

Prologue

Shifting Focus

Some Time Ago

Commander Ressa Ka'ai's gaze followed the telv man as he walked out of the tavern before taking another drink of ale and sighing. She looked down at the small piece of paper she held in her hand that only had one thing written on it. A name of some contact in Rosale.

“So, you leave tomorrow,” Alexi, her second said quietly, taking care to keep his voice low. They weren't in danger of being caught as imperials, but one couldn't be too careful.

She nodded absently. For the first time since he'd been assigned to her squad, they were separating. The man that had just left had passed on orders for her to travel to Rosale to find passage to Avira, where she was to gather as much information as possible on the state of the kingdom as she traveled to the northern front. Ressa had the most steps of anyone in the empire, and her magic was needed to fight the Avirans who were pushing back against the Relena cursed Turest Order despite advances the empire was making on its own.

Even if the Sovereigns had agreed to a ceasefire at the cost of significant gains the empire had made, traveling through their lands would *not* be permitted. Half of all the land had been handed back. As if her countrymen hadn't fought and died for it by the thousands. The losses in the Second Battle of Marketbol alone made up a significant portion of that.

The Sovereigns may have tried to push harder on what her people *had* kept if they weren't moving to free a city that the Avirans had helpfully 'liberated' from imperial occupation. That the Avirans had then forgotten that the point of liberation wasn't to then *keep* the city didn't seem to cross their minds.

Rosale would be her first challenge. There, she would need to craft a new identity, one that could blend seamlessly into Rosalian society. The next few seasons would be critical, her every move calculated to avoid detection while securing passage to Avira. Work, or the guise of it, would be essential in facilitating her travel.

Ressa's gaze drifted back to Alexi, seeing the unspoken concern in his eyes. “Easy,” she echoed, though the word tasted like ash in her mouth. Just another illusion to maintain, another role to play in the grand chessboard of war that had consumed western Ikios. But beneath the stoic facade, the gears of her mind whirred, dissecting every potential obstacle, every opportunity that lay in the path ahead.

She'd come far since her failure in Marketbol. She wouldn't fail again.

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The night grew deeper, the tavern's ambiance a backdrop to the silent promise she made to herself and her people. She would navigate the complexities of Rosale, find her way to Avira, and emerge victorious. For her empire, for her fallen comrades, Ressa Ka'ai would become anyone she needed to be. The journey would be fraught with danger and deception, but a Fist of the Empire was no stranger to either.

As the hour waned, Ressa and Alexi shared a final drink, a silent toast to the mission and the uncertain future. When dawn broke, she would step into the unknown, a lone agent in enemy lands. But she was prepared, her resolve as unyielding as the empire she served.



Ressa let out a light groan as she picked up the crate of supplies, purposely flexing her muscles to make it seem as if she were straining. The man across from her, a middle-aged sun elf with a glint of amusement in his eyes, let out a chuckle, balancing a similar crate in his hands. "Doin' alright over there?" he teased, his voice carrying over the hustle and bustle of the

"Yeah, I'm good," Ressa replied, adding an ever so slight waver to her voice. A tuft of hair fell into her face, and she blew it away with a huff. "Just a bit heavy. What does Lady Gears have in here anyways?"

They moved together, part of a stream of people all converging towards the *Wanderlust*, the ship that promised to take them to the skies. "That one's spare parts," the man answered, his stride confident and easy despite the load he carried.

"Makes sense," Ressa mumbled, more to herself than to him. Despite her mission, she couldn't help but feel a twinge of excitement at the thought of what lay ahead. The ship, a marvel of engineering and magic, stood ready to embark on a journey that would take them beyond the familiar horizons. Or at least that of the Rosalians around her. She'd integrated herself quite well.

They got everything loaded and ready to go. Supplies and people were good. Berths assigned.

Tomorrow Reinhart and her entourage would arrive, including the traitor Nemura.

After ensuring the crate was securely stowed away with the rest of the supplies, Ressa made her way to the small room that would be hers for the duration of the journey. The space was cramped, barely enough for a bunk and two small chests for personal belongings, but it was sufficient for her needs. She didn't plan on spending much time here, anyway.

