

Early Years

The Trampling Unicorn Monastery was renowned for its martial pacifist teachings and equally famous for its acceptance of students with little regard to race, birth, or circumstance in contrast to the stalwart, rigid humanism that pervaded much of Cadia. As such, the current Head Monk, Father Fujimoto, was unperturbed at yet another orphan to be left in the monastery's care. He listened without judgment as the parents laid out the incident surrounding their decision to leave the child in his hands. He attempted to have them reconsider even knowing neither would sway from their position. The Human father handed him a heavy case filled with a generous donation of coin no longer needed and made his way toward his wife. The Elven woman was currently nose to nose with the giggling infant as she playfully tickled him with her scarlet bangs. She leaned back into her husband's embrace as he encircled her with his lean, wiry arms and rested his chin on her shoulder. Mother and father held their positions as they poured warmth and love into their son; likely their final moments as family. The little infant who inherited the crimson hair of his mother as well as her forest-green eyes knew not the gravity of the situation. Content he was in snuggling deeper into his mother's chest and grip his father's thumb before drifting off to sleep. Father Fujimoto was careful not to disturb them as he impassively observed them from a respectful distance.

The newly orphaned Zosimus Armstrong grew and thrived in the disciplined environment of Trampling Unicorn Monastery. He fit in neatly with the ways of the Art and the necessary discipline that was pervasive in every technique. Half-elves normally felt a distance between peers within and outside their kind but the consistent exposure to the mixed cultures and races within the monastery had all but nullified the potential for such isolation. In fact, Zosimus had become rather accustomed to interacting with different personalities; a habituation aided by his amiable countenance. He was careful not to offend and was as controlled as Trampling Unicorn required in his social dealings and daily life.

However, he nurtured a bright inner fire in his spirit that flared at the potential of battle. In training exercises, he was keenly focused. In friendly spars, he was outright chipper. In duels, he was terrifyingly enthusiastic. He would, of course and on many occasions, vehemently deny outside acknowledgment of his blood-knight tendencies as he believed they were unbecoming of one embracing teachings of the monastery and a personal obstacle in his advancement of the Art. It was true that Zosimus never purposely sought or provoked battle but once he engaged in combat, the hot-blood flowing in his veins manifested quite clearly. Though about conflicted about his fondness for combat, the senior monks reassured him it was well the purview of Trampling Unicorn as long as he did not fight for the mere sake of fighting nor did he prolong the battle unnecessarily for personal enjoyment. After all, unicorns are gentle creatures but at the same time utterly fearsome once roused to defend or protect. They did caution however that he should restrain his fighting spirit so as not to make it overly conspicuous. It was an exaggeration to be sure but the young acolyte fought like a Demon against superior opponents and it was more than a little unsettling to spectators. There was little for Zosimus to do but reflect on the counsel of his seniors and continue tempering his burning blood.

Zosimus had approached Father Fujimoto only once to better understand the reasoning behind his lack of parentage. His mother's name was Gwendolyn Leith. She was an Elf woman who possessed the slender build common to most elves but wielded a massive greatsword as her chosen weapon. Her soft-spoken demeanor concealed a forceful personality. She had long, scarlet hair stylized in a hime-cut that complemented her emerald green eyes. His father was a human named Duarte Armstrong. He had a preference for daggers and carried several on his person. His weapons of choice reflected a cold, practical attitude toward conflict. His brown hair was worn fairly short and spiky but possessed a single, side braid on the left of his head. His brown eyes had a dull light to them but they were not

unseeing. They left no possessions or deeds to Zosimus' name. However, the Father put a reassuring hand on the young man's shoulder and said, "Rejoice, boy! They loved you as much as any parent would." He propped up his glasses as he continued wistfully, "But they had a duty they sought to fulfill and desired to sever ties before the parting became too painful and the consequences too dire. It is my solemn hope that all their wishes were eventually realized, for your sake and theirs."

Point of No Return

Zosimus and several other Trampling Unicorn disciples were sent out on a request from a nearby town. The messenger said the local militia was holding at the moment but they were desperately pressed for aid as it was an invasion by a Demon Lord.

Though Zosimus leapt from one conflict to the next, his blood barely stirred. A fight was a fight but mere minions were not the most challenging of opponents. His constant engagements and preemptive strikes into all the battles around him did not sit well with one of his seniors. Leon Drow made the disapproval of his junior's actions quite clear, often citing conflicts with the teachings of the Art and the Codex followed religiously by most of Cadia. The Half-Elf ignored him, that one always had a terribly narrow view of the teachings. Honestly, he was probably angry that someone else finished his fight. No matter, the several militia and civilians rescued by Zosimus' actions were not nearly as ungrateful.

