

The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles

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The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles: Volume 5 [Complete]

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Prologue

Corpses carpeted the floor in horrific numbers—some slashed, others burned, yet more cut to pieces. All were so brutalized that they could not possibly retain life. Blood poured forth in an unceasing torrent, a riot of charnel blossoms vast enough to stain the world red.

With a discordant crash, the ceiling fell in, burying the sea of crimson beneath a cascade of ashen dust. Once the seat of grandeur and the pinnacle of glory, the throne room was now collapsing. Beneath the acrid smoke and the putrid reek of decay lay the deeper stench of death.

In the heart of that vision of hell, a woman lay beneath a mountain of rubble. The once-lustrous turquoise of her hair was dull with dust and matted with red, and blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. One could not tell whether she was alive or dead. A short distance away, a crimson-haired girl sat slumped against a pillar. The cruel wounds crisscrossing her body spoke to the ferocity of whatever battle had been fought here, but as to its cause, they kept their silence.

Deeper, now, to the imperial throne and the headless body seated upon it. The emperor's torso was still clad in the gold-threaded finery of the ruler of the empire. His head lay at the feet of the man once known as the first prince.

"How many of you upstarts must I endure?" The man scowled, his hand pressed to his face. "Do you not realize that you are outclassed?"

Opposite him stood a black-haired, black-eyed boy, his features soft, his stance relaxed.

"Time for you to die," the boy said, and his mouth pulled into a savage grin.

Chapter 1: The Growth of the Valditte

The ninth day of the twelfth month of Imperial Year 1023

Chill winds swirled across the plain as winter set in. The undergrowth was dry and withered, and golden leaves adorned the trees until some sudden gust sent them dancing out over the thoroughfare. The Schein High Road, one of the nation's arterial carriageways, was busy with villagers drawing oxen. A young child gleefully swung a stick like a sword. His mother smiled, his other hand clasped in her own. It was a portrait of a happy family that one might find anywhere, a typical tableau of country life—all but for the unsettling hum encroaching upon the scene. The low rumbling reverberated in the pit of the stomach, sending vibrations passing from the ground up through the legs.

A host of ironclad soldiers appeared on the road. At their head, a black dragon banner fluttered in the light of the midday sun. The villagers' eyes widened. They hurried to the roadside and bowed their heads.

The force numbered three thousand, and it marched beneath the standard of the War God's scion, the One-Eyed Dragon. Other banners also asserted their presence among the press, a lily on a crimson field and a sword and shield on a violet field among them. The escort's affiliations were as varied as its colors, with soldiers donated by the western nobles riding alongside eight hundred men from the Crow Legion.

"Whoa..." the child breathed. Eyes shining with astonishment, he stepped out into the road.

"No!" His mother hurriedly pulled him back, but she was too slow. Horses screamed as the opulent carriage ground to a halt. Her face grew pale. Her child had impeded the passage of royalty, a crime punishable by death.

"Do you know whose carriage you have just obstructed?!" A soldier's voice rang out in the winter air, colored with enough fury to make anyone want to cover their ears. The villagers blanched. It was a wonder nobody screamed.

"Please, sir, show mercy!" the mother begged, her hands pressed together in

apology. “He didn’t mean any harm!”

The villagers joined in, pleading for the two to be spared, but the soldier would not be deterred. If anything were to befall a member of the royal family, it would be his head on the block, perhaps literally. If he was lucky, he would lose his position. If he was unlucky and found responsible, he could lose his life.

He raised a whip high, his face flushed with anger. “There will be no mercy! Let this be a lesson—”

“Enough,” came a voice. “Leave him be.”

The soldiers and villagers turned as one. Out from the open carriage window peered a boy with eyes as black as his hair—a hue all but unheard of in Aletia. The peasants stared agog in the brief seconds before the soldiers closed ranks to shield the boy from view.

“You must understand, Your Highness! The boy obstructed your carriage—”

“And your devotion to your duty is appreciated, but not necessary this time.” Hiro’s eyes flashed; that was not a request. The soldier fell silent. “Royal carriages rarely pass this way. It’s only natural for a child to get excited. Nobody could have foreseen his actions. Let him be.”

“Understood, Your Highness.”

“And give him this, if you would.” Hiro handed the soldier a small pouch.

The man’s eyes widened as he glanced at the contents. “Confectionary, Your Highness?”

Hiro grinned. “To buy the loyalty of the next generation.”

“As you wish, Your Highness,” the soldier sighed.

As the villagers looked on, wondering what kind of royal would behave so, he turned hesitantly back to the child and handed over the pouch. The boy’s eyes shone with delight as he uttered a hasty thanks.

The soldier didn’t quite seem to know what to make of the situation. “It’s Lord Hiro you should be thanking, not me,” he said, looking awkwardly between the two.

With a smile, Hiro gestured down the road. “Shall we be off?”

“I, er...” The soldier’s confusion was written on his face, but he could not refuse an order from a prince of the empire. He snapped back to attention and bowed. “At once, Your Highness!” he barked, filling the wintry air with warm fervor.

“Bless you, milord! Bless you!” the villagers cried.

Hiro withdrew back inside the carriage. As it began moving once more, he looked around the interior at the other occupants. “Now,” he said, “where was I?”

A silver-haired girl raised a hand. “The emperor’s letter.”

Brigadier General Treya Verdan Aura von Bunadala was, in a word, cold—her expressionless features betrayed not a sliver of emotion. Although her allegiance lay with the western noble families, exceptional circumstances now saw her accompanying Hiro to the capital.

Ideally we would have waited for Liz to make a full recovery, but this left us no choice.

Hiro looked down at the envelope in his hand. A summons from the emperor himself. Aura’s fate had been decided, and Liz needed to be reprimanded for her recent failure.

If she’s lucky, she’ll get house arrest; if she’s unlucky, demotion. And if she’s very *unlucky, she could be stripped of her place in the order of succession.*

Leading twenty thousand men to defeat would leave a stain on anybody’s record. While the fiasco had in a sense been inevitable, Liz could not expect to walk away unscathed—affording her special treatment on account of her royal status would draw protests from the nobles. Much the same was true for Aura. Still, their punishment was unlikely to be too harsh. Hiro’s invasion of the Grand Duchy of Draal had seen to that.

At the end of the day, it all comes down to the emperor’s decision.

With a deep sigh, Hiro looked at Liz, who was seated next to Aura. Her expression was grave, a stark change from her usual grin. Still, at least she was

recovering from her injuries. With the exception of her nails, which were yet to grow back, her Spiritblade's blessing had sealed her wounds with almost frightening speed.

"And what did the letter say?"

Hiro turned to the source of the voice, a hooded woman sitting on Aura's other side: Culann Scáthach du Faerzen, former princess of Faerzen, leader of the Faerzen Resistance, and the commander who had driven Aura to the brink of defeat. Her full expression was hidden beneath the shadows of her cowl, but the mention of the emperor had made her lips twist in anger.

Hiro avoided commenting on her reaction. "It said... Well, it would probably be quicker to read it yourselves."

The letter was technically addressed to him alone, but its contents were nothing worth keeping secret. He opened it out and held it up. The trio huddled together as they read. Aura was the first to react; she shrugged and sat back in her seat, having evidently expected the contents. Next was Liz, who grimaced as she went down the page but quickly steeled her resolve, clenched her fist, and nodded to herself. Scáthach simply breathed deep as though trying to calm some hidden fury. Had the emperor been there in the carriage, she likely would have leaped at him, spear in hand.

"Now that we're all on the same page, I'd like to talk about what happens next." Hiro smiled sheepishly at the three very different responses. "It'll depend on how things play out, but I expect our opponents at court will make as big an issue of Liz and Aura's mistakes as they can."

They were certain to call for harsh punishment. This was a chance to boot Liz clean out of the competition for the throne—only a fool would overlook it. Their anger had to be redirected elsewhere.

"Conveniently, we have House Krone and the atrocities they committed in Faerzen. They'll make the perfect scapegoat."

Exposing their crimes would provide Liz's opponents with fresher meat to sink their teeth into, and the resulting convictions would dramatically weaken House Krone—or that was the plan, at least. Still, Hiro wanted to hear the opinions of the other three before proceeding.

“I’m all for that,” Liz said, “but it’s not enough.” She stared back at Hiro with determination in her eyes. Its flame was not quite steady, but he could tell that she was earnestly wracking her brains to come up with an ideal solution. “They should foot the bill for the Faerzen reconstruction too.”

Hiro nodded. “Agreed. They deserve to pay for their crimes.”

It was important to be gracious to the people of other nations as well as one’s own. If Liz was to stand at the zenith of the empire, she could not afford to survey the world with a blinkered view.

“That’s already taken care of, though,” he added. “Rosa will see to it.”

An amusing spectacle surely awaited them once they arrived at the capital.

Liz’s eyebrows rose. “Really?”

“She seemed like the best choice for the job.” Hiro smiled. “I’m sure she won’t disappoint.”

Liz’s expression turned pensive again. “Then I suppose all that’s left...is how I’m going to demonstrate to Father that I’ve taken responsibility.”

That was her obligation as a princess, her duty as a citizen, her burden as one who aspired to rule.

I see, Hiro thought. *You really are well on your way.*

While he couldn’t guess what had provided the impetus, it was clear that Liz had begun to walk her own path.

Kingship or conquest. I wonder which she’ll choose...

Either way, he couldn’t deny a certain sadness at seeing her taking steps outside his reach. It was a good sign, all told, but it also augured the advancement of his own plans.

In the near term, I’ll focus on seating her on the throne.

That alone, however, wouldn’t be enough. He would have to work in parallel to further his personal goals—but that was something he couldn’t allow Liz, Rosa, or anybody else in the empire to catch wind of. Even Garda, his closest confidant, did not know the full scope of his intentions.

I've sought out a certain party's cooperation, but I'm not stupid enough to trust her.

Their paths were beginning to converge. Already, their interests aligned. As such, it had been practical to make overtures, but while his collaborator was certainly capable, it would be foolish to expect her loyalty.

He looked outside the window. In the distance lay the white expanse of the north.

Still, I can use her. I'll never seize the initiative without taking a few risks, so I might as well have one more pawn on the board. Her heart might be black, but for now, she'll be playing for white.

As Hiro brewed his schemes, Aura's eyes were boring a hole into Scáthach. The seconds ticked on, but she said nothing, only continued to stare. Scáthach squirmed awkwardly in her seat, clearly uncomfortable.

Liz, oblivious to the tension, raised her head with renewed determination in her crimson eyes. "Hiro, once we reach the capital...there's something I want to talk about."

From the steel in her voice, Hiro could tell that she had chosen her course. The true gravity of that decision remained to be seen, but in any case...

"All right. But there's still time. Think it over."

"I will. But I've decided something. No more doubts." Her resolve would not falter. That much was clear.

"Well, then," he murmured. "I look forward to hearing what you have to say."

He cast another glance at the three girls, burning the sight of them into his mind. Liz was spreading her wings and setting out on her own path. Aura, too, seemed to have discovered a new course in Faerzen. Even Scáthach was moving toward the dream of rebuilding her homeland. Anger and hatred might currently rule her thoughts, but once her vengeance was done, she would be able to think about the future.

I think they're going to be alright.

Their convictions were more than strong enough to forge ahead without him.

Finding their resolve gave people wings, causing them to grow with astonishing speed. So it had been for him and Artheus—they had reveled in the discovery like fish newly taken to water, and the ripples of their wake had coalesced into the Grantzian Empire. Once the trio had reached their full potential, Hiro would have no more part to play.

And that'll be the real test.

Significant, if foreseeable, strife awaited the empire. If worst came to worst, war could engulf the entire continent.

The Grantzian Empire has ruled Soleil for a thousand years, but the lion has grown weak in its old age.

The beast's claws remained sharp, but its eyes had grown dim, its guts rotten, and its bones brittle. Sic transit gloria mundi—all glories must fade. The strong preyed on the weak, such was the way of the world, and no amount of storied pomp could resist the laws of nature. At the turning of the age, when the empire teetered on the brink of destruction—that would be when he was most needed.

Could that be what Artheus meant?

Words flashed through Hiro's mind—words spoken by his old friend in a dream shortly after his return to Aletia. *To think the Time of Turning would fall so distant.* He had asked what that meant, but Artheus had never answered, only instructing him to live life as he pleased. In the end, his friend's one-sided speech had been cut short prematurely, and Hiro had not heard his final words.

What exactly is it you want from me?

He patted his chest, trying to put himself at ease, but the slip of card that Artheus had once given him was long gone. As far as he could tell, it had disappeared during the final battle with the Faerzen Resistance, most likely after he lost control on seeing Liz frozen in ice. Strangely, he seemed physically unaffected—or no, that wasn't quite true. A change had overcome him, one that was slowly but surely worming its way into his flesh.

Perhaps this is some kind of punishment, he thought wryly before shaking his head to dispel his unease. That wasn't worth thinking about. He had more

immediate problems to deal with before he could start worrying about himself.

“First,” he said, “we’ll use the imperial audience to strip power away from House Krone.”

That would give Liz a push, just in case. She had promised no more doubts, but there was always a danger that someone as kind-hearted as her would hesitate to put themselves before others. That possibility needed to be mitigated.