She placed her small bag on the bottom bed and turned to the mirror that hung on the wall, a luxury she hadn't expected in such a modest cabin. The reflection that stared back at her was not her

own, at least not the one she was born with. Instead of her natural green skin, her reflection showed the delicate features and soft brown hue of a sun elf. Her eyes were now a vibrant shade of orange that was common amongst the sun elves.

Ressa studied her illusion to make sure it was still solid. Crafting it hadn't been easy, but it was essential for her mission. And one requiring subtlety and deception. They were skills that were not her usual fare but that she had adapted to with surprising adeptness.

The illusion was more than just a disguise; it was a new identity, one that allowed her to move freely among those who would see her as an enemy if they knew her true nature. She had been living under this guise since being in Rosale, and it was holding up well. Still, the constant vigilance it required was exhausting. Every reflection, every shadow threatened to reveal her secret.

As she turned away from the mirror, Ressa reminded herself of the importance of her mission. She was here to gather intelligence, to learn of the Kingdom of Avira's weaknesses and strengths, and to find a way to the northern front. The *Wanderlust* was her passage to Lehelia, and from there, she would make her way into the heart of Avira.

But first, she needed to blend in, to become another face among those working on the skyship. As she lay down on the bed, Ressa thought back to her short interaction with the young raithe girl—Mariel—who was Sloane's adopted daughter, apparently. Something that had happened sometime since the group arrived in Rosale.

There was something about her, despite her being a teenager. Ressa had gotten used to gauging how strong people were over the last year. And that girl was dangerous. In fact, all of those around the terran were. Ressa would have to be careful, but despite being careful, she had wanted to take the opportunity to meet the girl, and not with her current illusion in place.

Ressa could only maintain one identity illusion at a time, and she couldn't tweak it. It had been a risk to show her orkun self to the girl, but it was better than being recognized on the ship. Despite her feelings about Reinhart, Ressa wasn't here for them.

For now, though, she needed rest and the days ahead would be challenging. Especially if she had to avoid the terran and Nemura. The light from the corridor went out and her room was enveloped in darkness. Ressa closed her eyes and let herself drift off to sleep.



Beginning of Winter

General Dellona Raloren smoothed down her coat for the umpteenth time in the last quarter bell. She glanced around, seeing all of the other women in their dresses, aware of their whispers as they silently judged her. *As if they have any reason to.*

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They could keep their curiosity and veiled disdain to themselves. It was inconsequential to her; the fate of Meris hovered on a knife edge, and it was only the machinations of the consul that allowed them a semblance of continued sovereignty.

She didn't believe for a second that her nation's value of self-determination was at play here.

The grand hall of Barbeck was lavishly decorated, with crystal chandeliers casting a soft glow over the assembled nobility and military officers. Despite the opulence, Dellona felt out of place, her military attire stark against the sea of silks and satins. Her gaze lingered on the faces around her, trying to discern potential allies from assured foes, though she knew such distinctions were likely meaningless.

Throughout the evening, she kept to the sides of the hall, drinking a bit of wine here and there and trying some finger foods that would make one of her troops cry. It was so good. After several weeks of what they ate at camp, she was nearly moved to tears herself.

As things started waning and the crowded room started to thin out, an attendant approached her.

The telv's posture was stiff with formality. "General Raloren, the Consul is ready for you now," he informed her, his voice low but steady, as if the very walls held ears eager to listen.

Following the attendant through the throng, Dellona's mind raced. Marcus Eliron, the second consul, was a man of considerable influence and cunning. His invitation had been unexpected, and she couldn't help but wonder what game he was playing. She was used to dealing with politicians, but none had frustrated her more than him.

Focus. Finish the meeting then I can head back.

Entering a smaller, more intimate room, she was greeted by the sight of Consul Eliron and a young man she did not recognize. The Consul's eyes were sharp, his smile calculated as he introduced the young man as Prince Adrian, the first prince of the Kingdom of Meris. The prince's handshake was firm, his gaze curious, yet cautious.

Why is a Merisan prince here?