He was currently stomping on some sort of imp thing. The creature did not seem to have a concept of death and keep writhing on end. Admittedly, the motion might have been more from the stomping than any remaining life within it but he wanted to make sure it was staying dead. It had been a tenacious foe. He was about satisfied with its lack of movement when he was interrupted by another disciple who he recognized as Rosalind Blackmore. She was rather timid but a good fighter nonetheless and they practiced together often. She was currently flying toward him and it was only due to his finely-honed reflexes that he could catch in the girl in such a manner as to not make matters awkward for them later. He checked her condition and found her largely unharmed. If her sudden entrance was any indication, there was a strong enemy here. He swiftly sprinted toward the direction she came from, momentarily forgetting the blushing girl in his arms who took the opportunity to lean closer.

The scene he arrived at was, in his eyes, magnificent.

There was a lightly armored Elven woman sweeping aside his fellows and the local with her enormous bastard sword. Her flame-red hair swirled around her as she continually cleared the area of anyone daring to enter her weapon's reach. Unusually, she was using the flat of the blade and edge of the sword itself seemed unusually dull. The unfortunate attackers were in various states of unconsciousness and scattered all over but they were intact and their wounds were not immediately mortal. People were becoming more and more reluctant to confront her and nervously stayed out of her range.

Nearby, a human man was performing equally astonishing feats. He was dressed very formally in crisp clothes like a butler if that butler's sole purpose happened to be combat. His short hair was a stately silver with a single, elaborate braid on the left side of his face and complemented by a monocle on the right side. Similar to the woman, he only attacked people who stepped within his area of jurisdiction. Unlike her, the wounds he dealt appeared much more severe but the victims did not cross into the realm of the dead and dying. The last sliver of health was the only bit that mattered and the man seemed to avoid extinguishing it. He was the picture of serenity and calm in the midst of numerous bodies skewered with long, thin blades. Understandably, people were also hesitant in approaching him.

Zosimus' blood-knight tendencies resonated with these two opponents. He could fight to his fullest and not find them wanting; there was no better feeling. Judging from their behavior and red, slitted eyes, these two were the Demon Lord's thralls and charged with holding ground until its emergence into the material realm. Zosimus was about to charge into the fray before sharp tugs on his collar stopped him in his tracks. He apologetically smiled at his passenger's indignant look. After setting Rosalind down and apologizing profusely but briefly for his lack of manners, he moved closer toward the conflict.

He sprinted as fast as his legs were able, the Elf would not be able to utilize her whole weapon effectively if he closed the distance first. Her reaction was deceptively swift for someone wielding such a monstrous weapon and it very nearly took his head off as soon as he arrived within melee distance. The air pressure from the swing blew his hair back, uncovering his pointed ears. He recovered from his dodge to viciously dig a fist deep into her armpit. To his surprise, her grip did not loosen at all on her weapon. There was a look of confusion on her face and she had made no retaliatory action. No matter the reason for her pause, it would not last long and Zosimus took advantage of the opportunity to hammer multiple strikes at her sword arm until the weapon dropped to the ground with a tremendous thud. He then let loose consecutive blows with to her body in rapid succession. The power behind his attacks were reduced by her armor but they sent her staggering away all the same.

He continued his overwhelming onslaught before a sudden and forceful palm to his sternum killed his momentum and sent him tumbling. He quickly got back on his feet with much pain but she already recovered her sword by then. Still, she took no further action. Zosimus quickly glanced at the Human and noticed the man watching their battle most intently.

Several people had taken it upon themselves to cut down the well-dressed man while his attention was divided. In return, the man simply raised one gloved hand over his shoulder and three long, rapier-like swords manifested with their simple hilts held between his fingers. With a backhand motion as he turned around, the shoulders of three were impaled. With a flick of his wrists, both hands were occupied with blades and he threw these with an upward motion, crippling six more. A senior Trampling Unicorn monk got close enough in the commotion to trade blows but the man dodged with minimal movement. The monk just about skewered himself when the man swept the air before him and blades materialized to create line of threatening points. He quickly stopped his charge and vaulted backward but the Human simply threw his hand forward as if commanding an army and the line of blades flew forward to embed themselves into the retreating monk. Apparently satisfied, he smoothed out the wrinkles in his vest and adjusted his monocle.