“While the rest of the court is reeling, we can shore up the eastern nobles’ power.”

Hiro had in fact instructed Rosa to pivot to backing Liz instead of him in the near future, but he wasn’t going to tell Liz that—not because Aura was there, with her western connections, and not because of the minor detail of Scáthach’s presence, but to avoid making Liz self-conscious. Putting unnecessary pressure on her wouldn’t help anyone.

“The central nobles will fall even deeper into paranoia and start scheming to switch allegiances to the east. All we have to do then is ensure First Prince Stovell’s removal from the order of succession and House Krone will be finished.”

In view of Aura’s presence, he avoided mentioning the western nobles directly, but they would be in no position to challenge the east—the fighting in Faerzen had left them significantly weakened. With apologies to the man, Third Prince Brutahl’s position in the order of succession was not long for this world. That left the northern nobles, who backed Second Prince Selene, and the southern, who backed nobody. The latter, who were still watching and waiting, were the most worrisome presence on the board; most likely, they were aiming to take advantage of the rest of the empire’s squabbles to better their own interests, and if they began colluding against Hiro, that could mean real trouble. There was little hope for help from Rosa’s eastern nobles on that score—they could handle their central and western counterparts, but pitting them against the north and south as well would be far too much to ask.

“I’m torn on whether or not we should turn to Kiork,” he mused aloud.

Kiork’s influence in the south was growing, but against House Muzuk—a great

house and the leader of the southern nobles—he would be very much outmatched.

"I know how good a statesman he is," Liz opined, "so it's not like I don't trust his abilities, but what could he do by himself?"

She was right. Kiork alone didn't have the resources to help, and the slightest misstep could cost him the Gurinda Mark. They needed more allies, but all the recent conflict had left them with few opportunities to forge political connections—and now they were out of time to seek out people they could trust.

If we show any hesitation now, we'll end up with a knife in the back.

He had seen it often enough in other nations. The moment Hiro's power began to ebb, his allies would turn on him.

I might have hit the limit of what I can accomplish on my own.

Rosa and Kiork were assisting him as best they could, but he couldn't take on every other noble in the realm when they were his only connections outside of the military. A thousand years ago, he would have had some sway in politics, but in the modern era he did not have the authority he had once enjoyed as Schwartz.

Aura raised a hand. "We do have one other ally."

"We do?"

Aura nodded. "To the east. A small nation with great power."

Instantly, Hiro understood. On the eastern coast of Soleil was the nation of Baum, home to the Spirit King's sanctum. Its matriarch, the archpriestess, commanded considerable power across the continent. Even the Grantzian Empire could not disregard her will. With her assistance, they could easily steal a march on any opposing nobles, and she and her nation were likely to help Hiro if he asked.

I'd like to avoid that if possible. Baum couldn't survive outright war.

The nation's political influence was significant, but long centuries under the auspices of the empire had left it with little military might to speak of. Turning

to the archpriestess for aid with prospective enemies on all sides would risk seeing it wiped from the map.

“That’s a possibility,” Hiro replied, “but we’d have to be extremely careful about how we played it.”

There was no harm in making back-up plans, he supposed. At the very least, it would be worth writing a letter asking the archpriestess to lend Liz her support.

Aura cast a glance out of the window before looking back at Hiro. “We’re getting close to the capital.”

“Then we’re early,” Liz chipped in. “The audience is tomorrow, isn’t it?”

Hiro nodded. “We can spend the night in Rosa’s mansion. I sent a messenger a while back. She should be expecting us.”

Rosa was already in the city. As soon as she had gotten word of Liz’s capture, she had stationed herself there with her troops so as to be ready to act at a moment’s notice.

A thought struck him. “What will you do, Aura?”

“I’ll stay with you and Countess von Kelheit.”

“Are you sure that won’t get you in trouble?”

The western nobles were likely to object to that, possibly to the point of endangering her station. Moreover, she risked causing headaches for the other members of House Bunadala.

Aura shook her head. “My family means to side with Liz.”

“That’s...news to me. Is it alright if I ask why?”

Aura bobbed her head in a dainty little nod. “The west has been torn to shreds.”

The endless succession of conflicts in Faerzen had put tremendous strain on the western nobles’ treasuries, and House Krone’s schemes had them jumping at shadows. Both factors had them fearing being held responsible for Aura’s mistakes.

“And there’s another reason I’m joining you.” Aura lowered her gaze sadly

before looking back up apologetically. “The western nobles are going to cut ties with me.”

To ensure her protection in transit, she explained, her father—the head of House Bunadala—had instructed her to enter Hiro’s service. No doubt the man had judged that her enemies couldn’t do her harm as long as she was under Hiro’s wing.

She sat up straight and bowed her head. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

Her perilous situation was the product of her own mistakes, for which she had been prepared to face due punishment. Involving Hiro and the others seemed to leave a sour taste in her mouth.

“Don’t worry about it,” Hiro said.

“Right!” Liz piped up. “You’ve got nothing to apologize for!”

“Oomph!”

Liz wrapped Aura in an embrace, sending the breath bursting from her lungs, and began stroking her head. Aura seemed less than thrilled by the situation, but she was powerless to resist.

Hiro smiled as he watched their antics, but soon enough a shadow fell over his face. “Is the west really under that much pressure?” he whispered to himself. The only reason to relinquish a strategic mind like Aura’s was if they couldn’t guarantee they could defend her. Their hands might be full with their own affairs, but even so, it was hard to see their decision as anything other than a mistake.

“They’ll hold together for a few more days.” Aura lowered her eyes. “But Third Prince Brutahl is going to start losing some powerful nobles very soon.”

“And then either the western faction will disintegrate or they’ll change heads,” Hiro supplied.

The current leader of the western nobles was House Münster, Third Prince Brutahl’s family by birth.

“The wealth that’s held them together has run out,” Aura said.

Loyalty rarely ran deeper than the bottom of a purse. That was true in any

world. Aura, however, likely still felt a certain amount of obligation toward Brutahl. Would she be able to fight against him if the time came? That was a real concern. She was stubborn in her loyalties; at the very least, she would certainly hesitate. That today's enemy could be tomorrow's friend and vice versa might be the nature of war, but that didn't make it any less bitter a pill to swallow.

Hiro sighed. "The road ahead seems less clear than ever."

House Krone, the heads of the central nobles, had lost the confidence of the emperor. House Münster, the heads of the western nobles, were also on the verge of being thrown to the wolves. Was that truly just coincidence, or was some hidden hand at work? If so, how far did its reach extend? He could think of no possible culprits but the southern and northern nobles. Rosa's eastern nobles *could* be responsible, but it was hard to imagine that they had been working in secret without telling him.

All the little mismatched ends I've overlooked are starting to come undone.

Now that he thought about it, even his own actions might end up playing into this hidden foe's hands. He would have to be extremely cautious in how he proceeded. He could not even necessarily rely on outside help—turmoil was brewing all across Soleil, and only the empire seemed to be concerned with keeping it in check.

Every nation's working in its own interests. If anything threatens that, they'll cut it away like a dead branch.

The countries with whom Hiro had forged relationships could turn on him at any time. What was more, there were several nations on Soleil large enough to rival the empire, and they had presumably taken advantage of the prolonged peace to shore up their armies. Information on those far to the west was regrettably sparse, but he had no doubt that they were eyeing the empire eagerly. The current rate of conflict was not sustainable. The nation his comrades had founded would be soiled and destroyed by fools. That, he would not allow. He had to carry their legacy forward into the coming age.

But that's easier said than done.

The stage was set for the Grantzian Empire's downfall. If that was indeed by

some party's design, then he needed to act quickly. Unfortunately, as he had reasoned earlier, he did not have the resources to stop it alone. As dangerous as it was to be on the back foot, he was no longer in a position to seize the initiative.

But then, if everything was going my way, this wouldn't be any fun.

It was all right, he reassured himself. He had a hand to play. If his opponent was a step ahead, then he would simply have to read a step beyond that.

I'll see this through, no matter what it takes. Nothing will stand in my way.

Let his enemies deal him a thousand papercuts. When he struck, it would be to the bone.

As Hiro's smile grew quietly wider, Liz was busy celebrating Aura's addition to their group.

"There's so much you could teach me!" she said, beaming. "I'm just hopeless when it comes to strategy. If you have any textbooks to recommend, I'd love to hear them!"

"Of course." Aura's face remained as expressionless as ever, but she radiated faint delight. Seemingly from nowhere, she produced her copy of the Black Chronicle and thrust it toward Liz. "You can't get better than this."

Hiro's smile stiffened. Even Liz's face turned hesitant. Only Scáthach leaned in with interest.

"Is that the Black Chronicle? Consider me impressed. I had heard it was so rare as to be unobtainable."

Aura nodded with gusto, her eyes sparkling. "That's right. You probably know it as an account of Mars's life until he took the throne, but it's so much more. It lists all the tactics he used to mislead his enemies, all his strategies that feigned defeat to secure victory, and all sorts of apocrypha that you won't find in any other text. It's a veritable compendium of War God knowledge. But that's not all. It details not only how he became the second emperor, but the events of the Missing Years. It's worthwhile just for that. Read it and you'll be satisfied enough to last a lifetime. Don't, and you'll regret you were ever born."

“I... I see. I shall have to read it...later.” Scáthach shied away, intimidated by Aura’s sudden diatribe.

“You should. No, you must. You’ll fall in love with the second emperor, I guarantee it. Read it as soon as you can. It’ll make you thankful to be alive, it’s that addicting. You won’t even have to eat anymore. One reading session is equal to two weeks’ worth of food.” Aura puffed out her chest, as though to say she was living proof.

Scáthach looked incredulous for just a second, but she managed to hide it behind an expression of polite astonishment. “I see. That sounds most impressive.”

“Read it now. Right this second. And then tell me what you think.”

“Right now?! I-I fear I cannot—”

“Why not?”

“Why? Well, I...erm...”

Scáthach panicked as Aura’s eyes grew colder. Hiro smiled weakly. Liz gazed steadily out of the window, out of the conversation and intent on staying that way.



The Missing Years, she said... That was the period of time after I went back to Earth.

Hiro had read that section himself. It included details that only somebody with first hand knowledge could have known. He had detected no falsehood from it; the Black Chronicle, he felt quite certain, truly had been written by a witness to the events described. That, then, raised a question: why had it appeared now, in the modern day, long after its author had surely died?

Scáthach looked at the spine and cocked her head. “By whose hand is it written? I see only the title.”

“I don’t know. Nobody does.” Aura shook her head sadly before foisting the book on Scáthach again. “But you should still read it.”

A groan escaped Scáthach’s lips as she looked to Hiro for help. Hiro shrank from her gaze and turned to stare out of the window, feeling guilty but unwilling to engage.

There’s only one person I can think of who could have written it. The same person who wanted so badly to make me emperor.

Outside, the sun was setting, the curtain of night settling over the horizon’s twilight blush. At the edge of the scene, throwing a gargantuan shadow across the plain, was a great city—the imperial capital of Cladius, grown only larger over the past thousand years.

Seeing an escape from Aura’s clutches, Scáthach turned to look. An impressed gasp escaped her lips. “So that is the imperial capital. I had heard tales...”

Liz looked surprised. “Have you never been?”

“The empire and Faerzen have been at odds since before I was born. It would not have been wise to visit.”

“Really!” Liz beamed. “Then I’ll have to show you around.”

“By all means,” Scáthach murmured, smiling back.

Aura, sandwiched between them, had question marks written all over her face. As Hiro watched, she began to sway in discomfort.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

She shot a guarded glance around the carriage. “*That’s Scáthach, isn’t it?*” she hissed so quietly it was barely audible above the rumbling of the wheels.

Hiro gave her a blank look. The other two also turned to stare at Aura in confusion. She frowned, as though confused why her question seemed so strange.

“Um...haven’t you been introduced?”

“No one told me anything.”

“Liz, you didn’t fill her in?”

“I thought you had.”

Hiro had assumed that Liz had handled the explanations. Apparently, she had thought the same of him.

“That does explain why you were glaring at me so.” Scáthach crossed her arms, nodding as though some missing piece had slotted into place.

“Why didn’t you say something sooner?” Hiro asked. They had been traveling together for days.

Aura laid a finger against her cheek. “I thought it would be rude.”

Hiro lifted a hand toward Scáthach. “As I’m sure you know, she’s the former leader of the Faerzen Resistance. She’s working with us now, for reasons I won’t go into. I’d appreciate if you could keep this discreet.”

The only other people who knew about their arrangement were Garda, Huginn and Muninn.

Aura seemed to process that for a moment. “I see.”

“I’m not going to force you to be friends.”

As former foes, it was only natural for them to have complicated feelings about the situation. They would simply have to set those aside, Hiro thought—but as it turned out, there was no need to worry.

“No grudges,” Aura said, offering Scáthach her hand.

The woman's eyebrows rose in surprise.

"I lost a lot of good men in the fighting. But I'm sure you did too." Something like guilt flickered in Aura's eyes. "And I know what Buze's rule did to the capital. I'm sorry I couldn't stop him."

No doubt she felt particularly responsible for that. Her victories in the first Faerzen campaign had directly paved the way for the nation's destruction.