She didn't have to wait long for the answer.

"Prince Adrian has seen the benefits of association with our glorious republic. The Duchy of Tilorl has caused an unexpected delay in our plans."

Before she could respond, he held up a hand. "I do not blame you general. Prince Adrian, here, has a role to play after our victory. The Tilorans are a notoriously proud people. We will win them over by not deposing House Tilorl. To do this, Prince Adrian will wed the ducal heir, Lady Roslyn Tilorl. With their union, it will bring the duchy into the Kingdom of Meris and create a strong state that

supports the republic which will ensure our control over the region and cut off Avira's access to the sea."

Dellona's brows furrowed. "And what role do I play in this arrangement?" she asked, unable to keep the skepticism from her voice.

With a single look from Marcus, the prince was promptly dismissed. It was a clear indication that the discussion was about to turn to matters of a more strategic nature. Still, it was amusing to her that the teenager so readily adhered to Marcus's orders. Once the door closed, the consul led Dellona to a large map spread across a table, its surface littered with markers and flags denoting troop positions and territories.

"This war," Consul Eliron began, his finger tracing the boundary between Meris and Tiloral, "is not just about territorial expansion. It's about securing our future. Your role, General Raloren, is to ensure victory. Your successes have already forced the ducal forces on the defensive. We need you to continue pushing to ensure we win this war."

She bit the inside of her cheek. She had to be careful in how she responded.

"With respect, this does not necessitate me leaving my army to attend a ball of all things. You need me there," she said, her eyes not leaving the map. "The duchy is proving to be a more... tenacious adversary than expected. I need to be planning my next move while they believe we are settling in for winter."

"This is true. Other than giving you information on the future, there is word from the fleet. The Aviran Royal Fleet was destroyed but our naval assets are running into the same issue you have. The Ducal Fleet is much more equipped and capable than we were aware of. They fought off the first attack and have even sent raiding squadrons against several Merisan ports."

Dellona frowned. "How are the Tilorans so strong compared to the royal forces? It doesn't make sense. We haven't been able to ascertain much. I'm sure you are aware how averse to sharing with the army the Eyes are..."

Marcus Eliron sighed as he looked down at the map. "We know the broad strokes. Essentially, the Tilorals are already pariahs in the kingdom and have made enemies of both major political factions. The Eyes believe this makes them less likely to be reinforced now that the 13th Royal Army has been wiped out. The reason for the animosity is because they have allied with a terran princess who has caused a lot of issues for the royal family. My advisors believe House Tiloral has been building up their forces in order to rebel. It's the only explanation for how developed their forces are. The forces that managed to hold onto that castle have been training and expanding for two years now. We believe their choice of location was coincidental because of how far removed it is"

So, that meant she somehow managed to run into the ducal army's elites that had been training in secret. That explained a lot. Like how many mages they held and how well trained the entire army was.

The upper leadership of the Republic had always been aware that the ruling House of the former Kingdom of Tilor held a grudge. They weren't quiet about it either. It was even in their motto—'A Tilor never forgets'.

"That does make a lot of sense based on what little I have been able to gather myself. The force that held Larton are all subordinate to a House Reinhart. The one that the terran princess heads."

Marcus Eliron contemplated the information Dellona provided with a measured intensity. His gaze lingered on the map, tracing the territories and borders as if seeking answers in the contours of the land. After a moment of thoughtful silence, he looked up, his eyes meeting Dellona's with a newfound resolve.

"Your encounter with the forces at Larton and the ties to House Reinhart—led by the terran princess—provides a unique opportunity," Marcus began, his voice steady and deliberate. "If there's a chance to bring them to our side, we must explore it. The dynamics within the kingdom of Avira, especially with the ducal forces' unexpected strength, necessitate a flexible approach."

He leaned forward, the strategy forming clearly in his mind. "I want you to attempt to meet with the princess. Assess her intentions and what she desires. If her people can be persuaded to either step aside or, better yet, to join us, we should be open to negotiations. This princess could be the turning point we need."