Zosimus clenched his fist in anticipation of his next opponent. That man was certainly formidable. His movements were highly deceptive and he carried himself with a deadly elegance. But first, he had a current fight to finish. He turned to find the Elven woman regarding him with a kind smile. For some reason, it felt painfully familiar and his hand clutched at his chest reflexively. This action seemed to made her smile even more radiant and beautiful. She bowed her head and her smile turned into a feral grin. He found himself responding with his own in turn. They both readied their stances and joined in battle once more.

He was losing. Her heart was in it this time, rejuvenated. He was hard pressed to even land a blow as she forced him on the defensive. Her attacks were swift, relentless, unending. Every counter, every parry, every feint, even her defensive maneuvers transitioned seamlessly into more attacks. Zosimus could only land glancing blows that minimally affected her. He had already been punished several times by his overcommitment to a strong attack and an opponent of her caliber was very unforgiving in

that regard. It was a battle of attrition and he was disadvantaged. But, victory was secondary in comparison to the burning song in his blood. The local militia and the other monks were still cleansing the town and chaos was all around. None of that mattered to him. As far as he was concerned, this Elven woman and him were the only ones in this world.

She suddenly disengaged from combat and stepped aside to reveal the combat butler at a distance behind her. His arms were crossed and his face was expressionless. A wall of blades positioned behind. He smiled flauntingly before the steel rain descended.

Zosimus weaved through the storm of blades with much difficulty. He dodged what he could and deflected with a pair of snatched blades when able. Impalement was avoided but his clothing was full of tears and body covered in light wounds. He was tired when he reached the Human but the will to battle was strong and it was all he needed to continue.

This man was another foe he could barely touch. Abandoning the use of this blades, the man fought him in hand to hand combat; Zosimus' realm and forte. However, the Half-Elf was the only one getting hit. He could not clearly discern the man's direction of attack or intent. Nor could he predict the man's movements. He would take advantage of openings that were non-existent and dodge strikes only to be hit by the same attack but from a different angle. There was a strange, disorienting quality to the man's style of fighting; his body language was not relevant to reality of his actions. It was brutal, efficient, and gracefully executed. However, Zosimus manage did land one solid hit through it all...to the monocle. It shattered but somehow did not harm the eye. He considered it progress enough. Before he could make another attempt, the man merely removed the remains of broken eyepiece and tossed it aside before retreating.

The atmosphere became oppressive as a large, swirling concentration of fell energies condensed on the battlefield. A clawed hand emerged from the portal and the Demon Lord dragged itself into the material world. The terrifying aura it emanated halted all conflicts in the area as its participants felt the chill of terror slide into their souls. It was a mockery of whatever it once was as barely-healed wounds covered much of its body. Its pale skin was in tatters. Parts of its skeleton were exposed. Its eyes were hollow sockets in a face that was mangled beyond belief and framed by bony protrusions. Its voice was coarse and painful to the ear as it took in a harsh breath and spoke, **“I see my servants did all that I had hoped. Finally, I have broken through to this reality once more.”** It surveyed the insects that stood before it. **“Ah, sacrifices. How DELIGHTFUL.”** It chuckled amusingly as the humans prepared to defy it but then paused in rapt attention at an irritatingly familiar scent. **“That scent...THAT STENCH!”** It roared in abject fury and swiped at the space around it. Its clawed hand moved at a speed Zosimus could not perceive and it carved gorges into his chest. It then proceeded to sample the blood on its claws. **“I see. You are their child. Pathetic creature, I shall have your flesh and blood and feed on your despair.”** Sensing confusion, it came to a realization and laughed with much cruelty, **“Your ignorance, so sweet! Indeed, the loyal servants at my side are your parents. Forever bound in servitude to I, Azglduro! They thought themselves worthy to slay me, ME, the Descending Spiral, but they are now slaves to my will. They may have crippled my magnificent form but it is nothing I cannot regain with time, starting with this meager town. But first, you will have to die.”** He instilled in his thralls the compulsion to kill until the child breathed his last. **“Forward, my servants! The Descending Spiral commands it!”**

It took a great deal of strength for Zosimus to even stand. The slash wounds seethed with the corroding energy unique to Demons. His body was already utilizing his reserves of ki to mitigating its corruption and he was fit enough to continue for a short while. The Demon Lord's command sent him bounding

toward the creature. He did not know what he could do against it but at least break its hold on his apparently still-living parents. All in all, he would certainly do all in this power to send it to oblivion. His being was suffused with righteous Cadian fury and the song of battle thrummed even louder in his veins. As he closed the distance, both parents were prepared to intercept him. Mother with her bastard sword held low and father with an expansive wall of blades behind him as in addition to a set in both hands. He prayed that he would be swifter than they.