"You are not to blame." Scáthach laid a hand on her shoulder, smiling kindly. "I would be glad to have you by my side. Your strategies were magnificent. I would be glad to learn from you."

Aura fell silent for a long moment. "Of course," she said at last.

"Ah, now I remember. There is one thing I wanted to ask you."

"What?"

"How did you keep such a watchful eye on the walls night after night?"

Hiro had heard about that. While under siege by the Faerzen Resistance, Aura's troops had maintained a constant presence on the ramparts day and night, allowing for no enemy ingress.

"It wasn't anything special." Aura explained that she had propped up deceased soldiers' armor on wooden poles—a ruse, in other words, but one that had nonetheless prevented Scáthach from attacking by night.

"I see." Scáthach brought a hand to her mouth in astonishment. "I confess, I was thoroughly deceived."

It was not surprising that she had failed to see through the trick. The Faerzen Resistance had been racing against time. Arrogance led to oversight, anger led to tunnel vision, and panic led to mistakes.

When people are put under pressure, they can get cautious or reckless. And Scáthach would have needed to conserve her resources for the battles to follow.

In other words, she had been too cautious, and paid for it. More surprising was that Aura had revealed the deception so readily. Now she would be unable to use it again if Scáthach were to turn against them.

Sensing his puzzlement, she turned to look at him, eyes shining. “Don’t worry. I’ll just come up with a better trick.”

He shrugged. “I’m sure you will.”

At that moment, a furious shout rattled the windowpane. “Down with House Krone! The villains have forgotten imperial honor!”

“Protect the Valditte! Protect the Warmaiden!” came another cry.

Those two were far from the last. A multitude of voices intermingled in the wintry air. The rumble of footsteps shook the carriage, and the atmosphere hung heavy with rage.

“Your Highness!” the coachman cried.

Hiro nodded. “I know.”

He opened the window and looked outside. While they had been talking, the carriage had arrived at the capital, and on the other side of its yawning gates, an angry crowd thronged the city’s central boulevard.

As Hiro narrowed his eyes, a guard came cantering up from the walls on horseback.

“I am pleased to find you safely arrived, Your Highness. However, continuing any further would endanger your royal person. If you might make your way around to the western gate?”

“All right. But would you mind telling me what they’re shouting about?”

“Word of House Krone’s atrocities in Faerzen has spread among the citizenry, Your Highness. Sadly, rumors breed rumors. The baseless notion has spread that the Valditte and the Warmaiden were framed, and protests have sprung up.”

“I see. All right. We’ll do as you suggest.”

“Thank you, Your Highness. I apologize for the trouble.” The guard turned his horse about and rode back toward the uproar.

Once the man was out of sight, Hiro closed the window and turned to the rest of the carriage. “It looks like Rosa has played her part well.”

“Maybe too well.” Liz looked pale. “The city’s one bad day away from a riot.”

Hiro, on the other hand, was unconcerned. “It might look that way now, but I’ve got a hunch that these protests will die down before violence breaks out.”

Admittedly, that would depend on Liz’s and Aura’s fates, but the threat of civil unrest was almost certain to have lessened their punishments. Rosa had done good work. As the crown jewel of the empire, the capital saw a constant flow of travel from foreign nations—a riot would make them the laughing stock of the continent. The emperor would have no choice but to lighten their sentences.

“With the people on our side, all you have to do is make a good account of yourselves. That’s the hard part now.”

Liz nodded meekly. “I’ll do my best.”

Hiro sensed no hesitation from her. The last time they had come to the capital, she had seemed pained by the prospect of entering the palace, but now she radiated calmness and composure. There was nothing so terrifying as someone who had found their resolve. Soon the nobles of the court would

discover that they had taken a lion cub for a kitten, and he looked forward to seeing the astonishment on their faces when they realized their mistake.

“We have arrived at House Kelheit’s mansion, Your Highness,” the coachman’s voice announced as the carriage eased to a stop.

Hiro cast one last look at the other three and placed a hand on the door. “First, we should greet Rosa. I’m sure she can’t wait to see us.”

He opened the door to see an ample bosom flying towards him. He had time for one choked cry and then everything went dark. Apparently Rosa’s greetings had not gotten any less enthusiastic with time.

A low, melodic voice played at his eardrums. “Thank the Divines you’re safe! You can’t imagine how glad I am to see you!”

Hiro smiled weakly. “And you. It’s good to see you’re well.” He prised himself away from the warmth of her embrace—noting a pleasantly sweet scent as he retracted—and looked her over from a proper distance.

She chuckled. “You’ve been in good health, I hope. Have you been eating well?”

Myste Caliara Rosa von Kelheit was the current acting head of House Kelheit, one of the empire’s five great houses. She was also the former third princess, and her golden hair and blue eyes testified that her von Grantz blood ran thick. Her alluring body and voluptuous curves left women too stunned to envy her and men too captivated to look away.

“What took you so long? I’ve been counting the minutes.”

“Really? We’re here ahead of schedule.”

“Even so...” Rosa seemed ready to argue, but the sight of the girl disembarking the carriage behind Hiro stopped her protests dead in her throat. Her eyes began to water. “Oh! Liz!”

“Wha— Oomph!”

Too slow to dodge her sister’s ambush, Liz vanished into the darkness of Rosa’s embrace.

“Ever since word came that you’d been captured, I haven’t been able to sleep

a wink!” Tears welled in the corners of Rosa’s eyes. Her relief was written on her face.

“I’m sorry I made you worry.” Liz said.

“As long as you’re safe, that’s all that matters. We must tell Kiork. He was just as concerned as I was!”

As the sisters celebrated their reunion, Cerberus slinked between their legs.

“There you are, Cerberus.” Rosa gently stroked the white wolf’s bandages. “I hear you’ve been quite the brave hound.”

“Oh, that’s right!” Liz exclaimed. “Aura here says she wants to work with us now!”

“Oh? Lady von Bunadala herself?”

“If you’ll have me.”

“You’d be more than welcome.” Rosa held out a hand to Aura. “I’m sure Liz could wish for no better tutor.”

“I’ll be glad to— Wah!” Seized by the wrist, Aura too was pulled into Rosa’s ample bosom. “Mmmph!”

Short—*petite,* Hiro corrected himself—for her age, the sight of Aura struggling to get free was comical to say the least. Unfortunately, she was nowhere near strong enough to escape from Rosa’s arms.

“My, but you are an adorable little thing. Be careful, or I might just tease you a little!”

Hiro was about to remark that she seemed to have already started, but seeing Liz turn back to the carriage and the hooded girl standing there, he closed his mouth and let things play out.

“And this is, um...a mysterious stranger.”

It was hard to discuss Scáthach’s identity with the guards present. Liz’s voice trailed off until it was lost in the wind.

“You needn’t hide it. I know who she is. My darling told me all about her in his letters.”

Rosa released Aura and approached Scáthach. The others fell silent as her demeanor turned frosty—angry, even. Only a few people present knew about the part Scáthach had played in Liz's injuries, but those who did could easily guess what Rosa might do next.

"Rosa, wait—"

Liz tried to interpose herself between them, but Rosa froze her in place with a glare. Scáthach stood stock-still, waiting to see what the woman would do.

"Consider yourself welcome."

To the surprise of all, Rosa threw her arms around her.

"Wha..." Even with Scáthach's face hidden beneath the hood, her astonishment was palpable.

But that's the sort of person you are, isn't it?

The untimely death of her husband had left Rosa to shoulder the weight of a great house, a woman alone in a man's world. She knew only too well what hatred wrought, what toll grief exacted. This was her apology to Scáthach, not as a countess but as a princess. No words she could offer would be enough, but actions might speak better.

After a long moment, she drew away and showed Scáthach a gentle smile. "It's grown rather cold out here. Dinner is ready, if you would step inside?" She gestured gracefully toward the doors, adding that the imperial audience would be held at midday the next day.

"What are we having for dinner?" Liz asked eagerly.

Rosa chuckled. "That, I won't reveal. You shall have to wait and see."

"I hope it's sweet," Aura murmured.

"Oh, don't worry on that score. My dining hall does not want for desserts." Rosa leaned toward Scáthach, who was still struggling to contain her surprise. "Do you have any particular requests?"

After a long silence, the woman spoke. "Anything warm will do."

"Then we'd better hurry before it gets cold, hadn't we?" Rosa cast Hiro a

sidelong glance. “And you?”

“You four go ahead,” he said. “I need to discuss something with my men.”

“Very well. But be warned: take too long, and Cerberus may get your share.”

With a goodbye wave, Rosa ushered the other three into the mansion. As the doors shut behind her, Hiro looked back over his shoulder. Garda, Huginn and Muninn stood silently at attention. Aura’s aides—with the exception of von Spitz—had accompanied them to the capital as well, but they and Tris had made arrangements to stay at House Bunadala’s mansion.

Garda spoke first. “Fear not, One-Eyed Dragon. Muninn and I will guard the place.”

“Good. Would you mind setting up camp in the garden? If anything does happen, I’ll need you on the scene immediately.”

“As you command.”

Beside Garda, Muninn pulled a sour face, but his commander’s presence obliged him to keep any complaints to himself.

Smiling wryly, Hiro turned to Huginn. “And you’ll stay in the mansion.”

“What? But... But...I’m happy to stay with the boss!”

She was putting on a brave face, Hiro could tell. Her skills with a bow might outstrip any man, but the succession of battles in Draal and Faerzen had left her on the point of exhaustion. On top of that, she took pride in being a hard worker. She refused to skip a single day of training no matter how tired she was, saying she refused to lose to any man, and was constantly pushing herself to improve, refusing to accept special treatment on account of her sex. Hiro, Garda, and her brother Muninn all hoped that she would take this opportunity to rest, but she would refuse unless given a reason she was happy with.

“I want you to be Rosa’s bodyguard.”

“A bodyguard? Me?”

“Nowhere’s safe in the capital right now. There could be assassins lurking around every corner. I need you to protect her, particularly while she’s in her own home or attending functions. That’s where she’s most likely to let her

guard down.”

Huginn went quiet for a moment. “All right, Your Lordship. If that’s what you want, that’s what I’ll do.”

“Your poor old brother gets guard duty out in the cold, while you get to guzzle warm soup in a noblewoman’s mansion.” Muninn smirked like a child plotting mischief. “How the other half lives, eh? Careful, or you’ll make a man jealous.”

Huginn’s brows knitted as she sensed her brother’s playful mood. “His Lordship gave me the job ‘cause he rates my skills! If you don’t like it, go run through the streets in a dress!”

“Eh? Wouldn’t that just make me a pervert?”

“And what’s new about that? You’re the one that gets off on bullying his own sister!”

Muninn snorted. “All right, if you’re gonna be like that, how about I tell everyone *your* interests, eh? Every night, my dear beloved sister watches the chief sleep— Oomph!”

“Say any more and I’ll deck you good!”

“You already did!”

“Shut it!”

The war of words had broken out into violence, and Huginn was winning. Hiro tore his gaze from the siblings’ spat and approached Garda, who was watching them in exasperation.

“Let’s talk about what we do next.”

Garda grunted. “Out with it, then.”

“I want you to send Muninn to infiltrate the central nobles’ mansions. Here’s a few that I’ve earmarked.” Hiro handed the zlosta a slip of paper.

Unsurprisingly, Garda’s lips tightened in discontent. “They’ll be heavily guarded. He’ll be lucky if he makes it back alive.”

“I just want him to leave signs of a breakin, nothing more. Although even that won’t be totally risk-free, I admit.”

“What are you plotting?”

“Are you aware that many of the central nobles are dissatisfied with House Krone?”

“I could have guessed it. With the commonfolk in protest, it’s no surprise they’re just as discontent.”

“So if someone breaks into the dissenting nobles’ mansions, and only those mansions, what do you think people will assume?”

That was enough to clue Garda in. He took the sheet of paper, his grin widening. “So you’ll have them thinking House Krone is keeping eyes on potential traitors?”

“That’s the idea. The mansions I’ve written down belong to the houses who have voiced complaints against House Krone. What do you think would happen if they suffered repeated breakins?”

“An amusing ploy. Very well. I shall let Muninn know.” Garda paused. “So what would you have me do?”

“All sorts of things, probably. It depends on how everything plays out. I’ll tell you more when the time comes. For now, all you need to do is watch the mansion.”

“Very well.”

Hiro turned back to Huginn, who was still squabbling with her brother. “Shall we head inside?”

“Gladly, Your Lordship! Anything to be rid of this oaf!”

Huginn flashed Hiro a radiant smile, then spun around and bared her teeth at her brother. Muninn pulled a rude face in return.

Hiro smiled awkwardly. “All right, let’s go.” After a few steps, he turned back to Garda and Muninn. “I’m counting on you two.”

Promising to bring them some food from the table, he led Huginn inside the mansion.

* * * * *

As soon as the pair passed through the doors, a servant escorted them to the dining room. A circular table stood in the center of the chamber, covered with a white tablecloth and laid with what looked like as many sets of cutlery as it could hold. Flower petals lay scattered over its surface, while candles bathed the scene in gently wavering light. The female contingent had already taken their seats on finely decorated chairs. The table had no head—the virtue of a round table was that it put everyone on an equal footing.

