the latter days of the war. Radia, too, had lost her mother to the Choking Plague. She had been raised in Limberry, but after her mother's death, Gaffgarion had returned home long enough to take her to his cottage. She had grown up here in the latter days of the war, seeing her father but rarely.

He told her of his father, too, and of his sister and his brothers. He told her of Delita and Teta, what had happened to all their parents, how they'd grown up under Balbanes' care and protection. He tried and failed to teach her to play grass flutes.

Late one sunny afternoon, they walked along the cliff's edge, shielding their eyes against the sunshine reflecting off the ocean.

“The Draining Blade?” Ramza repeated.

“Or the hungry blade,” Radia said. “Or the Vampire's Sword. There's a lot of names, but they all mean the same thing.”

“He taught you?” Ramza asked.

Radia shrugged. “A bit. He's not here often, and...”

She trailed off. The resentment between her and her father had been obvious from the moment Ramza had first seen them together: it was much clearer now, seeing how she simmered every time she begrudgingly talked about her father and his life.

“I've never heard of it,” Ramza said.

“It's not like the Bursting Blade,” Radia said. “There aren't really schools for it. In theory, anyone can learn, but it's hard. It's not the way magic usually works, so...”

She trailed off, studying Ramza, who had stopped walking and was staring out over the ocean. Thinking of Zalbaag and Wiegraf, and Gaffgarion's words.

“You okay?” she asked.

“I...” Ramza shook his head. “No.”

Radia sighed. “I hear ya.”

The waves kept crashing down below. The contrast between the chilly, wet breeze and the golden sun upon Ramza's skin made him feel a little unsteady, a little strange.

“You taught Miluda?” Ramza asked.

“I...” Radia closed her eyes. “Yeah.”

“So you must be good.”

Radia shook her head. “I'm really not,” she said. “She was, though. She learned so...but if it was my dad, he...” Her voice took on that familiar strain. “The thing is, the art's about stealing your enemy's strength, and using it for you. The things I do are...like, you saw me when I hurt your friend.”

Argus, slumping atop his chocobo, so weak he could barely move. Argus, bleeding in the snow, cursing at Ramza. Ghosts and sins, no matter where he turned.

“I was just...I couldn't stand, either,” Radia said. “But if it was my dad, that...that would've made him *stronger*.” She shook her head. “I don't do it right. I couldn't teach them...not really...not enough to...”

Her words faded into the rising wind. The salt stung at Ramza's nostrils. The ocean roared and crashed down below.

They meandered inside, silent, lost in their own worlds. Ramza remembered his brother's order, and Argus' arrow: Teta, with blood plastering her hair to her face, and Delita kneeling in the snow as the fort collapsed around him.

“Radia,” Ramza said, as the door swung shut behind them, silencing the wind. “Why did you join the Corps?”

Radia didn't answer right away. She shrugged off her blanket and curled up on the sofa. Ramza took his customary place on a dining room chair he'd pulled up beside the fireplace.

“You've heard the Zodiac Brave Story?” Radia asked.

Ramza hesitated, caught off-guard by the question and the peculiar discomfort he always felt when people asked about his religious beliefs. But her eyes were on the ceiling, not quite looking at him, and anyways she didn't seem a particularly fervent believer herself.

“Ajora's band, right?” Ramza asked. “The Disciples who slew the demons corrupting the Ydoran Empire.”

Radia snorted. "That's the Church's story, yeah," Radia said. "Not sure I buy it."

"There's another story?" Ramza asked.

"An older story," Radia said. "My dad says it predates the rise of the Ydorans."

Ramza had never heard of such a thing. "Tell me," Ramza said.

Radia leaned back in her chair. "Before the Ydorans," Radia said. "Before Ajora. Before the Fall. Ivalice was a nation of seven kingdoms. I think you know them?"

"Gallione," Ramza said. "Fovoham, Lionel, Mullonde, Zeltennia, Lesalia, and Limberry."

"Right," Radia said, and her words assumed a dreamy, poetic cadence. "The kingdoms were always at war. They'd form coalitions against their mutual enemies, then betray their allies for a fleeting advantage. All Ivalice bled, over and over, and no man could rise above. One King of Lesalia decided he would put an end to the madness. He would form an army that could not be resisted, and conquer Ivalice. He learned ancient magics, he spent gold and blood and lives, until he summoned the Lucavi."

"Demons," Ramza said.