Dellona's eyes narrowed slightly, considering the consul's proposal. She knew what the consul was thinking: a weakened opposition and possibly a powerful ally were too significant to ignore. The princess would be a wildcard. Clearly, she'd built up a loyal faction, thus far. But if the intelligence the Republic's spies had gathered was correct, the girl had made some enemies. Perhaps that was an avenue she could take. The Republic would be a powerful ally.

"If the princess desires land of her own, we can accommodate that. Partitioning part of the duchy into her own territory is a small price to pay for a strategic advantage. My primary goal is control of the duchy," Marcus added, his tone leaving no room for doubt about his priorities. "As long as that objective is met, I am willing to make substantial concessions since we will have control in the end."

He tapped his knuckles on the table then smiled. "At the end of this war you will receive several things. Land. A title. A position of influence as an advisor to the new king," the consul offered, each word measured and deliberate. "And more importantly, to act as a guardian of the realm's interests. There will be more if you can do anything about this princess, but that is something that we will simply take what we can get. If not, then there are other ways to deal with her. The Eyes have

discovered factions within the duchy hostile to both the Terran and ducal Houses. We'll discuss her more after your meeting.”

She glanced around the room to ensure they weren't overheard. “And what of the current Merisan king and queen?” she asked, her voice low.

“They will soon overstay their usefulness,” the consul replied, his tone indifferent. “The region requires fresh leadership. Leadership that understands the needs of the time. You will ensure the obedience of this new leadership.”

Dellona stood silently for a moment, the weight of the consul's proposition heavy on her shoulders. The future of the region rested in part on her decision. Or so she liked to believe. She had always been a soldier, fighting for the ideals of the republic, yet here she was, being offered a chance to shape the political landscape in a way she had never imagined.

Internally, Dellona wrestled with the morality of the consul's plan. The promise of land was enticing but a noble title was not. She was a republican at heart. Nobility were no better than citizens, some were even worse. Yet, the idea of surveilling a young king and queen, manipulating the threads of power from behind the throne, seemed a far cry from the straightforward honor of battlefield victories. Especially since she did not believe the young Roslyn would be so willing. Could she, who had always valued honor and duty above all, adapt to this new role of political maneuvering?

The thought of the current Meris king and queen being discarded as easily as game pieces troubled her. She had seen the cost of war, the lives lost for the sake of territory and power. Was this political game any different? The lives and futures of entire kingdoms were at stake, not just those on the battlefield.

After much deliberation, Dellona realized that refusing the consul's offer would not stop the wheels of politics from turning. Another would be selected to replace her. One who may not hold the same morals as she. If she wished to protect the ideals she held dear, perhaps it was necessary to engage in this new form of battle. With a heavy heart, she accepted the consul's proposition. She was determined to navigate the murky waters of politics with the same integrity she brought to warfare.

By accepting the consul's offer, Dellona positioned herself as a key player in the future governance of Meris and Tilor. Her military expertise coupled with her new political influence would be instrumental in ensuring the stability of the region post-war. The marriage between Prince Adrian and Roslyn Tiloral, under her watchful eye, would symbolize the union of military strength and political acumen.

The meeting with the consul ended, but her racing thoughts did not. And the next day she was able to depart to return to her army.

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When she returned to the camp outside a village in southern Tilorai, her mind buzzed with plans and strategies. The war was far from over, and her immediate focus remained on defeating the ducal forces. Yet the horizon of her responsibilities had broadened.

Dellona couldn't say that she enjoyed even the thought of it.



Present

In the heart of the forest, where the trees whispered ancient secrets and the air hummed with the magic of untamed wilderness, a small cabin stood as a solitary beacon of habitation. Its occupant, a woman who had chosen the solitude of nature over the clamor of society, lived a life of quiet contentment, far removed from the rest of the bustling island beyond the forest's edge.

On this particular afternoon, as golden sunlight filtered through the canopy, casting dappled shadows on the earth, she sat in her cozy cabin, savoring the warmth of freshly brewed tea. The delicate aroma mingled with the scent of old paper as she turned the pages of a book, a rare find from a merchant who had ventured through the nearby village before the world she had found herself in had changed even more once the wells of mana appeared around the island.