Hiro looked around, wondering where to sit.

His question was quickly answered. “This one is for you,” Rosa said, gesturing to the chair between her and Liz.

There was a complication, however: Hiro had brought Huginn, who had probably never dined in a noble household before. Sure enough, out of the corner of his eye he saw her glancing around awkwardly, visibly uncertain what to do with herself.

Liz came to her rescue. “You sit here, Huginn,” she said kindly, laying a slender hand on the chair between herself and Aura.

Huginn shuffled over, looking nervous. Her steps were stiff with tension.

Eventually, Liz spoke up, unable to watch any longer. “Don’t worry about etiquette or manners or any of that,” she reassured her. “Just enjoy the meal.”

Huginn whimpered in relief. “Thank you, Your Ladyship...”

“Now hurry up and sit down. I’m getting too hungry to wait!”

“Yes, Your Ladyship!” With a small smile at the joke, Huginn took her place at the table.

Seeing that everybody was seated, Rosa clapped her hands. “Then let dinner be served,” she announced. The kitchen doors swung open and a column of servants poured out, carrying an assortment of luxurious dishes. She smiled with pride. “In honor of our reunion, I have prepared the finest delicacies that Soleil has to offer.”

“I’ve never seen the like...” Huginn breathed, her eyes widening at the exotic cuisine.

“Consider me impressed. This is quite the spread.” Even Scáthach, a former princess, could not conceal her astonishment. Her eyes shone as she gulped in anticipation.

“This beef is just the kind you’d like, Cerberus,” Liz said to the white wolf under her chair. “Don’t worry, I’ll save you some.”

By her side, Aura picked up her apron and, with practiced motions, tied it around her neck to spare her clothes from stains.

You know...I’ve seen this before somewhere...

The sight brought back memories of mid-range chain restaurants back on Earth. In particular, Aura looked just like a child out for a family meal seated in their little chair. She obviously wouldn’t be pleased with that observation, so he maintained a tactful silence as he watched the plates assemble.

“Now that all is ready...” As the servants finished laying out the food, Rosa held up a wine glass. “First, to the Spirit King, by whose grace you have all arrived here safe and sound. And second, to the Twelve Divines, who will rejoice to hear of your victory over the Grand Duchy.”

The rest of the table took up their own glasses—filled with wine or water—and raised them high with a resounding “To the Spirit King and the Divines!” With the toast still lingering in the air, they filled their plates with whatever caught their eye, enjoyed the exquisite fare on offer, and soon enough fell to conversing.

Under cover of the chatter, Rosa leaned in to whisper in Hiro’s ear. “I’ve gotten word that House Krone is making aggressive movements.”

Hiro’s silver spoon halted halfway from his soup to his mouth. He quietly replaced the utensil and cast Rosa a sidelong glance. “Are they now? What are they up to?”

“Scraping together every able-bodied man from every village and town they can, or so I hear. They’re scheming something wicked, there’s no question of it.”

“Only one thing comes to mind, doesn’t it?”

“And, for a good few weeks now, the city smiths have been experiencing a spike in commissions for arms and armor.”

“So who do you think they’ll move against?”

“Nobody, would be my guess. I think it’s a threat. A message to the emperor.”

Most likely, they were just trying to cover their backs in the event that they were held responsible for their actions in Faerzen, but they had been far too quick to act. If this had been planned in advance, that would be one thing, but they surely wouldn’t take such an extreme tack as to threaten the emperor just to shirk accountability.

No, this is about something else...and I think I know what.

After the death of Viscount von Wirst, the emperor had taken the province of Sieg under his personal jurisdiction. Just before Hiro’s departure for Draal, he had given it to the control of House Maruk, an undeclared house from the central territories. House Krone had petitioned him to reconsider, but he had refused to even hear their case, further deepening the rift between them.

“I’m guessing this started when they lost Sieg. Am I right?”

“You are. It’s a market keystone. They’ll stop at nothing to get it back.” Rosa paused. “I expect they’ll try to make a move at tomorrow’s council, but the emperor won’t give them an inch. He’s out to weaken them.”

“Well, far be it for us to get in his way...but it sounds like you don’t feel that way.”

“Our interests align up to the point of hurting House Krone, but past that point? It’s anyone’s guess.” Rosa heaved a sigh and crossed her arms, her expression conflicted. “He wants to topple them and raise up House Maruk as the new head of the central nobles, but even if the latter are inducted into the great houses, they won’t offer you or Liz their support. That would mean bowing to me.”

The eastern nobles stood behind Hiro, and after his invasion of Draal, the whole court knew that Hiro stood behind Liz.

“However,” Rosa continued, “nor will they oppose you. That much is certain.

They will have no choice but to watch and wait.”

Third Prince Brutahl already had the backing of the western nobles and Second Prince Selene the backing of the north. There was no room left in either tent for anybody else. House Maruk would have to find another heir to support, but removing Liz and Hiro from the picture left extremely slim pickings. Their best bet would be the previous emperor’s nephew, but the man was old enough that he might drop dead at any time.

A thought struck Hiro—one that could pose a problem. “The emperor doesn’t have any brothers, does he?”

“No.” Rosa’s voice was a flat dismissal. Greiheit had once been the youngest of six brothers, she explained, but the rest had either met with unfortunate accidents or passed away from sickness. “Suspicion fell upon him, of course, but nothing was ever proven.”

The deaths had all occurred at the palace, and all while he had been elsewhere. Some had suspected the use of assassins, but those accusations were soon abandoned—it had been determined that without the backing of any court faction, he hadn’t possessed the power or resources to accomplish such a thing.

Now that is interesting, Hiro thought.

Five elder brothers, five convenient deaths. There was little doubt that the emperor had had a hand in the deeds, no matter how well he seemed to have covered his tracks. But how had he done it? It was an interesting question to chew on, even if there was no longer any meaning in cracking the case.

I need some *kind of weakness I can exploit. With any luck, he’ll slip up somehow during the audience.*

When tomorrow dawned and Hiro stood before the throne, he was bound to get a clearer picture of the emperor’s schemes whether he wanted to or not. He would also be able to learn more about the up-and-coming House Maruk’s place in the game.

“Do you know which nobles will be present tomorrow?” he asked.

“House Maruk and House Krone will have to be, given the rumors. And the

head of House Muzuk of the south has also announced his provisional intent to attend."

"'Provisional intent'?"

Attendance at such a ceremony did not require any such announcement. Indeed, it was unthinkable that the head of a great house might be refused.

Rosa gave an exasperated shrug, took a sip of wine, and sighed. "Trying to confuse the rest of the court into looking for meaning where there is none, no doubt. He's a conniving little weasel. I doubt he'll show his face tomorrow, but he's the kind to pounce on the slightest sign of weakness, so you'd best watch your back." She paused. "But Second Prince Selene is the one you should really keep an eye on. He's in the capital too, and he's brought his lackeys."

So the wolf of the north had broken his long silence. That put a decisive end to Hiro's calm, but without a clear idea of what the man wanted, he could do nothing but watch and wait. Besides, the emotion stirring in his chest was not trepidation, but joy.

"It sounds like things are getting interesting," Hiro remarked. The second prince had always insisted that he had no interest in matters of succession. What could have prompted this change of heart?

"They're getting alarming," Rosa retorted. "He rode in with twenty thousand men."

The southern nobles' military presence numbered ten thousand, she explained; her and the eastern nobles' escort came to eight. The western nobles would not be attending.

"It's not just that they won't attend. They can't afford to." Aura leaned in to join the conversation, wiping glistening grease from her lips with a white napkin. "The west is in crisis. All of its different factions are pulling it apart."

Rosa turned to her with sympathetic eyes. "So it seems. House Münster no longer has any practical authority."

Third Prince Brutahl's position as third in line to the throne was just barely holding things together. If he were to lose that rank, the western nobles would collapse. The odds of them receiving punishment at tomorrow's audience were

low, but Hiro would have to be more careful about his moves in future. It would inconvenience his plans if they fell prematurely.

“First of all, we should deal with House Krone,” he said.

The central nobles were the most rotten in all the territories, so they needed to be the first to fall. They themselves were aware of that fact, which was probably why they were making such aggressive moves. If House Krone found themselves under fire tomorrow, their “threat” to the emperor might quickly transform into a very real fighting force.

“That’s why the emperor didn’t limit the size of the escort that nobles could bring to the capital. He was preparing for House Krone taking drastic measures.”

For a central noble rebellion, in other words. Had it really been necessary for him to make them so desperate? He was probably reasoning that he could quash them quickly now that the people were on his side. Hiro would have preferred to avoid civil war entirely, no matter how brief, but the emperor was set in his course. Rosa seemed to think so, anyway, judging by the resignation in her eyes.

“If it comes to that,” she said, “the central nobles can field around fifty thousand men by my estimates. Back before you became Fourth Prince, when they were stronger, it would have been twice that.”

“Even just fifty thousand is enough that we’d need allies,” Hiro said. Even if all of the armed forces in the capital banded together, it would only just even the odds.

“I wouldn’t count on that,” Rosa replied, “even if the worst does come to pass.”

Hiro had to agree. Every faction would be trying to steal glory for themselves so as to impress the emperor. There would be no hope for cooperation in that environment, only the knowledge that, if they put a foot wrong, they would be picked off one by one. Still, the emperor seemed determined to forge ahead, regardless of the risks. Extending the attending nobles the freedom to bring as many soldiers as they chose showed as much.

“In the end, all depends on what His Majesty decrees tomorrow.” Rosa smiled as she savored her wine. “But no matter how all this plays out, it is only House Krone that is rotten. All else is in perfect order. The Grantzian Empire’s foundations stand firm yet.”

Hiro had to wonder if that was true. With so many plots in the air, it seemed a hasty judgment to make. There was nothing so ugly as political conflict. Nations invariably fell to their own people. And once House Krone had been crippled, House Kelheit, with their two imperial heirs, would be the natural next target.

And that’s to say nothing of the possibility of outside interference.

It always paid to be cautious, but how best to fend off the hands grasping from the dark? Hiro pondered to himself between mouthfuls of fine cuisine as the night drew on.

* * * * *

After dinner concluded, Hiro returned to his assigned room. The women had gone to the baths together, leaving him alone. He drew closer to the moonlit windowsill and picked up a book. The text was known as the White Chronicle—an account of the life of Emperor Artheus, including the solitude and grief that was said to have defined his final years.

“Might things have been different if I had stayed?” Hiro murmured.

Regret swelled in his chest. Could he have spared Artheus that torment if only he had remained at his side instead of returning to Earth?

He read in silence for a while. A chill breeze blew through the chamber, although the window was closed. Grief writhed in his chest with every page he turned. There was no happy ending there. Artheus might have saved Aletia from the zlosta, but his life as emperor had been anything but peaceful. The future he had won bred strife, envy, and war between humans. By all accounts, after achieving his dream, he had spent the rest of his life on the battlefield.

“This is...cruel.”

What kind of ending was that for a man who had fought so hard for peace?

“This isn’t the future we fought the zlosta for.” Hiro closed the book and

clenched his fist bitterly.

Cerberus, who had been exempt from bath time due to her wounds, pressed against his leg.

“I’m all right,” he murmured, stroking her head softly.

Just then, he heard voices from the corridor.

“Ugh, how did your chest even get that big?”

“I should sooner ask why my sister’s is so small when the same blood runs in both our veins.”

“I don’t know! I wish I did!”

Hearing Liz and Rosa approaching, Hiro stowed the White Chronicle inside the Black Camellia. Their footsteps stopped outside of the door, which opened without so much as a knock.

“Ah.” Rosa’s eyebrows rose to see him standing by the windowsill. “You’re still awake, I see.”

“A little late for mischief, isn’t it?”

“Whyever would you say that? I merely thought you might have turned in early.” With a forced laugh, she settled down into a nearby chair.

Mentally marking her as suspicious, Hiro turned to the other visitor. “And what are you doing here, Liz?”

“Um...about that...” With an awkward smile, she dove onto the bed.

Hiro crossed his arms and cocked his head quizzically at the pair.

At that moment, a servant entered. “Your wine, my lady.”

“Excellent,” Rosa said. “Leave it there.”

“Very good, my lady.” WIth a sharp bow, he exited the room.

“Good man.” Once he was out of sight, Rosa opened the wine bottle and filled a glass with its crimson contents. She shone a smile at her sister as she savored its aroma. “You aren’t planning on putting this off forever, are you?”

Liz’s shoulders twitched, but she remained face-down in the duvet.

“No one will interrupt us now. If you’ve something to say, now’s the time.”

Rosa’s encouragement seemed to push Liz to a decision. She sat up on the bed. “We have to talk,” she said, glancing at Hiro’s face for a moment before looking away awkwardly. “I want to make my father admit responsibility for what happened in Faerzen. I want to make him promise them support.”

Her eyes held him again, and this time she did not look away. Their crimson irises burned with a fierce will.

“I know how hard you’ve been trying for my sake. And I know that turning Father against us could ruin all that hard work. It might even endanger your position—both of your positions. But... But I can’t just leave things like they are! It isn’t right!”

“Oh, Liz...”

“Is that stupid of me?” Liz gave a little tilt of her head, seemingly worried that she’d annoyed him.