Radia shook her head. "Demons is too light a word," she said. "The Lucavi were devastation incarnate. They could obliterate whole castles and armies. They could burn whole nations. The first thing they did was slay the king and destroy his castle, and then they set across the seven nations, bringing disaster wherever they went. They might have laid all Ivalice to waste."

"Except for the Braves?" Ramza asked, smiling a little.

"Except for the Braves," Radia agreed, smiling in turn. "Who took on the difficult task of slaying the terrible monsters." Her voice lost its storyteller's rhythm. "Who they were varies each time I've heard the story. They're Ajora's Disciples from the far corners of Ivalice, united under our savior to do God's work. They're mercenaries, nobles, commoners, mages, local heroes, foreign heroes. The best version I ever heard had the son of the King who summoned the Lucavi take up the mantle, finishing his father's work by mercy and kindness, not magic and conquest."

"Isn't there a bit about crystals?" Ramza asked.

"The Zodiac Stones," Radia said. "One for each of the Constellations, each blessed with remarkable powers. The Glabados Church says that they were gifts from God to his prophet, Ajora. They say the months are still named for them."

"I remember that," Ramza said.

"But I don't think the story *needs* the Stones," Radia said. "I mean, I guess it's a way of leveling the playing field? They're fighting demons, so they need a gift from God, right? I just...what mattered to me..."

Radia closed her eyes. Ramza waited.

"In every version of the story," Radia said. "In every version, the Braves aren't from one army or one nation. They aren't all nobles, they aren't all commoners, they aren't all men of God. They're just people trying to do the right thing."

"Heroes," Ramza said.

Radia nodded. She was silent for a while, leaving Ramza to his own weary thoughts. Heroes. Men like his father, fighting to end a war. But what about his brothers? Was Dycedarg one, if he turned friends against one another to win a future war? Was Zalbaag, if he ordered a defenseless woman shot? Was Wiegraf?

Ramza still believed in heroes. He just wasn't sure there had ever been very many of them.

"I thought the Corps..." Radia began. Ramza looked up and found she still had her eyes closed. "I thought they were heroes. And I always...I always wanted to be one."

"So you joined them?" Ramza said.

"So I joined them," Radia agreed. "I thought...but..." She shook her head. "It wasn't like that, was it? The things Gustav and Gregory did...hell, even Captain Miluda..." She gave him an odd look. "And then there was you."

"Me?" Ramza said.

"Teta told me you were trying not to kill anyone," Radia said. Ramza felt a sharp pang of guilt and grief mixing with all his other pains. Teta, who he'd failed to save. Just like Delita. Just like Argus.

"Look where it got me," Ramza whispered.

"I didn't believe her," Radia said, as though she hadn't heard him. "I didn't think anyone could be that stupid."

Ramza felt a warm flush in his cheeks. "It...it was stupid," he agreed.

"So stupid," she agreed. "But you did it. You did it, and you beat me, and..."

She trailed off. Silence, as Ramza thought of Teta, and Delita, and of his sword in Argus' back.

"I was lying there," she said. "Sure I was about to die, sure that...and then you didn't, and...and I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe I was still alive. I thought I was...I thought I was gonna die, right there. And then..."

Ramza remembered. The cold Plateau, and the dead all around.

"I didn't know why I was alive," Radia said. "I didn't know why we'd taken Teta, or why Miluda had hurt her, or why she was dead, or..." She buried her face in her hands. "Like the world had ended, you know?"

Ramza remembered Zeakden collapsing in geysers of fire. His last glimpse of Delita, before the

bridge had fallen.

“I know,” Ramza said.

“Nothing made sense,” Radia said. “And everything I tried just made it worse. Just...” She shifted so her eyes were just visible above her hands. “The fort was coming down,” Radia said. “And you were the only one I could find.”

Ramza looked into her green eyes. He touched the spot on the back of his head, still sore but free of its bandage. He wondered what had gone through her head, when she'd found him. He wondered if she'd thought about killing him. He was scared to ask.

“I don't know what to do, Ramza,” she said. “I just...I don't.”

Ramza didn't know what to say, so he said nothing.

Minutes, or moments, or hours passed in silence before the key turned in the lock. They both looked up as Gaffgarion entered the room, still wearing that customized mesh of plate and mail. His helmet of the same dark color was under one arm.

“Still with us, Beoulve?” he asked.

“I am, sir,” Ramza said.