Gwendoyne acted first. She propelled herself off the ground toward her target. In a flashing blur of steel, she unleashed a devastating volley of attacks and struck her appointed foe repeatedly. Time stood still and she took advantage of the Demons Lord's surprise at her betrayal. Her former training made her mind a fortress, battered over years of enslavement but unbroken. She was merely biding her time after the fateful first encounter, for when it was at its weakest and most arrogant. The Demon was still reacting to her last strike and in the space of a heart beat, she put all of her supreme focus into a single, crippling blow at a fatal flaw that she planted years ago in their first battle.

Azgduro howled in immense pain and befuddlement. Its arms were torn gruesomely from its shoulders and the sword of that wretched Elven wench was rooted into the base of its skull. It would have none of this nonsense and began gather its power to rid himself of her.

Duarte unleashed his storm of projectiles against the Demon and all found a mark. His swords were specially forged to slay supernatural entities and he utilized an unlimited number of them. He coldly looked on as wave after wave of swords sought to spill the Demon's blood.

Multiple blades to the throat had disrupted the Demon's spellcasting. Blades lodged into the hide and old, festering wounds rendered it unable to do anything of major significance. To say it was in a murderous rage at not one but both thralls betraying him was an understatement. **“ENOUGH!”** He bellowed, the force of his command making even his resistant thralls halt. **“THIS CANNOT BE! I WILL NOT HAVE MY RESTORATION TO GLORY BE RUINED BY FILTH!”** Their efforts were futile. No matter the injuries they inflicted, he would endure and rebuild his power. He internally scoffed as he saw their spawn charging toward him and made mockery of it, **“I AM THE DESCENDING SPIRAL, THE EMBODIMENT OF ALL THE WORLD'S EVIL. WHAT HOPE DOES A MORTAL HAVE AGAINST MY MIGHT?!”**

Zosimus did not care for the Demon's words. His only objective was on ending it even if its strength was a hundred, even a thousand times greater than his own. It was already severely wounded and he hoped one final attack, no matter the significance, would bring its death. It also meant that he had to put everything into that one attack and if it had no effect, his life would be the first in a long line of casualties. For the first time in his life, he completely released the restraints on his battle lust and let it roar unabated. He stopped diverting ki to combating the encroaching taint but instead allocated to his bones, muscles, and nerves. His blood felt like an inferno but his outward demeanor was that of tranquility. It was not the berserk rage that he expected and feared which was a small relief. He prayed to no god, not even the God Emperor of Mankind, and practiced no magic but words held power, even for the more physical arts.

An aria built itself in his mind, imprinted upon his soul, and its declaration spoken in a low, solemn tone. “Be gone, evil”, Zosimus said as his body became a blur in his offensive. He slammed one of the blades on the throat, driving it deeper and tearing the wound further. The Demon Lord attempted to snarl but it was incapacitated in all respects. “Shatter into oblivion.” He drove deeper another sword on its chest where he thought the heart was to no response. “In my hand is darkness.” He tried another

sword and was rewarded with a howl of pain. "In my hand is light." The blade was hammered further into the creature, the sword's further penetration stopped by the Demon's bones cracking from the impact of the weapon's guards. "Know that all is in this hand." He again punched the same blade with more force. There was an audible shattering and wrenching of flesh along with the Demon's muted howl. The next attack would finish it once and for all, "In the face of all things, thy defeat is certain." All his strength, all this anger, all his energy went into the attack and he could only pray that it was enough.

Somewhere distant, a divinity answered him. Heironeous the Invincible, god of valor, took notice of such immense fighting spirit in the name of all that is good and lawful.

Zosimus' hand along with the blade speared through the Demon as if its physical being was nothing more than paper. Its entire frame shuddered. Not satisfied, he wrenched his hand out of the its body and jumped to grasp the protrusions on its head. He pulled himself upward to into a better position and braced himself on its hollow sockets. With great force, he wrenched the horns apart and the head exploded in a showering burst of gore. Its body collapsed, consumed by an unnatural fire. He unsteadily walked out of the smoldering inferno of its remains. Covered in dark ichor and with a left eye now trailing a luminescent red glow, little wonder that the guards raised their weapons at him in nervousness.

Gwendolyn immediately moved to stand protectively at her son's side, one arm keeping him on his feet. Her bastard sword rose as an obstacle to all the individuals closing in. They flinched. "My little boy and I have some catching up to do", she said and lovingly ruffled his hair. "You would do well to stand aside."

Leon Drow was the lone, vocal objector and was quickest to regain composure. "Stand aside, filth! We have to take him into custody and finish you off as well!" He stepped forward only to be stopped when several blades perforated the ground in front of him.

