



Duty—Part I
by Marie Mönkemeyer

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Porta Yaquiris, 290 before the Fall of Bosparan

“We should have been there, at their side. They were our comrades. We let them down and now they are dead!”
Cavalry Prefect Aradnus’ voice was a deep rumble, full of anger and desperation.

“And still the Lion Worshipers have not tired of spilling our blood. It is only a matter of time before they come at us again. We need a tactic that will work against them.”
Centurion Maga Cirania was practical to her core and always looked to the future. Only her unyielding grip on her walking staff gave any hint to the emotions that burned within her. I remained silent, even though I knew they were waiting for me to respond.

Two months ago, I was still assigned to the Divine Field Commander. For 36 years, my role as a priest was to serve on the battlefield with the legions. I had been deep in meditation over the nature of our god when my brothers and sisters mustered and marched off to the Battle of Bloodhills. What happened next is well known. It didn’t



settle the question of which deity—Rahandra or Shinxir—deserved to be worshiped as *the* god of war, but given the results, it might as well have. The servants of the Lion Goddess had betrayed us, their comrades, and won. Of the many champions of Shinxir who fought that day, none survived.

I could not accept that these men and women had gone to their doom without me, but no matter how long I meditated or how many hours I devoted to practice with my weapons, I could not compensate for my injured left leg. The answer was plain for all to see—Shinxir called me to serve, but he did not call me to battle. Even so, he was still my god, my supreme commander. Whatever he asked of me, I would do gladly. And so I stayed with the legion.

Rahandra has reigned as the true goddess of war ever since. After the Battle of Bloodhills, fear began to spread through the tents. It was only a matter of time before belief in Shinxir would be proscribed, his priests executed, and his believers cast from society. Officers and soldiers alike learned quickly to keep their heads down. They adapted to the new order and swore allegiance to Rahandra (or at least to the belief that this really was the will of the gods).

And so it came to pass that the three of us were sitting in my tent instead of in the officers' mess, questions hanging unspoken in the air between us.

Aradnus and Cirania were more than good officers. They were my friends, and both would have given their lives for me without hesitation. They showed me consideration with their silence. Instead, they focused their anger on the servants of Rahandra and the officers, who were suddenly



avoiding them. Yet they longed for answers. Should they have found a way to carry me into battle? Should they gather those who were still loyal to Shinxir and attack the servants of the Lioness, and by so doing, seek their own deaths as well? Was that Shinxir's will?

For most of my life, and especially these past few months, I had asked these questions of myself and my god. I meditated for hours, until the black and golden squares of the board filled my mind, pushing everything else aside. Twelve times twelve squares, black and gold like a hornet, orderly like a legion's camp. The game requires tactics, planned moves, and quick countermoves against the unexpected strikes of the opponent. System and tactics, discipline and order, camaraderie and companionship.

Even now my gaze remained fixed on the board that sat on the table, flanked by Aradnus' and Ciranias' goblets. I had not put it aside for more than a year.

Twelve times twelve squares, twelve pieces for each player. Alone, a single piece is of little importance. Only together do they have meaning—just like a legion. To win, one need only employ them in the right way, systematically and prudently. When strengthened by its companions at just the right moment, an otherwise worthless piece can win the battle.

Shinxir is no hot-headed warrior who throws himself heedlessly into battle. He is a field commander who plans well in advance and does not send his reserves to the slaughter. And he is my god.



“By the way, I am keeping my fastest horse ready for you, in case they try to arrest you.” Aradnus’ words derailed my thoughts. He clapped my shoulder encouragingly, forcing my gaze from the black and golden squares. *It would have to be a very good horse*, I thought. As Prefect of the Cavalry he was very demanding, so of course it would be a strong animal. However, I did not need it.

“Thank you,” I said, “but that is not necessary.”

“If you say so.” Aradnus shrugged skeptically and reached for the wine. Then he seemed to come to a decision. “Yes. I am not going to flee, either,” he said. “This is the time for action.”

Aradnus and Cirania exchanged glances, and I could tell by their body language that they had been waiting for a moment like this. Officers never liked to sit around not knowing when or if new orders would arrive.

“If we die as martyrs,” I began, “who then shall serve Shinxir? Who will guard his sanctuaries? Who will honor the Champion? When you lose a battle, do you sit in the corner and cry? No! You retreat, you gather your forces, and you regroup. And that is exactly what we are going to do. The thundering Lioness might have beaten us this time, but that does not mean she will always win, or even that this war is over. The next battle will come, and people will sing Shinxir’s praises again.”

They found comfort and, I think, cautious, hesitating hope in my words.



“If the war is not over, should we not raise an army and lead it against Rahandra’s servants?” Cirania asked, ever eager for battle.

“No. We retreat. You two can remain in the legion, if you wish. I shall become a private citizen and settle down on my family’s land.”

“So, we’re to run away, after all,” Aradnus grumbled into his goblet. I gave him a chiding stare, and he snapped to attention, red-faced, like a scolded recruit. “Please forgive me!” he exclaimed.

I waved him aside before he could continue. Aradnus had served on the border, in Corania, and everywhere in between. His manners, even after all the drilling, were still as rugged and wild as his homeland. This would never change.

“Do you think you will be safe there?” Cirania asked.

“I think so. I am getting old and I am a cripple. How dangerous could I be?” I tapped my left leg, smiling.

“You are not a cripple!” Cirania yelled. She always objected strongly whenever I started talking like this. *Another thing that would not change.* She was tough on herself, and she would never give up on me.

I had been a young man, and she was still in training, when an enemy’s arrow struck my horse. It plunged and rolled, trapping me beneath its body. If not for Cirania, I would certainly have gone on to join Shinxir’s otherworldly legions. She pulled me from beneath my dying horse and

treated the worst of my injuries at great risk to her own life. I was eventually able to walk again, slowly and with a limp, but I survived only because of her.

“Some may see me as one, if they like. You know that the most dangerous enemy is the one you underestimate.” How often had I uttered that ancient bit of wisdom?

“Yes,” she said, nodding to herself. After a few moments, she asked, “You said ‘retreat and wait.’ Until when?”

“Until Shinxir’s next battle.”

Aradnus frowned, his brows furrowing. Cirania rolled her eyes in mock exasperation at the obvious nature of my answer, and she remained confident that things would work out for the best.

The truth is not easily grasped by mortal minds, and my mind is no exception. Eventually I came to understand that alone I was doomed to fail. I could make use of my authority as a priest for a time, but that authority would not survive beyond my death. I needed Aradnus and Cirania to join me in an important task. Therefore, I needed to explain something to them which even I could barely put into words.

“It might not happen for a very long time,” I began. “The Champion is a *god*, and gods... They... They think in different dimensions. To them, we are so small, like a game piece on the board. Time works *differently* for gods. Hundred of years seem like forever to us mortals, but to the gods, centuries rush past in the blink of an eye. There will come a day when Rahandra’s sword grows rusty, and Shinxir will be there to



fight her once again. I know it. I have seen it! Yet I do not know when it will happen. We must not lose heart. We must do our part as loyal soldiers. The Champion will return, and it is our task to ensure that somebody still supports Shinxir's fight here in the mortal world, on Dere, when that day arrives. Thus will the Divine Field Commander be victorious!"

...to be continued in *Duty—Part II*.