“Hmph.” Gaffgarion set his helmet down on the table, grabbed a dining room chair and hauled it closer to them. He sat squarely between them. Radia had straightened up, her face white, eyes carefully averted from her father.

“Well, Beoulve,” Gaffgarion asked. “You won't go home. What do you want to do?”

Ramza didn't know. Had he ever known? Even back at the Academy, he'd had no clear objective. He'd always known he could never live up to the example of his brothers, and now he had no desire to, having seen and heard the monstrous things that they had done. But even they hadn't stabbed a man they'd saved in the back. How could Ramza embody the values of a Beoulve, when he saved a man one day and murdered him the next? When he swore not to kill, and led an injured band into the jaws of a vicious army? When he couldn't even save his friends?

“I don't know,” Ramza said.

“Hmph.” Gaffgarion drew out his pipe, packed it, lit it, and began to smoke. Silence presided over his cottage.

“When I left the Haruten,” Gaffgarion said. “I did so on very particular terms. I liked the work I did, and I wanted to keep doing it. I call myself a mercenary, but that's not quite the right word. I'm a specialist. A man who knows both politics and combat. A man who gets the diplomatic and the military. A man you can trust to train green troops or fight in a difficult spot or handle a delicate job.”

“A hired thug,” spat Radia, not looking at her father.

“The whole world is hired thugs, oh daughter mine,” Gaffgarion said. “The difference is that I know what I am.” He puffed on his pipe again.

“But I was looking at these most recent contracts,” Gaffgarion said. “And the work they need, well...it's work I can handle, but it's work that would be easier with the right, ah...” Gaffgarion studied his pipe for a moment. “Specialists.”

Ramza stared into Gaffgarion's glittering eyes. “Specialists,” Ramza repeated.

“Oh yes,” Gaffgarion said. “I'm quite well-known in certain circles so while I was looking at my new jobs for the season I floated the idea of expanding my unit with new specialists—say, an Academy-trained soldier with extensive experience operating under difficult mission parameters.” He set his pipe down as his words drifted across Ramza's mind. “There was some interest, Beoulve. And just as much interest when I mentioned a soldier with skills similar to mine and extensive experience dealing with covert operations and rebellions.”

Radia's white face whitened further, and her hands curled into fists in her lap. “I told you, I would never—”

“Never what?” Gaffgarion asked. “Never fight for an ignoble cause? You know that ship sailed with Gustav, if not before. You may as well get paid.”

“I would rather—” she started.

“Rather what!” Gaffgarion shouted. “Fight and die in some pointless war? What have you ever done that mattered, Radia?”

Father and daughter glared at each other, green eyes on green eyes.

“I'm sorry,” Ramza said, as his thoughts caught up to the conversation. “Are you...are you saying...”

Gaffgarion looked away from his daughter. “I'd like to add you to my team,” he said. “Specialists who handle complex jobs.”

“I...” Ramza shook his head. “I don't understand.” Things felt very strange, very surreal, and he couldn't quite make sense of any of it. “Why would you...I don't...”

“He wants to use you, Ramza,” Radia said.

“Of course I do!” Gaffgarion said. “That's the way of the world! We all use each other. Ideally, we all benefit from that use equally. Like a marriage.”

“Oh please—” Radia said.

“I loved your mother, Radia,” Gaffgarion said. “I married her for love. So let me assure you that any vainglorious notions you have of selfless love are idiotic and uninformed. We used each other. For money, for comfort, for passion. That's all anyone ever does.” Gaffgarion shrugged, looked

between them. "So I want to use you, and let you use me in turn. See the world, far from your brothers. See the world, far from your rebels. And put a little gil in your pocket, too."

"What do you get out of this?" Ramza asked.

Gaffgarion lifted his pipe back to his mouth and took a smirking puff. "There's two answers to that question," he said. "The way I see it, you travel with me and see the world. You learn I'm right, and you go home, and use your power the way it should be used, and when that day comes you remember your old friend Gaffgarion who showed you the way." He snorted. "And even if you decide I'm wrong, you'll learn enough about the world to know a man like me has his uses. You're a useful protege to have."

"And the other?" Ramza asked.

Gaffgarion closed his eyes and took another puff from his pipe.

"When a man takes his first step onto a battlefield, he thinks himself a hero," Gaffgarion mused. "Everyone tells themselves a story, about...about what they're fighting for, and how they'll fight. How they'll be better. How they'll prove them all wrong."