Duarte held another brace of blades, should the monk continue his advance.

Leon fumed. "Armstrong. The Codex leaves no room for doubt. You cannot spill a Demon's blood and emerge untainted! As my junior, you will submit to my authority. Perhaps, they will be more merciful on you if you turn yourself in willingly."

Zosimus gave him a long, hard stare. The red glow was gone now, but it was still intimidating. "You forget yourself, Brother. Father Fujimoto has the last word and you do not represent it." He turned to walk away. "I earned this victory with my own fists. If wish to challenge that then you will have earn the right with your own."

The senior monk was infuriated at the junior's behavior but there was little he could actually do. He had never beaten Zosimus in any match. "Stop this now!", he said, hoping that it would work. "I cannot allow this!" he yelled while moving no further. There was an exasperated, feminine sigh from behind him.

"I will keep an eye on him if it warrants that much of your concern." Rosalind volunteered. "Just attend to the town with along everyone else." She saw a protest form on his lips. "Honestly, your behavior is unbecoming as a representative of our monastery." She left him flabbergasted and walked away, sweeping her black ringlets aside in dismissal.

Zosimus frowned in confusion, this was very unlike the Rosalind he came to know over the years. He attempted to question her on the change in demeanor but she merely grabbed his arm and dragged him from the crowd.

Waiting for One's Arrival

In a fairly secluded spot away from town, he excitedly regaled his parents with tales of his years so far. Most of these stories were, predictably, of the various fights he fronted. Rosalind sat a respectful distance away to give them privacy but catch mention of her name more than a few times. Gwendolyn was happy to listen contently until her husband remarked about the how their son inherited the worst of her battle manic personality. She immediately bowled him over for it.

When all had settled into a comfortable silence, Duarte put his hands on his son's shoulders and spoke the cold truth, "We do not have much longer in this world. You know this." He would not offer his son any delusions nor any alternatives.

Zosimus responded with shaky smile on his face and a wavering voice with a semblance of confidence. "I had a faint hope it was not to be." Sudden and inevitable as it was. Even if killing the Demon had solved everything, they would be forever hunted on principle by the greater majority of Cadia. It was not a life to live by any means. Gentle arms wrapped around his head and pulled him close. Mother really missed him apparently if the collision of his head to her breastplate was any indication.

"Don't fret." She pressed him tighter as his shoulders started shaking assuming he needed more comfort. In reality, what he needed oxygen and the shaking was the only sign his futile struggle to pry her off. Duarte could only put a palm to his face in exasperation at the scene. He moved to free his son from his wife's enthusiasm and strength.

A few moments later, Gwendolyn still held her son but in a much more comfortable position for him as she elaborated on her husband's words, "We knew our duty and we did it. We expected to die in glory; to die hero's deaths. The enemy denied us that when he neared its end, the coward. Connected our lives with his and imposed a crude geass. No matter how gravely we injured him, we could not kill him. So, we waited. Played along and cut him down each time he regained enough power to enter the material plane."

Duarte chimed in on the topic, "The fool never failed to comprehend or expect betrayal from us but retaliated all the same. Killing us was out of the question as it was weak and be left vulnerable to other entities without our aid. Its only option was to increase the extent of its corruption and drain our life energies in an effort to reinforce our dependencies on his continuing vitality. We gradually took on small changes but he could never alter us entirely." He motioned to his silver hair. "In the end, all he tasted was death and defeat." He grew silent as he looked cautiously toward the town. "Enough talk. I do not wish to overstay our 'welcome' and your current level is insufficient." He idly manipulated one of his blades in dexterous fingers, "There is much for you to learn and a no-holds battle is the most effective if brutal and insane way to teach." He saw his son's eyes light up at the prospect, truly he took after his mother. Elf blood was potent it seemed, in more ways than one. Still, he had observed some of his combat pragmatist traits internalized there as well. For that, he was reassured. "You know what you must do even if it is not your wish. Do not hold back, we certainly will not." His son nodded, not in resignation but hardened resolve. "This was a blessed encounter and I will undoubtedly depart in peace,

knowing that you have grown up well and knowing that your mother will not have to suffer the tragedy of a long life. A morbid solace but reassurance all the same.” he said and became silent.

Gwendolyn hugged her son and ran her fingers through his hair. “Indeed. Never did I expect to hold you again nor see you develop into such a fine, young man. The heroic death in battle I sought years ago pales in comparison and I much prefer the peaceful one now available in the present.” She pushed him away to look him in the eyes. “You must promise me something.”

Zosimus nodded. “What do you ask of me, Mother?”