Her tranquil reverie was suddenly interrupted by a distant roar, a sound all too familiar in these parts, yet always jarring. With a resigned sigh, she placed her tea down, its warmth a stark contrast to the chill of anticipation that ran through her. Her subsequent whistle, sharp and commanding, pierced the silence of the cabin, summoning her unusual protectors.

Some people had dogs. She decided to create her own pets in the only way she knew how—with both magic and engineering

From every corner, steel spiders as tall as her waist skittered into action. The arachnids' metallic legs clicked against the wooden floor or even ceiling with a precision that belied their eerie, organic movement. They converged at the door like a gang of tinkered bouncers, ready to bully the threat that lurked beyond their peaceful turf.

The woman rose with movements that were graceful yet deliberate. She quickly donned her hat and readied herself to confront whatever challenge awaited outside.

The spiders moved through the door without prompting. Her connection to her automatons was one of creator to creation, a bond forged in the solitude of her workshop and attached smithy.

Hanging from a hook next to the front door was the final thing she required.

She grabbed her repeating crossbow with the fondness of a mother cradling her first born—she was a little more carefree with her spiders, like any parent with more than five children.

Oxylus

The weapon was a seamless blend of art and function, its body an intricate sculpture wrought from dark, polished wood that gleamed under the sun's scattered rays. Its limbs, carved with delicate patterns, bore the soft luster of aged ivory, and the bolts were lined neatly in a built-in magazine, ready to be deployed in rapid succession.

The stock of the crossbow nestled comfortably against her shoulder, its curves and grooves a perfect match for her form, as if the weapon were an extension of her body. The metal parts, cold and precise, contrasted with the warm wood, and the gears within clicked softly as she armed it, their sound almost musical in the quiet of the forest.

The path from her door meandered through the small trail worn smooth by the passage of her wagon's wheels. She walked this familiar route with an ease born of countless treks to and from the main road that connected her, however tenuously, to the world beyond the forest. The trees stood as silent sentinels, their branches swaying in a gentle dance orchestrated by the whispering wind.

As she reached the main road, the scene before her unfolded with a stark contrast to the tranquility she had left behind. Her mechanical spiders, intricate assemblies of gears and cunning, were engaged in a delicate ballet of combat, swarming over a large, horned reptile. Their movements were precise. A dozen spiders switching between attack and evasion both melee and ranged with bolt throwers some had equipped that demonstrated the lethal efficacy of her engineering prowess.

It was something she would have never done back home. Nor even considered.

Her sister would have loved to see the arachnid automatons in action. But that thought was dismissed, swept away like she had been during the Flash. From all she knew. To a world filled with magic that she had bent to her will and used to keep herself safe.

Each spider moved with a purpose, their metal limbs reflecting shards of light as they clambered over the scales of their adversary, seeking vulnerabilities and stabbing down with a relentless precision while three circled their prey from afar pelting the creature with bolts. It was a scene that melded the wild chaos of nature with the ordered genius of the tinkerer's art.

She lifted her crossbow, but it wasn't needed. The beast, which appeared to have been already injured, fell with one last gasp. Only then did she finally look around at the scene she had come upon.

Two guards lay fallen near the wreckage of a wagon, victims of the reptile's fury along with the body of someone who appeared to be a merchant of some variety. Yet two people survived—a man and woman with fox-like features huddled together. Their changed features were just one of several variants that had taken hold among the more transformative events that had reshaped the inhabited parts of the island, leaving them caught between their humanity and something altogether new.

And the reason for her self-induced seclusion. She whistled again and her spiders scurried over to form up behind her before she turned her attention on the young couple.

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“Hello. Are you injured?” she called out.

She didn't have a problem with the beast people—or beastkin as they were starting to call themselves—but she liked her human features and she didn't fancy a tail.

The man shakily stood and moved in front of his companion. “W-Who are you?” he demanded, his posture taut with wary courage.

She lowered her crossbow and gave them a nod. “Don't worry,” she reassured them. “I won't harm you. But you can call me 'Kat'.”