Gaffgarion set his pipe down. He opened his eyes, and for the first time since Ramza had met him, they didn't look that dangerous. They looked a little tired, and a little sad, and a little wistful.

"And every man learns," he said. "How wrong they were. What's required from the very best of us. Even men your like father." He sighed. "I will not coddle you, boy. I will not spare you. But I can help you walk an easier path than I did." He looked at his daughter. "I can help you both."

Ramza stared at the strange, mercenary man, who'd spat on notions of honor and justice and service, on everything a Beoulve was supposed to hold dear, but what Beoulve held them dear now, when Zalbaag ordered the death of innocents and Dycedrag let good soldiers starve to solidify Larg's place upon the throne and Ramza couldn't save anyone, could only swing his sword and kill his friends?

If his father hadn't been telling him the truth...if honor and justice and service were empty words...

If that were true, Ramza hadn't failed. He'd only been a fool.

"May I have some time to think about it?" Ramza asked.

Gaffgarion laughed. "I leave for my first contract tomorrow," Gaffgarion said. "You have until then."

Ramza nodded, rose from his seat, and headed for the door. He needed air, sunlight, clarity. He left the cottage behind him, made his way up the slope, and stood at the cliff's edge, looking out at the magnificent lighthouse cairn. Erected in the honor of a mage unequaled in the history of Ivalice. A

hero of the 50 Years' War. A killer even more prolific than his father.

Ramza fingered his ponytail again. Not as long as his father's, even now. They had called him the Heavenly Knight, because he had swung his sword and killed so many. And Ramza wasn't saying it was the wrong thing to do, but it was still murder. That was the problem Ramza kept coming back to. What was the difference between what Gustav had done to Ivan's friend and what Ramza had done to Argus? What difference in betrayal, intention, action? What made Gustav unjust?

"Ramza."

Ramza looked over his shoulder, as Radia ascended the slope and came to a stop a little ways behind him. He turned away from Midnight's Deep to face her.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"I..." Ramza shook his head. "I don't know." He tried to parse together the right words that could explain it: how he'd understood on some level what war and killing were, that he had idolized his brothers and his father, how he still idolized his father but he felt queasy at the notion of his brothers, how he felt like such a profound fucking failure because he couldn't save Teta and Delita and he hadn't been strong enough to stop Miluda and he had always felt like there was no place for him in the world but never more than at this moment.

"What about you?" Ramza asked, barely able to hear himself through the clamor of his thoughts.

Radia shook her head. "I..." She looked past Ramza, out to the lighthouse, and Ramza craned his neck to follow her gaze. They stared at Midnight's Deep together, while the ocean pounded against the rocks below.

"I never wanted my father's life," Radia said. "Not when he was in the Haruten, not after. I...he's always been like this, Ramza. He's always..." She shook her head. "He told me about the Zodiac Braves," Radia said. "Because he wanted me to know that...that they weren't real. That they're just a story so the people in charge can...can play pretend, and..."

She looked down at her feet. "Was he wrong?"

Honor. Justice. Service.

"I don't know," Ramza said.

The surf kept pounding against the cliffs.

"Not wrong," Ramza said, and it hurt to say it. The words caught in his throat, because he heard echoes of his last moments with his father, promising that Ramza could embody the virtues of his family, and how had Ramza repaid him? Justice, when the innocent died and Ramza killed his friends? Service, when Ramza fought and tormented men and women whose only crime was rebelling against

Dycedarg's broken promise?

“Not wrong,” he said again, more surely this time. “Not...not right.” No, not right. Because his father's words were with him, and whatever else he had seen, he still knew Balbanes had been a worthy soul. He remembered his father's plea, that he should show his brothers what it meant to be a Beoulve.

The problem was, Ramza had no idea what that meant anymore. Every part of the strange journey from the Academy had robbed him of those notions. He didn't believe the Crown, or his brothers, cared much for the common people of Ivalice. He didn't agree with what the Corps had done, but he didn't know what other choice they'd had. He knew so little. And he had failed, time and time again, to achieve anything worthwhile. He was alive, where so many others had died.

Gustav. Ivan. Miluda. Beowulf. Argus. Teta. Delita. He let their names wash over him, and remembered his last sight of them—of bodies burning on pyres, bleeding in the snow, kneeling with arms around their sister's corpse as Zeakden crumbled around them.

“I don't know enough to know,” Ramza said. “And your father, he...”