For a while, Hiro only stared at her in surprise. Eventually, out of curiosity, he cast a glance at her sister. Rosa was sipping her wine with a smile on her face, delighted that Liz had begun to act on her own ideals.

Hiro, naturally, felt the same. “Of course not,” he said.

“What? Really?”

“But there’s more, isn’t there? Tell me the rest.”

If she had reached that conclusion, that couldn’t have been the only thing on her mind.

“Oh. Um, right.” Liz’s nervousness was written on her face. She took a few deep breaths, then clenched her fists tight and laid her hands on her chest. “So...about House Krone...”

In brief, she meant to press their guilt for their actions in Faerzen and request that they foot the bill for the nation’s reconstruction, as well as pay reparations to war orphans and those who had lost work due to their wounds. Then, while the throne room inevitably descended into chaos, she would demand an apology from the emperor.

“That won’t erase the empire’s crimes,” she concluded, “but I hope it will earn some forgiveness from the people of Faerzen.”

“I see,” Hiro said. “But I doubt the emperor will agree to that.”

“That’s all right. I don’t need him to make a decision then and there. That’s why I’ll bring it up while everyone’s arguing. I’ll take the chance to propose stripping Stovell of his position for killing the royal family too.”

“And what about the emperor’s guilt? It sounds like that’s going to be left up in the air.”

“That’s fine. The people are bound to hear about this eventually. All I really want is that when they do, they remember that I was the first to ask him to apologize.”

So she planned to weaponize common opinion. Just like Hiro had condemned House Krone through the voices of the commonfolk, Liz planned to use the people as a cudgel to pressure the emperor to admit guilt. Her plan needed some refining, but it was a good one. Striking the emperor with a confounding question while he was already off balance, amplifying his confusion and compromising his judgment... She had thought this through. Her suggestions broadly aligned with Hiro’s own thoughts.

“It’s a good plan. I’ll be glad to help.”

Rosa chuckled. “Look at my little sister, all grown up.” She smiled, her cheeks flushed with drink.

“Are you sure about this?” Liz asked.

“Of course. You just follow your heart.”

Such was the duty of any who aspired to rule. One had to be flexible of thought but firm of will if they meant to rule a nation.

She’s grown. Far more than I expected.

At this rate, she would be more than all right on her own. And she would not be alone—she had Rosa, Aura, Tris, Cerberus, and any number of other allies. She was no longer the girl she had been when they’d first met.

My part in this will soon be done.

It was time for Hiro to accelerate his own plans.

“If you want to press the emperor for an apology, I’m with you.”

With the eastern nobles on his side, on the wings of a historical victory, supporting her shouldn’t endanger his standing.

“All right.” A smile blossomed on Liz’s lips, pleased to have her plan accepted. She was almost dazzling to look at.

Hiro’s hand drifted to the White Chronicle where it lay inside the Black Camellia.

I think she could really do it.

From that night forth, he was certain.

Liz was capable of preserving Artheus’s legacy.

Chapter 2: The Valditte Takes the Stage

Pleasant sunlight shone through the window, and the drifting trill of birdsong came to rest gently on the ears. Yet the otherwise tranquil morning was disturbed by an ugly commotion. Wills clashed, sparks sprayed, and cries rose into the sky, forming an impromptu alarm that woke Hiro from darkness.

“Morning already...”

He slid his legs out of bed, stood up, and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. His fingers came away tearstained, and he stared at them for a moment before breaking into a rueful smile. The usual dream must have paid another visit. He shook his head as though banishing a nightmare and walked over to the window overlooking the courtyard.

“I’ll get you yet!”

“By charging at me like a wild boar? You mistake foolhardiness for valor!”

Outside the glass, Liz—whose wounds still hadn’t healed—was sparring with Scáthach. Enclosed by walls on all four sides, the courtyard comprised a central fountain surrounded by flowerbeds in a variety of vivid hues, which were in turn lined by an array of small trees—an artificial recreation of nature in which the pair now trained. Scáthach kept Liz pressed with deft spearwork, while Liz, likely due to the pain of her stripped nails, was fighting bare-handed, diving into point-blank range to lash out with her fists. Lævateinn’s Graal was Might; her punches would be no laughing matter if they landed. Scáthach was having to fight in earnest.

“Ngh... I see your blows do not need to strike home to rattle the skull!”

Aura sat in the shade of a nearby tree, nose-deep in a book.

Rosa pressed herself coquettishly against Hiro’s back. “Now what’s gotten you so pensive? Feeling left behind now that Liz has found her own wings?”

“Not at all. It’s a promising sign for things to come.”

“Really? I admit, I’m not as strong. This must be how a mother bird feels,

watching its chick fly the nest.” Happiness and loneliness did battle in Rosa’s eyes as she stared over Hiro’s shoulder at Liz.

“I’m going to accelerate my plans,” he said. “You’ll need to pivot to backing her sooner rather than later.”

“And you’re all right with that?”

“It’s our best option.”

The weight on Hiro’s back pulled away, as did the accompanying softness. “Very well. I’ll oblige, for now. But if the people happen to change their minds, I’ll be only too happy to give them their Black Prince.”

Hiro swung around, surprised.

“Besides, I do still desire the War God’s bloodline.” Rosa leaned over him, arms keeping him trapped against the wall. The lush sheen of her lips loomed closer, closer—and brushed past his cheek to approach his ear. Her voice was bewitching and her breath dripped with seduction as she whispered, “Don’t think I’ll let you get away.”

Hiro shrugged helplessly. His smile contained just a hint of exasperation. “Once the council is done, I’m going to keep looking to weaken House Krone’s position, but I’m also going to try and strip Stovell of his claim to the throne.”

“Very well. But what of the other great houses?”

“House Scharm of the north, we’ll have to leave for now. Selene’s faction is too tight-knit to crack. Once the eastern nobles shore up their power a little, we’ll be able to beat them into submission with brute force.”

Rosa made a thoughtful noise. “And we hardly need to worry about the western nobles, doomed as they are. They’ll soon tear themselves apart without us having to lift a finger.”

“Which we should move to prevent if possible. It’ll be inconvenient for us if they collapse too soon. Still, as you say, I don’t think they’re a threat.”

That left House Muzuk of the south, which, if possible, Hiro wanted to recruit to his cause. For one thing, the Gurinda Mark was in the southern territories, and it was in no position to stand up to a military assault. Besides, Berg Fortress

was Liz and Hiro's center of operations.

Rosa pressed her head into his neck as he outlined his thoughts. "You know, if you do lose Berg Fortress, you can simply come to the east. I'd welcome you with open arms."

She said that as though it were nothing, but if the eastern territories were to fall under attack from three sides, Liz's path to the throne would become untenable. That was to be avoided if at all possible. Focusing all their enemies' attention on the east was too big of a risk.

"Not least because of Six Kingdoms. With all this chaos, they're guaranteed to try something."

The western nobles were the empire's bulwark against Six Kingdoms, but their current strength would not weather an assault, and if they collapsed, the imperial heartlands could very quickly burn. Six Kingdoms was far from the only nation with designs on the empire. A thousand years of rule had birthed countless grudges, and now the aggrieved parties sensed that their chance was coming to settle the score. If even just the Duchy of Lichtein and its neighbor, the Republic of Steissen, joined forces with Six Kingdoms to attack from the south and east, all these squabbles over the throne would be moot—the empire would be fighting for its survival.

"So you believe that war with Six Kingdoms is inevitable?" Rosa's face took on a somber cast.

Hiro nodded matter-of-factly. That was another reason he wanted to bring House Muzuk into the fold. Once he did, he would work to shore up the empire's military and incite the emperor into drawing first blood against Six Kingdoms, all while elevating Liz's political profile. After claiming victory on the battlefield, he would blame the emperor for instigating the conflict, drag him off the throne, and, finally, install Liz in his place. So as to avoid accusations of usurpation, her ascension would appear to be the will of the people.

"Your role in that will be to undermine the people's faith in the emperor. We'll have to move quickly when the time comes, so I'll need you to prime public opinion in advance."

"I do have quite the talent for it, don't I?" Rosa nodded confidently, as though

to say the matter was safe with her.

At that moment, Liz called out from the courtyard, seeing that Hiro was awake. “Hiiirooo! Good mooorning! Come on down! We’re training!”

“My dear Black Prince, I do believe that was a summons from our princess.”

“I’d better get going. I don’t want to put her in a bad mood.” Hiro waved back to Liz and set out towards the door. “Want to come with me?”

“I’ll join you soon enough. Sleep yet calls.” Stifling a yawn, Rosa sank back onto the bed.

“All right. See you later.” With a parting wave, Hiro left the room.

“Good morning, Your Lordship!”

Huginn was waiting for him in the hallway outside with her usual carefree smile, as radiant as the sun. Presumably, she was there to keep watch over Rosa.

“You can stand guard inside, you know. Rosa won’t mind.”

“I-I couldn’t possibly, Your Lordship! I’ll sense any ne’er-do-wells just as well from out here, so it’s no trouble!”

That was odd. Huginn wasn’t usually so timid. Moreover, she seemed strangely reluctant to meet his eyes. There was something else at play.

“Did something happen between you and Rosa?”

“N-Not at all, Your Lordship! Why do you ask?!”

She obviously wasn’t being straight with him. He planted his hands on his hips and sighed. “Whatever’s going on here, I can’t have it affecting your duties. Would you mind telling me?”

If there was a problem, it couldn’t wait until something happened to Rosa. It had to be pruned before it could sprout regrets.

Huginn looked hesitant for a moment, but finally her shoulders slumped in resignation. “She’s...hard to deal with.”

“How so?” It wasn’t like Huginn to let personal feelings get in the way of her duties.

“Last night, we went to the baths together, and...she started groping me. My chest, I mean.”

Hiro clapped a hand to his forehead, cast his eyes to the ceiling, and let out a sigh. He didn’t need to hear any more. He knew exactly how much of a menace Rosa could be. She wouldn’t have listened to Huginn’s protests; if anything, they would only have stoked her sadistic streak. She had a passion for anything beautiful or endearing, and human beings were not exempt from it.

“She...can be childish sometimes. Just try to humor her, all right?” He couldn’t think of any other advice to offer. The words simply wouldn’t come. “Besides, trained assassins can conceal their presence. If you want to be certain of protecting her, you’ll have to stay close.”

Huginn groaned, visibly weighing her dignity against her duty. “All right, Your Lordship. Since it’s you who’s asking.” She hung her head, trudged over to the door, and laid her hand on the handle with a scowl. “Excuse me, Your Ladyship!” she cried as she burst into the room.

“Ah! Excellent timing. I was just in need of a pillow. In my darling’s absence, you will have to do.”

“Wha— Gyaaaaaahhh!!!”

Hiro walked away, offering Huginn a silent apology as he turned a deaf ear to her screams.

* * * * *

By the time he arrived in the courtyard, Liz was lying face-up on the grass, breathing raggedly. Scáthach sat on the brick surface of a nearby flowerbed, wiping her sweat off with a towel.

“Good morning, Lord Hiro.” Scáthach greeted him as he approached. “We have been blessed with fair skies.”

“So I see. How was your sparring match?”

“See for yourself,” came a quiet voice.

Hiro turned to see Aura standing behind him.

“Good morning,” she said.

“Good morning,” he replied, casting a glance at Liz. Her wounds had already faded enough to be unnoticeable. The lacerations across her back were likely still there, but even so, she had healed far faster than any normal person could dream of—Lævateinn’s blessing at work, no doubt. Only her nails had been slower to grow back.

She winced with pain as she sat upright but quickly flashed Hiro a grin. “Finally! What took you so long? Come on, you owe me a match!”

Hiro raised an eyebrow. “I think you need a rest first. Although, from what I could see from up there, you’re twice the fighter you used to be.”

Liz waved a hand dismissively. “What, even though I’m still all beat up? No way!”

Scáthach chipped in to voice her agreement. “Your guard was nigh impenetrable compared to when we first fought. I scarcely recognized you.”

It wasn’t just me, then, Hiro thought. Between her heightened physical abilities and their discussion the previous night, it was clear that Liz had found some new purpose in Faerzen.

“It was as though you had come to some decision,” Scáthach continued. “Each of your blows carried astounding resolve. Had you not been wounded, or had you held a blade, the loss may well have been mine.”

Liz’s cheeks flushed crimson. “Please! You’re just imagining things!” She waved her hands in front of her face to hide her embarrassment and turned to Aura for support. “You agree with me, don’t you, Aura?”

Aura cocked her head. “I couldn’t really— Wah!” A squeal rose from her throat as Liz’s hand closed on her slender wrist and pulled her closer.

“You do agree, don’t you? It’s all just in their minds!” Liz began to knead Aura’s head, casting suspicious glances at the other two as she did.

Aura looked up at Liz irritably. “That hurts. Release me.”

“What? No way! I’m being so gentle!”

“Owww!”

Forgetting her own strength, Liz ground Aura’s head around in circles. Any

longer and it really might come off.

“Um...oh, right! How about breakfast?” Hiro hastily suggested. “You must all be hungry.”

Scáthach rose to her feet. “Quite. All this exercise has left me famished.”

“Then let’s call it here and get something to eat!” In her excitement, Liz let go of Aura.