She internally gushed with delight at hearing that word though it did not show on her face. “It is of utmost importance and I will not rest peacefully if you do not abide by it.” She said. “Though, it would appear that you are already well on your way to fulfilling it. But, I must hear you make oath of it nonetheless.”

“You need only ask.” His parents already expressed a want for death at his hands. His Father also desired a willingness to learn the skills and knowledge he and Mother would impart in their final engagement. Zosimus had only known them for too short a time but even if they were only familiar strangers, he wished to do good by them.

“Grandchildren.” she said. “I desire grandchildren.”

There was a long silence as he processed that statement. In the end, only one response was appropriate, “What.”

“Grandchildren”, she repeated with great solemnity. “I know you might think yourself too young for it now but I expect you to at least settle down after a while though by no means should you stop improving your skills. You’ve already a fine head-start with the Blackmore girl and the pair of you would make an adorable battle couple as familiarity is already apparent, in more ways than one.” She looked at the girl standing in the distance who acted as though she was not listening to the conversation. “Though you may not have noticed, she has expressed a vested interest in you, as a fighter worthy of respect and as a man. You would do well to make clear your own feelings in the matter. Even I can see that, short as my time has been, through her body language and from listening to your tales.”

She smiled amusingly at his increasingly reddening face and embarrassed motions. It was adorable and Gwendolyn could not resist hugging him again. In her bliss, she once again ignored the thud of his head against her armor but he was not in need of air this time. “Did I tell you how I met your father?” She started excitedly, “He was so cold when we first met! But then I found out how utterly sweet he was under the right conditions and I fell for him instantly. He was adamant in denying my advances though but I tried many, many times to catch his attention. Finally, one day, I was...”

Zosimus gave his father a pleading look as his mother continued to ramble about her courting efforts and then started giving him advice on the subject, among other embarrassing things.

The man shrugged.

I have no regrets

It was getting dark as Zosimus and Rosalind approached the steps leading to the monastery. His ragged clothing kept his modesty and there were many wounds upon his body, enough to lend a healthy red to the shredded cloth. His right arm dangled uselessly at his side. He staggered along with Rosalind's aid as he was blinded in one swollen eye. His mental and emotional states were no less battered. The mood was thick and heavy as they slowly continued in a sullen silence.

The Father, along with Leon were waiting at the steps, Both wore grim expressions at the sight.

Fujimoto examined Zosimus with a careful eye and contemplated the situation. "His injuries appear...numerous." He concluded and turned to look at Leon. "You are certain of this charge?"

It was a curt, matter-of-fact response, as expected. "Zosimus Armstrong has been corrupted by the blood of the Demon, Father Fujimoto."

"I am no heretic!" Zosimus' conviction was strong even if his entire being was battered at the moment.

"You lie! I saw the signs. It festers within you even now. And the others, where are you hidin-" Leon said in a scathing tone.

Zosimus had no patience for his senior's behavior. "I sent the Demon to oblivion!"

"But did you have unholy assistance? I must know." Fujimoto interrupted with his gravelly voice, the young ones were getting a little excited.

Zosimus looked at his functional hand. Something was with him on that final blow. It was by no means dark in nature but in this monotheistic land, it could be considered little better. "I do not truly know but it felt...holy and righteous, there is no other way to describe it."

Father Fujimoto would take the boy at his word, he was not known to lie or be very good at it outside combat. He did sense deviations the ki of Zosimus' body, a hint of the divine and a small amount of taint. "Very well. Now about these others?"

"They receive the end they deserved." said Zosimus, his voice quiet.

"Ah." Father Fujimoto pressed no further on the subject. "Now let us get you cleaned up."

Leon protested. "But the Codex, the teachings!"

Fujimoto gave him a stern look. "Every teaching is a set of rules. They guide us, shape us as people. Teach us to hold honor and duty sacred above all. But how we live with those rules is the true test as an individual. And you, still have much to learn, as have us all." Fujimoto pushed his spectacles upward. "Trampling Unicorn welcomes all, that is my final judgment." He dismissed Leon Drow, the senior monk needed time for some self-reflection.

"No. I will not come with you." Zosimus said. The Father did not seem to be surprised but the decision worried Rosalind. He continued haltingly, as much as his battered body would allow. "If I remain in the monastery, they must conclude that I corrupted everyone living there." He exchanged a look with

Rosalind and the Father, “Not to mention those that stand at my side.”

Father Fujimoto sighed, “If that is the your choice. I suppose you are not much worse off compared to the time you participated in the Aurelian Bout. But where will you continue from this crossroad?”