Gaffgarion was a lousy man of a poor reputation, and Ramza knew better than to trust him. But he knew that in part because the man made it so clear he didn't want to be trusted. He mocked honor, justice, and service. He called them nasty little words. But at least he didn't hide behind them. Didn't that make him better than Dycedarg and Zalbaag?

Ramza didn't know. And he was suddenly, terribly conscious of how little he knew. About the lives of others, and his own family. About how Ivalice really worked, at its highest levels and at its lowest. He had always felt daunted by the responsibilities that came with being a Beoulve: now he found he didn't fully understand those responsibilities, or the world around him.

He didn't know. And he wanted to know. He wanted to make sense of his brothers, and the Death Corps, and everything he had seen. He wanted Delita's death to mean something.

“Your father wants to show me something,” Ramza said.

“He wants you to end up like him,” Radia said. “He wants *me* to end up like him.”

“I know,” Ramza said. “But at least...at least he tells me that.” He felt tears burning in his eyes, and looked away from Radia so she wouldn't see. “I'm so tired of...of people lying, and...”

He choked back a sob fighting its ways up his throat. He shut his eyes and clenched his jaw and flinched against the faces of the lying and the dead looking back at him from the darkness.

“I know,” Radia said.

The waves crashed down below, a muted roar rumbling just under the skin of their silence.

Whatever work Gaffgarion had for them would be different. It would be bloody. Ramza would have to kill again, and that thought didn't scare him the way it once had. What did it matter, after he'd

stabbed his blade through Argus' back?

But the idea of doing it alone scared him.

"I'd feel better," Ramza said. "If it was...if it was both of us."

He looked back at her, now that his eyes were no longer burning. Radia stared past him, out to the horizon.

"I need to know I can leave," Radia said. "Whenever, okay? If I say go--"

"We go," Ramza said. "And I'll..." He swallowed. "I'll go with you, if you'll..." He looked down sheepishly. "I owe you that."

Radia took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Then she nodded. "Okay," she said.

Ramza turned away from the ocean, and the cairn. He walked towards her, stopped just in front of her. Her eyes were still closed. "Thank you," Ramza said.

Radia nodded again. Ramza hesitated, feeling his ponytail tickling at the nape of his neck. "Radia," he started. "Do you...do you have a knife?"

She blinked her eyes open, her mouth twisting to one side. She studied him for a long time. Ramza didn't know what she saw, looking at him: he only knew what he saw, looking at her. The red hair, a little cleaner now, and the green eyes so unlike her fathers, that looked just a little hurt and just a little angry. Powerful eyes, emotional eyes, but not dangerous eyes. This woman was powerful, but she was not a predator.

She reached down to her side, and pulled a knife out from its sheathe. She flipped it casually and handed it to Ramza, handle first. He took it from her, and in one quick, aching tug severed his ponytail, feeling his straw-blond hair itching its way down his neck and back.

Nothing like his father. And he had no idea how he could be. He needed to know what the world really was, before he could ever try again.

He handed the knife back to her, and they trudged their way back down the hill, shoved open the door and found Gaffgarion still sitting in the living room with a drink in hand. He examined them indifferently. "Well?" he asked.

"We'll do it," Radia said. "But we leave whenever we want. What's our cut of the profits?"

Gaffgarion cocked his head. His eyes flickered to Ramza. "She speaks for you?"

"She probably knows your tricks better than I do," Ramza said..

Gaffgarion grinned. "60-20-20," he said. "But you forfeit your share if any job goes unfinished."

Radia nodded. Gaffgarion rose to his feet. "So!" he said. "I'm a commander again!" He clapped his hands together. "Clean your shit off my bed, boy. You're taking the couch."

...invisible forces. The web of chance, consequence, and decision is so complex, it boggles investigation or explanation. Again and again I come before this wall, in every research and every work. The Death Corps rebellion mattered, of course—its example inspired countless imitators through the years to come, which festered and disrupted and made the War of the Lions a still more difficult slog. But that such a relatively inconsequential rebellion could have such far-reaching consequences! The more I look, the more I find. How the Glabados Church found the lever by which they'd move Ivalice. How the Hokuten gained the experience they needed to challenge the Nanten. How Ramza Beoulve fell in with Geoffrey Gaffgarion. And, most importantly, how it could have set Delita Heiral on the path that would make him King of Ivalice. I fear I still have so much more to learn in my search for truth.

-Alazlam Durai, "Letter to the Dean of Historical Studies at the College of Lesalia"