“I hate this.” Aura stood up with an indignant look on her face, rubbing her aching neck.

With that, the four of them headed to breakfast.

* * * * *

They arrived in the dining room to find Rosa already at the table. Beside her sat a teary-eyed Huginn, lips pursed tight and face bright red.

“She did it again...” Huginn whimpered. “She groped me again... Even His Lordship hasn’t done that yet...”

It seemed better not to ask. She had done her duty as a bodyguard. That was all that mattered.

“Hm?” Hiro noticed a separate table a short distance away where none had been the night before. There sat the male contingent: Tris, Garda, and Muninn. That explained why they hadn’t been in the courtyard. Only a day had passed, but for some strange reason, Hiro was already missing their company.

“Morning, everyone.” He raised a hand in greeting and moved toward the male table, but—

“You sit here.” Liz seized his arm with fearsome might and dragged him over to sit with the women.

“Shall we begin?” Rosa clapped her hands, just as she had the previous night, and a column of servants began laying out plates. With an amused chuckle, she turned to Liz. “Today’s council promises to be a lively affair.”

“Whaf?” Liz cocked her head, cheeks bulging with food. She clearly hadn’t been lying about her hunger.

Rosa's eyes widened. Apparently, she had expected Liz to be feeling far more nervous. "But it seems our princess is unconcerned about such things. How she has grown!" She stifled a giggle with the back of her hand as she gazed at her sister affectionately.

Scáthach gestured to Hiro with a skewer of carved meat. "What shall I do while the council is in session?"

"I was thinking you could guard the mansion with Garda and the others."

"A simple enough task. I had half expected you to ask me to fetch one or two of your opponents' heads."

She could make easy prey of almost anyone with Gáe Bolg, it was true. If she did, however, it would lead to outright war.

"It'll be time for fighting soon enough. Until then, I want you to watch and wait."

Scáthach grinned between bites of meat. "Very well. If you have need of my spear, you need only ask. Gáe Bolg shall pierce whatever foe you desire."

"Since you bring it up...Rosa, what *are* the other nobles up to?"

"They are already in attendance. It seems we will be the last to arrive." She added that Second Prince Selene and the recently vanished First Prince Stovell had been sighted among their number.

"Then we should head for the palace as soon as we're done."

"Agreed. Tardiness on our part will only make us needless enemies." Rosa's cutlery halted in midair as she seemed to recall something. "Ah, yes, and it seems that the southern nobles will not be present. My subordinates tell me that not a single one has shown themselves."

"Not a problem. We're dealing with the central nobles right now, not them."

The time had finally come. Today, House Krone would fall.

The rot infesting the empire all stems from them. I won't show them any mercy.

* * * * *

Two rows of parallel columns held up the ceiling of the throne room. The floor beneath them teemed with nobles. Rosa was visible among the crowd, as were First Prince Stovell and Second Prince Selene. More to the point, three of the empire's five great houses were present in the chamber. Including their lackeys and would-be lackeys among the lesser houses, the three factions totaled more than two hundred nobles.

House Krone of the central territories.

House Scharm of the north.

House Kelheit of the east.

Last but perhaps not least, House Maruk, the largest of the undeclared houses, was also present.

The convening of the great houses, representatives of the empire, lent the air an immeasurable weight. Everybody in the chamber sensed this would be no ordinary audience. The orchestral troupe's stately melody wound its way around the hall, but where its elegant tones would normally have been calming, now they only amplified the tension. The crowd watched with bated breath. A new page of history would be written this day.

Under the gaze of the entire chamber, three figures proceeded down the red carpet.

"This is the end for House Bunadala. Look, the western nobles haven't shown their faces. They're going to pin all the blame on her, mark my words."

"There's no refilling the coffers she drained. She's dead weight to them now, prime to be cut away. Not that it was all her fault, but that's how the wheel turns."

Insolent gazes converged on Aura from all sides, but she walked on with her head held high.

"Oh, it's not only Lady von Bunadala who's in peril. The ground is crumbling beneath Lady Celia Estrella's feet."

"Bah! This is what comes of leaving matters of state to women—to *girls*, no less!"

Other voices took aim at Liz, who had disgraced herself by being taken prisoner.

“A princess of the empire, captured by a foreign power? Why, it’s unheard of!”

“She’s soiled now, I’ll bet. Lousy with who knows what maladies.”

As that last jeer issued from the crowd, Hiro suddenly stopped. For a long, long moment, he glared at the noble responsible. He made no other movement, but the hostility emanating from him was unmistakable. The noble quailed under his gaze.

He would permit no slander of Liz from men so lacking in resolve. Simply standing in the presence of these impotent bottom-feeders, these parasites gnawing at the empire from within, was revolting.

How rotten they’ve become. Let’s see if I can’t teach them to show at least a little imperial spirit.

Hiro patted his neck several times. Then, with a small smile, he continued on his way. The noble who had insulted Liz collapsed onto his behind, where he remained, quivering.

An unpleasant atmosphere hung over the hall. Nobody seemed pleased to see Liz and Aura safely returned. Rival nobles licked their lips in anticipation of the pair’s impending punishment. It made Hiro sick to his stomach.

So could anyone blame me for this?

He allowed his malice to pour forth unhindered. The very air groaned under the weight of his might. The nobles gradually fell silent as they sensed his fury. They lowered their eyes to the ground, sweat beading on their foreheads. The prey did all it could to avoid the predator’s notice.

As an uncomfortable atmosphere settled over the chamber, the trio halted before the throne. The emperor sat upon his seat, radiating youthful strength. Liz and Aura knelt in the manner of vassals. Hiro followed them a moment later, bringing his left hand to his chest and falling to one knee in a formal Grantzian bow.

“Allow me to thank you for your attendance. I understand that you have traveled far.” The emperor’s first words were ones of gratitude. “Celia Estrella. I am pleased to see you safe.”

His austere voice filled the hall. Although the deep baritone was by no means loud, it had a way of carrying.

“Hiro Schwartz. The feats you have accomplished are immeasurable, and you may expect to be justly rewarded.” The emperor raised his right hand.

Chancellor Graeci stepped forward from his position nearby, from which he had been keeping quiet watch over the hall. “I now declare the ceremony in session.”

Byzan Graeci von Scharm was a thin-faced man who seemed perpetually overworked, but those who judged him on account of his appearance would quickly regret it. He was the chancellor of the empire and the former head of House Scharm of the north. While he had abdicated the latter position upon gaining the rank of chancellor, rumors abounded that he still maintained control over his house behind the scenes—rumors that Hiro expected were true. If Graeci had gone to the trouble of dispatching one of House Scharm’s agents, who were specially trained from birth, to monitor him, it was safe to assume that the man was plotting something.

Come to think of it, Drix hasn’t shown himself in a while.

The man had seemed suspicious from their first meeting, so Hiro had assigned him to handle miscellaneous busywork and avoided trusting him with any important tasks. His absence would not impede Hiro’s plans, although it did likely mean he was off on some other assignment elsewhere. He didn’t pose much of a threat even if left to his own devices, but it might still pay to be cautious.

“Treya Verdan Aura von Bunadala,” Chancellor Graeci announced. “We come to you first.”

“My lord,” Aura answered.

“As of this moment, you are relieved of your position as Chief Strategist to the Third Legion and stripped of command of the Knights of the Royal Black. In

addition, you are sentenced to three months' house arrest."

"I humbly accept His Majesty's judgment."

With the loss of every post she had held, all of Aura's ties had been cut. Appealing the sentence would be pointless—with no allies in the chamber to plead her case, protesting would only cause more trouble for her family. Still, there was one silver lining: she could now join Liz's camp with no regrets. Besides, given that she had been in danger of execution not weeks prior, she could count herself lucky to have kept her head.

The nobles voiced no discontent. The Warmaiden commanded exceptional popularity in the capital. Her becoming a free agent meant a chance to recruit her for their own factions.

"Next, Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz," Graeci continued.

"My lord."

"You are sentenced to six months' house arrest."

"Wha—" Liz looked up in astonishment. Cries rose from the eastern nobles. Even Hiro's calm faltered.

We've been outplayed.

The people did not want Liz to be punished harshly. The emperor had been obliged to lessen her sentence to avoid an eruption of discontent.

But I didn't expect that...

The protestors would hear "house arrest" and breathe a sigh of relief. Liz had neither been relieved of control of the Fourth Legion nor stripped of command of the Knights of the Rose, nor had she been demoted in rank. There was no obvious cause for objection.

But politically, she's had a ball and chain clapped around her leg.

The struggle for the throne would soon intensify. Sentencing Liz to six months of house arrest during that time might as well be stripping her of her position in the line of succession.

He's thought this through. The people will be delighted by what they see as

light punishment, and even his opponents at court can hardly complain he's being unfair.

There was no cause for despair—the situation was still in their favor. What was important now was that Liz accepted her punishment.

This isn't the end. We've got plenty of cards to play. Just please don't do anything rash.

Hiro stared at Liz, willing her not to argue back. Whether she received his message, he couldn't tell, but at any rate, she lowered her head again.

"I humbly accept His Majesty's judgment."

Hiro brought a relieved hand to his chest. Only then did he notice Liz's lips whitening in chagrin.

Don't worry. This isn't over. You'll have the chance to speak your mind.

Expelling a quiet sigh, he turned his void-black eyes back up to Chancellor Graeci.

"Finally, Hiro Schwartz von Grantz," the old man said.

"My lord."

"Not only have you claimed victory over the Grand Duchy of Draal and suppressed the insurgency in Faerzen, you have delivered Her Highness Celia Estrella from the clutches of the enemy. His Majesty applauds your achievements. As before, many voices have clamored for you to be given lands of your own. As you know, the empire's covenant with Baum forbids such a thing, but in its stead, you are awarded the sum of one thousand golden grantzes and a promotion from first class military tribune to lieutenant general."

This time, Hiro had jumped two ranks. The position of lieutenant general—above brigadier and major general and below high general—was more commonly known simply as "general." When called to action, it could command up to a corps of thirty thousand men. Nobody was surprised; his feats were more than deserving of the honor. Still, whether he would actually be given a legion of his own remained at the emperor's discretion. He could only muster

so many men without lands of his own, so little had changed in practical terms.

“I humbly accept His Majesty’s judgment.”

With all items attended to, Chancellor Graeci moved to end proceedings. “So concludes the conferral of honors—”

A sharp light glinted in Hiro’s eyes. *We’re not done just yet, old man.*

He struck the floor hard with his fist. With silence in the throne room a matter of course, the thump easily carried through the chamber. Eyes widened, and disapproving glares converged on him from all around.

Time to signal our counterattack.

Hiro cast a glance over the gallery of frowns and grinned to himself. Liz was one of the people staring, her eyes as wide as the rest. He shot her a meaningful look.

Tell them all what’s in your heart. Burn the sight of you into their minds.

Comprehension flared in her eyes and she shot to her feet. “Brius Percus von Krone!” she cried, naming the house’s head. “You too ought to stand here and be judged! At the roots of the Faerzen rebellion lie the atrocities your house committed!”

Her voice grew heated and her body language grandiose. The room had taken her for a kitten, but now she was baring her teeth. The nobles who had so readily insulted her were all too astonished to speak.

“Brius Percus von Krone! Uncountable losses to the empire can be laid at your feet!”

She held the room in thrall. Everybody present stood astounded by her transformation.

“Your Majesty! I ask you, grant him the chance to atone for his crimes! The people demand it!”

Her voice rang sharp and clear enough to reach every ear in the hall.

Now, how are they taking that?

Hiro glanced at the central nobles. Those who had followed what Liz was

saying were glaring at her in distaste. Others, the ones hopeful for House Krone's downfall, had perked up; they were staring too, but more in anticipation than hostility.

"The little girl ought to keep her mouth shut."

"Curse it all! That the sixth princess would be the one to turn on us...!"

Alarmed muttering arose from the crowd. The central nobles' fears were coming to pass.

One man stepped forward, perhaps hoping to cut Liz off before the situation deteriorated beyond control. "If I may, Your Majesty, you need not lend your ear to Her Highness's words. It is well known that the cause of the revolt in Faerzen lies with the western nobles' governance. Why must House Krone be punished for their mistakes?"

He was only the first. One by one, voices rose from the central nobles in support of House Krone.

"What right has Her Highness to speak in this chamber? Is she not under house arrest? I should say she has forgotten her place!"

"Her Highness has evidently not recovered from her ill treatment at the enemy's hands. Pray, disregard this outburst and let her rest. Perhaps house arrest will do her some good."

An onslaught of scorn descended on Liz from House Krone's supporters. The eastern nobles erupted with outrage, refusing to let their slander go unanswered.

"Shut your mouths and listen, you prating fools! Or are you so rotten that you do not recognize a noble heart when you see it?!"

"Your words fall on deaf ears, friend! The nobles of the central territories care only for fattening their own bellies!"

"Hmph! And what right do the eastern houses have to lecture us on this matter? Are your lands not the farthest of all from Faerzen?"

"You central houses are all the same—spouting pretty words that your actions never match! How dare you look down your noses at us while you cower behind

House Krone!”