“Mother told me...before she...before I...”, he trailed off. The entire affair was still too fresh in his mind. He felt Rosalind give him a comforting squeeze. “She advised me to walk the boundary. That it was most suitable in...light of recent events.”

Ah, the way of the Shadow Sun; walking the boundary. It was a deadly Art that require immense willpower to control and more to master. Quite a few practitioners ended up being consumed by their inner darkness. The Art itself was inherently dangerous and was even more so when said darkness was far from mundane but it was said that Cadia’s Honor Guard, the martial exemplars who regularly combated demons in their own realm without apparent ill effects, practiced it. “The path of Shadow Sun Ninja is fraught with peril.” said Fujimoto.

Zosimus agreed, “There are many perilous paths. We are beset on all sides.”

“Very good.” Fujimoto tossed him a pack along with some medical supplies which he caught with some difficulty. “Settle your last affairs and perhaps you shall match me if, no, when we meet again.” He smirked, “Preferably before I grow too old.”

Zosimus smirked back, “Yes. I would imagine you to be quite unstoppable by that time.”

Father Fujimoto let out a hearty chuckle as he headed up the steps, “Honor and Success, my son.”

“Peace and Enlightenment, Father.” Zosimus responded as he watched Fujimoto disappear up the mountain.

This is the only path

Zosimus laid against a tree in a nearby field. He sat unmoving as Rosalind busied herself with tending his various injuries. Deep thought consumed him as he stared at the enchanting expanse of the night sky. He had yet to fully understand everything his parents taught him or more accurately, beaten into him. They said comprehension in mind, in body, in soul, was a matter of experience, sweat, blood, tears, and time. He had little appetite for any of it at the moment. It seemed like such a simple mission this morning and then, everything changed in an instant. None of it could be sorted out for they happened too rapidly and in quick succession. It was all very uncertain, his future and state of being. Still, there was something he could address right now and it would be the only concrete opportunity to do so. It also needed to be done tactfully. More than he ever cared muster in his life.

“That is quite a shift in attitude, Rosalind.” He did not know what to make of her newly assertive and aggressive personality, different from the meek girl he thought he knew all these years. Her aptitude for battlefield control was the only constant.

It was a while before she deigned to give him an answer, occupied with his injuries as it were. “Well, if you must know.” Her voice was haughty but refined, that too was a change. “I intended it to be a long term plan. You were eager to improve yourself and others. I sought to spend time with you and better

my own capabilities. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement. I would endear myself to you through our prolonged and cumulative interactions. In time, a natural and beautiful romance would blossom between us as individuals who possessed intimate knowledge of ourselves and especially of each other. A certain, passionate love; free of lowly hesitancy.” She sighed. “I had to make sudden alterations to account for recent events. After all, if the straightforward method usually works extremely well-”

“There is no reason not to bash an opponent to death if you can.” he finished. He did say that a while back and it was something he always kept in mind though only applied to the matter of fighting. “Since when and why?”

Rosalind was rather pleased with herself at his interest. “It is difficult to precisely pinpoint the moment but needless to say I liked what I saw.” Her heart fluttered with feeling as she recounted his attractive points. “Strong but gentle. A warrior and a scholar both, even if latter is less overt. Painfully optimistic and refreshingly honest. A good man is difficult to find and I perceived one. You've yet to disappoint. A little dense perhaps and a tad careless where your own self is concerned but all is moot.” She finished wrapping the last bandage on his arm. “Well, now that the maiden has laid her heart bare, what say the gentleman?” she said and proceeded to lean against his shoulder. Her ebony ringlets tickled his neck.

He tried very hard not stare into her alluring green eyes and turned away. She was more forward than he was used to and he had little in the way of defenses for this type of charming attack from the opposite sex. He stuttered, “W-well, in retrospect. I suppose I have spent a greater proportion of time with you and may have intentionally contributed to that...” He tented his fingers in embarrassment. “And you are quite beautiful and charismatic in addition to being a very capable woman off and on the battlefield.” He jumped slightly as she leaned closer, her scent of eglantyne was considerably more noticeably now. “B-b-b-but I believe it unbecoming to regard you as more than a battle sister” He exclaimed. “Besides, it would be unwise to become involved with me...being a half-breed and now a touch demonic.” He muttered.

Rosalind raised an elegant eyebrow at the last statement. “It is rather late for that is it not?” She did not like this unseemly self-deprecation in him. His newfound bashfulness in her presence on the other hand? Simply adorable. She ventured forth a suggestion. “My family is of some wealth and standing. Simple merchants but competent in their own right. We could be of assistance.”