As the throne room descended into uproar, Hiro watched Brius. The man stood quietly with his eyes closed, apparently of no mind to assert order. His expression was outwardly composed—no doubt he had his pride as a veteran of the halls of power. He was as skilled an actor as one might expect from someone so slippery, but there was no doubt that on the inside he was seething.

Hiro glanced across at Stovell, curious about his reaction. The first prince noticed Hiro’s gaze and returned a wide smile. He was planning something, that much was certain, but his calm expression was utterly unreadable. As Hiro watched, he raised a hand to pat his own neck in an unsettling gesture.

Is he going to try something? Here?

But no time to worry about that. There were more pressing affairs at hand.

“The Ministry of Internal Affairs has received no end of grievances about the central nobles. Many citizens have lost their homes and been driven to seek refuge in the east. You don’t care a whit for your people! Is it not you who have brought these protestors to the palace gates?!”

“Your ignorance reveals itself. Of course grievances against the central nobles are most common in the central territories. If the capital were located in the east, the ministry would be hearing far more of you!”

With both sides unwilling to back down, their zeal and hatred was plunging the court into chaos. The commotion had grown so heated, it was a wonder that nobody had come to blows. If the situation deteriorated any further, it would become impossible to rein in.

Which would suit us just fine...but how about you, Your Majesty?

Hiro looked up at the throne, where the emperor’s brows had knitted in displeasure. Sure enough...

“Silence.”

The weight of that single word snapped every squabbling noble’s mouth shut. As a hush settled, a chill wind blew through the throne room. Every soul in the

chamber must have felt as though blades were pricking at their throat—and they could surely also sense the bloodlust in the hand that held them, the roiling emotions that irritation had unlatched.

Hiro had harbored suspicions for a long time, but as the emperor's anger burst its fetters, the space around his hands began to waver—enough to show they held something that could not be seen.

Ah, Gandiva. The Gale Sovereign. How long it's been.

There was no more room for doubt. The emperor's unnatural youth was the gift of Gandiva's Graal. If he wanted, he could turn the throne room into an ocean of blood in an instant.

Although that's about as much as he could manage. He's strong enough to impress a layman, but that's all.

Strength dulled with age. Nobody, no matter how powerful, could halt the march of time. Hiro could only speculate as to how strong the emperor might have been in his prime, but he would surely have been mightier than he was now.

"Brius Percus von Krone," the emperor pronounced in stately tones. "Come forward."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The head of House Krone broke away from his underlings, sank to one knee not far from Hiro, Liz, and Aura, and bowed his head. There was no question that he was a great house's patriarch. His composed demeanor oozed quiet confidence.

"Are you familiar with the name of Buze von Krone?" the emperor asked.

If the man was looking to raise up a new noble house, House Krone was nothing but an obstacle. He might look outwardly neutral, but inside he was no doubt dancing with glee at the excuse to sanction them.

"I am well acquainted with the man. I believe he is a recent addition to our house." The head of House Krone looked just as unflappable as his history of underhanded dealings would suggest, but his eyes burned with hatred for the

emperor. “He was appointed administrator of Faerzen, as I recall. What would Your Majesty know of him?”

“I have received troubling reports regarding his activities. Chief among them is the claim that he furnished certain nobles with a right to pillage—an inhumane permission. As a result, Faerzen’s capital now lies in ruins, and its people fester with hatred for the empire.”

“Troubling reports indeed, Your Majesty. I share your disgust.”

“Is that all you have to say in your defense?”

“I offer no defense, Your Majesty. I only believe it imprudent to judge the man in absentia.” Bruis paused. “As Your Majesty is surely aware, Buze von Krone disappeared during the conflict with the Faerzen Resistance, leaving the truth of these claims impossible to discern. To seek amends from a man who cannot defend himself would be—”

The emperor’s hand slid sideways as though stroking the air, cutting Brius off. The man fell silent. There was no special force at work—the emperor had not called upon the power of the Gale Sovereign—but his sheer authority was so overwhelming that Brius had to focus all of his faculties so as not to pass out.

“Brius Percus von Krone.” The hostility dripping from the emperor’s voice stabbed into Brius like a downpour of blades.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“House Krone will personally fund the reconstruction of Faerzen.”

The central nobles’ discontent immediately eased. So long as the funds were not coming from their own coffers, they couldn’t care less who paid. None of them would offer any objections.

Brius, too, knew to keep his mouth shut. If he tried to argue back, the decline of his house’s authority would become irreversible. This, he had judged, was the time for patience—and if the small smile tugging on his lips was any indication, he felt confident that House Krone’s wealth could foot the bill.

“Furthermore, it is relieved of control of the provinces of Heilung, Mitleid, and Grol, which will be placed under the jurisdiction of the crown.”

“Your Majesty!”

This time Brius truly did go pale. All three territories were key contributors to House Krone’s treasury. The emperor had just robbed it of three pillars of its income. He might as well have torn out its heart.

“Your Majesty, I implore you to reconsider! We have been stewards of those lands for generations—”

Their methods aside, House Krone had made undeniable contributions to the prosperity of the empire. Their accomplishments were beyond measure. On top of all of that, they had gathered their forces in a show of strength. Brius must have assumed no more was coming. It came as a surprise, then, when the emperor ignored him to strike yet another blow.

“And, for the next year, House Krone will forfeit six tenths of its taxes to the crown.”

Money was a universal need. A noble house such as House Krone—a great house, no less—had armies to maintain and a wide variety of ventures to fund. To dock sixty percent of their income was nothing less than telling them to hang themselves.

Well, well. Not bad. He’s really going for the throat.

Hiro managed to contain his grin, but disbelief spread through the nobles at the harshness of the sentence. Even Brius seemed stunned for a moment. As the gears of his mind began to turn again, his face visibly reddened.

“This... This is a farce...” he spat, eyes to the floor. His voice was too low to reach the emperor, but Hiro heard it loud and clear.

Time to step in, I think. If he starts ranting in the throne room, we’ll miss our chance.

Hiro saw that the moment had come to intervene.

Your turn, Your Majesty.

His lips pulled into a savage grin as he prepared to give voice to the emperor’s crimes.

“Allow me to say my piece, Your Majesty.”

But the voice that rang through the hall was not Hiro's. He spun around, looking for its source. After a moment, he found it: the imposing figure of First Prince Stovell.

"You may speak." The emperor's smile widened. He acknowledged Stovell without hesitation, as if he had been expecting the first prince's interruption.

"It is true that the Faerzen insurgency stemmed in part from my culling of the royal family. My love for my own blood left me unable to oppose my grandfather's ambitions for his house, and so I turned a blind eye to Buze's induction into House Krone, as well as his atrocities in Faerzen."



Brius looked at Stovell with blank astonishment. “Stovell, have you taken leave of your senses?”

Hiro, too, struggled to follow. *Where’s he going with this?*

“If Brius Percus von Krone is guilty, then so am I.”

Hiro had no chance to interrupt. If he broke in now, without a clear grasp of the situation, he might end up the one being admonished.

“In recognition of my responsibility for the chain of tragedies in Faerzen,” Stovell continued, “I ask that I may relinquish my claim to the throne.”

If one were to toss a rock into a perfectly still pond, it would produce a great splash and outward-spreading ripples. So it was in the throne room. As Stovell’s words broke the surface, cries of astonishment erupted from the nobles. They had little time to be surprised, however, before he spoke again.

“Casting an eye back over the crimes I have committed, I would be ashamed to list my name alongside the emperors of old. My presence would hold the empire back where it must progress. Accordingly, I have chosen to stand aside.”

The heir to the throne was relinquishing his claim. The next emperor was subject to constant scrutiny from not only the rest of Soleil, but the rest of the world. News of the day’s events would spread across Aletia like wildfire.

Why would he give up his right to the throne? What does he have to gain?

Everything was happening too fast. Hiro’s brain struggled to keep up with the changing situation. One thing, however, was certain: the emperor and Stovell had planned this in advance.

We’ve gotten what we wanted, but we’re headed in the wrong direction.

Nonetheless, House Krone had lost its figurehead in Stovell. Nothing could stop their decline now. The emperor’s sanctions ensured that they would soon cease to exist, both in name and in substance.

Brius stood motionless, still stunned by the events of the preceding few minutes. He could not even protest the emperor’s ruling—Stovell’s abdication had already occupied the nobles’ attention. He had fallen from the edge of a cliff and plummeted into the abyss below without so much as a chance to grasp

for safety.

My hands are tied too. Now I won't have any opportunity to bring up the emperor's crimes. That might even have been the point of this whole stunt.

Speaking up now would risk turning all of the court's ire on him.

Well, it's not all bad. We're still on track.

Everything was fine, he assured himself. His plans just needed a little adjusting. He would need to speak with Liz and Rosa later. Accusing the emperor could wait until another day.

Still, he had never expected Stovell to renounce his own claim to the throne.

I'd intended for him to bow out sooner or later, but I never thought he would leave the stage of his own accord. Is there even a point to this? Or is he just trying to disorient us?

As Hiro pondered, the emperor spoke again in subdued tones. "Very well. Your renunciation of your claim is accepted. May you continue to serve as my faithful vassal."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Stovell replied.

A wave of defectors would soon desert House Krone's faction like rats from a sinking ship. The longtime leaders of the central nobles would fall, and House Maruk, who had bided their time among the undeclared nobles, would rise.

"I hereby declare this council concluded."

Some nobles were likely dissatisfied with Stovell's abdication, but there was little room for objection when the man had proposed it himself. The curtain would fall unopposed today...heavy-handed resolutions and lingering resentments notwithstanding.

"I will not stand for this. Not even from you, Lord Stovell...nor from you either, Your Majesty."

The curses Brius whispered under his breath did not escape Hiro's notice.

A good enough result. My plans might need a little adjusting, but everything's falling into line.

Hiro’s smile widened as his thoughts turned to the obstacles ahead.

* * * * *

A modest banquet followed the audience. The dramatic events in the throne room did not undo the empire's victories in Faerzen and Draal. It was a day for celebration, and that demanded the same recognition as all matters of imperial honor.

"You must visit me at my estate sometime. My wife would be delighted to meet the illustrious Lord Hiro Schwartz."

"I'd love to, if I ever have the chance."

"Splendid, splendid. Well, good evening to you."

"And to you."

As a break arrived in the endless exchanges of pleasantries, Hiro cast a glance at Liz, who was sitting despondently on the sofa by the wall. "What's wrong?" he asked, concerned.

"We never did manage to make Father agree to compensate Faerzen for his crimes," she said somberly.

"Don't look so glum," said a voice from behind Hiro's back. "Another chance will come along soon enough."

He turned around to see Rosa holding two glasses, having presumably left to fetch drinks.

"Rosa's right. It's enough that we managed to pin responsibility on House Krone."

"I suppose, but..."

"Let's not fret over that." Rosa held out one of her glasses. "Here. Relax a little."

With a quick thanks, Liz drank the water in one gulp. She exhaled and looked down again. "I suppose I owe Scáthach an apology."

"I doubt she would approve. You're being too hard on yourself," said Rosa.

Hiro agreed, but he could also sympathize with Liz. After firing herself up for a confrontation, it was only natural that she would feel guilty about failing to realize it. That feeling would heal with time, however. For now, the most

important thing was not to allow her to dwell on it.

As Hiro searched for a change of topic, he suddenly realized that one of their number was missing.

“Where’s Aura gotten to?”

“Aura?” Liz’s eyebrows rose. “She was just here a moment ago.”

“Lady von Bunadala left in search of food,” Rosa supplied.

She was taking awfully long if so. Hiro looked around uneasily. Sure enough, he quickly spotted Aura in the middle of a crowd of nobles. From the irritated furrow between her eyebrows, it looked as though they were inviting her to their own factions. Anybody would jump at the chance to recruit such an exceptional tactical mind.

She waved them all off and padded back to the group with a pitter-patter of footsteps.

“Welcome back.” Hiro held out a glass of water.

“Thank you.” Like Liz, Aura drained it in one go.

Rosa smiled wryly. “I see that even the renowned Lady von Bunadala cannot scheme her way out of noble attentions.”

“It’s so hard to ignore them when you know they mean well...” Liz’s eyes filled with sympathy. She had been in the same position during her last banquet.

“I want to go home,” Aura said sulkily.

“You’d be disappointing a lot of hopeful nobles if you did.” Liz gestured to the surrounding crowd, who were sneaking glances in their direction.

“I’ve had enough. You can handle them.” Aura pulled a face. Her blank features were lined with unmistakable tiredness. Hiro could only offer a strained smile.

All of a sudden, he flinched as a chill lanced up his spine. Somebody was gazing at him with naked hostility, glaring with undisguised malice. He turned to see, standing across the hall, none other than First Prince Stovell.

What’s he doing?

The first prince's lips curled into a meaningful grin and he walked out of the room.

"Sorry, I think I've had a bit too much water. I'm just going to go to the bathroom." Without waiting for a reply, Hiro turned away from Liz and the others and set out after Stovell.

He wove his way through the crowd to the door and passed through into the corridor beyond. Another wave of naked hostility issued from farther ahead, as though leading him onward. His lips pulled into an amused grin as he forged on through the dark.

Stovell was in the fountain courtyard, gazing up at the stars. As Hiro emerged into the open, making no effort to disguise his footsteps, the prince turned to face him.

"What business have you here, boy?"