Zosimus vehemently shook his head. “They will destroy you, Rosalind. And the House of Blackmore forever dishonored.”

Her grin was mischievous as was her tone. “Oh, I am quite aware of that. Just as well. Hearts are not to be bought but stolen they say.” She brushed aside his crimson hair to reveal the pointed tip of his ear.

He blushed every spectrum of red as he felt a brief and playful nip.

Rosalind promptly fixed his hair afterward and went back to leaning against him. She did not wish to push him further. While he reciprocated her feelings with a degree of certainly, a great deal of things happened today and time was required to sift through it all. Their relationship was not out of the question and if she had her way, it never will be. “I offer an ultimatum,” she began. “You will have time to sort out the extent of our relationship and the exact circumstances of your personal affairs. After that bestowed period and at my discretion, I will seek you out when I deem myself able,” she continued at his stunned silence. “Regardless of whether or not you have come to terms with our relationship at that point, I will definitely protect you and you will most definitely love me seriously.” She finished

without doubt. "You may rely on that."

Zosimus simply nodded. He could give no other response.

She was pleased. "Now that we have reached consensus. There is the matter of payment for the services I have rendered today." She motioned to his cleaned and properly attended injuries.

He was confused but as he looked at her expectant expression but it then dawned on him the sort of reward she wanted; a display of affection. He was unsure of what would be appropriate or what to do for that matter. He settled for giving her a quick peck on the forehead, an easy target considering her parted bangs.

"Hmph." Frankly, Rosalind was disappointed but observing his shy motions before, during, and after the execution, she supposed what she received was well within expectations. There would plenty of time to properly instruct him later on what she considered proper treatment toward her person. As of now, it was sufficient that he was in her company. "Stay with me for a while?" She inquired and was internally delighted when he offered his hand. She gladly accepted it, promptly using it to close the distance and pull him into an intimate kiss that lingered long. She licked her lips in satisfaction and let him stew in embarrassed silence as they cuddled together under the night sky. He would not be forgetting her anytime in the near future, she was at least certain of that.

My Whole Life was Unlimited Blade Works

Since then Zosimus wandered the land and threw himself into all manners of conflict with the primary objective of improving his skills. He was careful to conceal his half-breed status as the outside world was comparatively less tolerant toward such matters. He took even greater care to care to hide his taint but that proved to be a much more difficult task. He discovered very early in his forays into Shadow Sun techniques, that while it was by no means progressing, it was influencing his abilities nonetheless if only in superficial manifestation. The exposed fires of his fighting spirit resembled infernal flame rather than an earthly manifestation. The shadows he harnessed to conceal his motions seemed to writhe with vibrant life and a sinister, chthonian feel. The ghost strikes meant to numb and incapacitate brought literal but intangible chill. The most prominent issue was his left eye. During intense battle or encounters with strong evil, it glowed with a scarlet crimson that was noticeable even in bright sun and left a visible trail that lingered in the very air as he moved.

Not all of his waking hours was spent in battle. It was also spent in duels, tournaments, friendly spars, and the occasional wasting of a particularly rude drunk or thug. He spent quiet periods in the pursuit of other studies, be they reading, weaving, cooking, or even fishing. He never spent too long in any settlement. While Zosimus was certain he was not a high priority target and at most a very minor concern, he took little in the way of chances. However, at any place he temporarily resided, he was glad to be of assistance to the locals as long as they were lawful and just in motive. The extra coin he garnered for such assistance was a welcome bonus.

Perhaps his most interesting encounter was with a succubus paladin that worked with him on an errand of sorts. During the course of it, he often found himself conversing with her as they shared many of the same goals and concerns in regard to their more pronounced inner darkness. Before they parted ways and bid each other fond farewells, they of course fought at his stubborn insistence. He was not the victor, but she was impressed enough to teach him Infernal, the language of Demons. It would be a

tongue he planned to use often if at all but it had potential to be of use.

During his constant travels he would always kept an eye out on the road behind him as if the amorous girl in his memories would suddenly appear one day. As far as he knew, Trampling Unicorn Monastery was still intact with Father Fujimoto as its head but she was sure to leave one day on her personal quest. She never gave him a certain time of departure only an iron-clad promise that she intended to keep.

If he wanted to be unnecessarily dramatic about it, his meeting with Rosalind would depend on two miracles. The first being that he would eternally wait for her and the second being that she would endlessly pursue him with only pure faith that they would be together at the end of their respective roles no matter how it changed them.

Well, whenever she appeared. He would have a proper answer for her. For now, he was content with restless wandering. It was just his style.