"I should be the one asking you that. Why did you lead me out here?"

Stovell scoffed. "Lead you? As presumptuous as ever, I see. Was it not you who came after me?" He spread his arms wide and turned to face Hiro. "Well, it matters not. As it happens, I now have time enough to humor you."

"Oh? And why is that?"

"No need for such suspicion. I have set no plans in motion...yet." Stovell chuckled. His voice dropped to a low murmur. "Do you know, our nation's existence has sickened me for as long as I have known how to walk."

Hiro only stood in silence.

"So I must ask you...is it only I who feels so? Or do you, similar creature that you are, not harbor the same revulsion in your breast?"

"This is all so sudden, I don't think I'm following."

"Are you not? I think you know exactly what I mean." Moonlight shifted on the corners of Stovell's mouth as his grin broadened. "Your lack of a denial is as good as an admission."

Hiro fixed him with a piercing gaze. "So what if I do? Even if our goals did align, I still wouldn't ally with you."

“Nor would I want you to.” Stovell snorted. “But I do have one message to impart.” A cold wind blew between them, plucking at Hiro’s fringe and sending the Black Camellia dancing. “This land’s decay cannot be halted, no matter which path you choose.”

“Maybe so,” Hiro answered. *But that’s all the more reason that it needs Liz.*

Stovell’s face contorted with amusement, as though he had read Hiro’s mind. “Struggle as you will. In the meantime, I will rise to greater heights.”

“Rise wherever you want. It’s none of my business.”

Stovell chuckled. “The stagnation will only deepen. New seeds will bear no fruit in soiled ground. It will spread and spread until all is rotten.”

Hiro shrugged. “Says the most rotten man of all.”

“Are you not the same? I had thought us brethren.” Stovell looked around. “But the wind grows strong.”

With that, the fire crackling between them tangibly cooled.

“The decrepit old fool interrupts us even here. A shame. I had begun to enjoy this conversation.” Stovell turned his back to Hiro and began to walk away, bound for the darkness where no moonlight fell. “We must have another...once the gale no longer blows.”

He melted into the gloom, leaving only the chirping of insects, the whistling of the wind, and an unidentifiable pressure lingering in the air.

Hiro breathed a small sigh and headed back to rejoin Liz and the others. Light-hearted music and a cheerful ambience greeted him as he passed back through the doors. He looked around for his friends. It didn’t take long to spot them, but as he moved to join them, somebody else blocked his way.

“Why, look who it is. It’s been too long.”

Second Prince Selene laid a hand on his shoulder with a friendly smile.

“So it has.” Hiro’s voice was cold.

“Blunt today, aren’t you?” Selene planted his hands on his hips in mock dissatisfaction.

“If you’re only here to exchange pleasantries, then you have done so. Good evening.”

Hiro set off back toward Liz and the others—or at least, he tried, but Selene slipped around to stand in his way.

“Come now, don’t be like that. Can’t you indulge me for a little while?” He grasped Hiro’s shoulder again and raised his lips to his ear. His androgynous voice took on a tone of warning. “You ought to be careful, you know. It’s been a long time since I last visited the palace, but I never expected to find it in quite such a precarious state.”



Hiro's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"*They* walk among us. There's no doubt about it. I say again: be careful." Selene drew back. "And now that I've said my piece, I suppose I will retire. I hope you'll understand when I say I don't wish to stay too long."

He stepped past Hiro and strode away, leaving only a breezy smile belying the weight of his words. Hiro spun around to see him waving goodbye over his shoulder.

"May we meet again." With his subordinates in tow, he left the hall.

Was that a warning? Who is "they"? Be careful of what?

But Hiro didn't have time to ponder what Selene had said.

"Hiro! What took you so long?!" Liz spotted him and marched over. "We're going back home. Rosa's had too much wine."

Hiro glanced to Liz's side, to where Rosa was leaning on her shoulder, cheeks flushed bright red.

Rosa peered back at him. "My dear Black Prince..." she slurred. "I'm thinking your neck looks *quite* delectable..."

Hiro pulled a face. It was some kind of cruel irony that somebody with her taste for alcohol was such a lightweight. "What's that supposed to mean? Come on, cut it out. People are staring."

"Disgraceful," Aura added, although her scorn went unheard by Rosa's drunken ears.

Hiro laughed awkwardly. "All right. Back to the mansion it is."

Just before he turned to leave, he cast one final glance around the hall. While a large number of nobles were still present, the most powerful houses were nowhere to be seen. Those who remained were mostly undeclared nobles, interspersed with a handful of central nobles who had turned their backs on House Krone.

A particularly large gathering caught his eye. At the center of the conversation stood the head of House Maruk. The evening hadn't given Hiro a chance to

introduce himself, but as he looked away, he felt a strange certainty that events would push them into contact sooner or later.

“Oh, Rosa! Walk straight, would you?!”

“My darling Black Prince... You may need to lend me your shoulder.”

“All right, all right.”

With a pained smile at the drunken woman clinging to his arm, he set out back to the mansion.

* * * * *

The group arrived to find Scáthach waiting for them.

“Welcome back. I hope you enjoyed the banquet—although one look at you, my lady, tells me all I need to know on that score.” A sheen of sweat glimmered like dew on Scáthach’s forehead as she gave Rosa a bright smile.

“Have you been training?” Hiro asked.

She looked away bashfully and nodded. “My edge will dull should I neglect to maintain it. And exercise keeps the mind from wandering.”

Aside from Garda and his subordinates, with whom she had barely exchanged names, she had been left alone in the mansion. With Liz and the others gone, she would have had nothing but her thoughts to keep her company—something that must be especially difficult here, in the home of her sworn nemeses. It seemed to Hiro that she must have been training to keep her mind clear of such thoughts, and he was not the only one who surmised as much.

“Scáthach!”

“What— Ah!”

Liz hurled herself at the knight and flung her arms around her.

“This is...very sudden, my lady. Is something the matter?”

“I’m...sorry.” Liz’s voice was quiet and thin, but its trembling tones lodged deep in the ears. “I couldn’t keep my promise.”

Scáthach’s eyes widened with comprehension before her face relaxed into a gentle smile. “As I believe I told you, your sentiment suffices.”

She was referring, Hiro suspected, to Liz's time in captivity. He had only heard bits and pieces of what had happened between them while she was in the keeping of the Faerzen Resistance, but it was plain to see they had forged a strong bond.

"Not for me." Liz shook her head in dissatisfaction. "I made you a promise, and I'm going to keep it."

"I believe I also told you that I would not see your heart tarnished on my account." Scáthach laid a compassionate hand on Liz's back. "Pursue your own goals. You need not worry on account of a vagabond such as I."

"I'm going to do this. Try all you like, you won't talk me down."

Scáthach chuckled. "I see. Then I await the day you come to me with better news." The corners of her mouth pulled into a defeated smile—clearly, Liz was not going to give in. The bond between the two was firm and shone with a brilliant light. To see their compassion for one another filled the heart with joy.

"My sweet Liz, stolen away to another's bed..."

The scene's beauty was marred only by one slightly odd comment from a drunken Rosa.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hiro asked.

"Can I not feel lonely watching my little sister fly the nest? With Liz gone, yours will be the only shoulder I can cling to. Isn't that a sad thought?"

"That's no reason to be inappropriate."

"Oh, please. It was just the wine talking. Anyway, why don't we take this chance to deepen *our* bond, hmm?" Rosa leaned onto him with all her weight.

"Hey, stop that! You're heav— Ah." Hiro froze as he realized what he had just said.

"Did you just call me *heavy*?" Rosa began crackling with fury.

"That's not what I meant. I suppose I just...misspoke, I guess..."

He wasn't lying. With a Spiritblade's protection, Rosa would be fairly light. The words had been an involuntary reaction, nothing more. Nonetheless, the genie

was out of the bottle now, and it wouldn't return until blood was spilled.

"It sounds like *someone's* asking me to smother them to death with my chest."

"Disgraceful," Aura muttered again, watching them in disbelief.

Seeing him fighting for his dignity, Scáthach finally took pity on Hiro. "Shall I help escort her to her room?"

"You stay out of this!" Rosa snapped. Evidently, she still hadn't forgiven Scáthach for stealing away her sister.

Hiro heaved an exasperated sigh and turned to Scáthach. "Leave her to me. You were about to take a bath, weren't you?"

Most likely, she hadn't actually intended to greet them as they returned from the banquet. She had simply been heading to the balnea after training and happened to pass by the entrance as they arrived.

His guess seemed to be on the mark, because she nodded. "As you say. I am impressed you could tell."

"Don't let us keep you, then." He shot her a meaningful look. "Take Liz and Aura too."

The signal was only brief, but she caught his meaning. "I see. Come, you two. Let us bathe together." She flung her arms around Liz and Aura's shoulders and pulled them close.

"Whoa! Hey! What's gotten into you?!"

"Mmph!"

Both of their eyes flew wide with surprise as she marched them away.

"The bath's already been drawn. For quite a while, in fact. We must hurry before it grows cold. And we must get in together, of course, or else we would waste water!"

As the trio receded noisily down the corridor, Hiro offered Rosa his shoulder and headed upstairs. His room was in the middle of the second floor. Inside was a bed, a writing desk, several freestanding chairs, and various other furnishings.

A flag emblazoned with House Kelheit's livery hung on the wall alongside Hiro's own black dragon standard. Clearly, it was more than a simple guest room—it had been prepared for him in advance.

"You can stop now," he said as he entered.

Rosa immediately dropped her pretense and stood up straight. "Good," she sighed, her slurring gone. "It's more tiring than you might expect, playing the drunk."

"Did you really have to?" Hiro asked.

"I have to be a strong elder sister for Liz, do I not?" Rosa sank into a nearby chair and leaned back, looking toward the ceiling. "There's no denying it. The emperor outplayed us."

Clearly she, too, was frustrated by the missed opportunity. She had put on a show of bravado for Liz's benefit, but deep down, she felt perhaps the most responsible of all. Hiro had only seen through the act once they had returned, after which he had signaled Scáthach to take Liz and Aura elsewhere.

"If only I'd seen earlier what he intended, everything would have been in our favor." Her fist clenched in chagrin on top of the armrest.

At a time like this, where the situation was so uncertain, words of reassurance would be useless. Whatever he said, she would disagree. But trying to empathize with her would only make things worse—he would end up sharing her despair, and they would sink together into the same swamp. What to do, then? Humans feel better when they air their grievances. Speaking them aloud lessens the burden on the mind. No, comfort was the best approach here, even if she might reject it.

"It's nobody's fault," he said. "No one could have predicted what Stovell was going to do."

"But surely I could have done *something* more. For Liz's sake."

"Where's the fun in always winning? A little adversity keeps things interesting. You'll only get complacent if everything always goes your way."

"There's truth in that, I suppose..."

“Besides, we haven’t lost yet. The game’s still in its early stages. It’s getting more complicated by the day, but its direction is promising.” Hiro’s smile deepened as he raised a hand to his eyepatch. “You have to find enjoyment in your successes *and* your failures. Otherwise, you won’t last until the end of the game.”

“Do you truly find enjoyment in matters of life and death?” Rosa asked.

Hiro nodded gleefully. “But of course—”

And he froze.

Tracing his lips with a trembling finger, he repeated in his mind what he had just been about to say.

What was that?

A chill ran up his spine at the words still caught in his throat. At the violent passions trying to stoke him to aggression.

Why would I say that?

A visceral pleasure swelled from the depths of his heart. He clutched at his chest, desperately choking it back.

“Is something wrong?” Rosa peered at him with concern, sensing his distress.

He shook his head to say that nothing was wrong, although his face was so pale that she would never believe him. She arched a single perfect eyebrow but otherwise didn’t press the point and tactfully changed the topic.

“Well, it’s certainly true that moping around will get us nowhere. Let’s focus on the central nobles for now, shall we?”

Their troubles shouldn’t have been so easily dismissed, but Rosa’s pride as the leader of House Kelheit refused to let her gripe about them any longer. Her eyes turned steely, as though she was forcing herself to act like an adult.

“They’re the ones who came out worst from today’s audience. Not only have they lost the horse they were backing now that Stovell’s given up his claim to the throne, their leaders, House Krone, have been stripped of their lands. If House Krone does nothing but sit on its hands, the entire faction will fall apart, and you can be certain House Maruk will be there to pick up the pieces.”

Rosa reached for the carafe of water on the nearby desk with one hand and picked up a glass with the other. She began to pour. Once the glass was full, she drank it in one. Her tongue snaked out lasciviously to wet her lips.

“That’s if they do nothing, but we know that’s not their way. They’re bound to resort to extreme measures. And unfortunately for them, it seems the emperor has seen right through their plans.”

She and the rest of the nobles had gathered their forces in the capital. House Krone would pay dearly for any attempt at rebellion. But if they endured their punishment in silence, they would be mocked by the nobility and sneered at by the commonfolk.

“They won’t have an easy road ahead of them, no matter which path they choose.” Hiro sat down on the bed, finally composed. Animal instinct still raged like a storm inside his chest, but that was nothing but his anxiety about the future taking shape as emotional turmoil—or so he told himself.

“The greatest surprise of the night was that Stovell gave up his claim to the throne at all,” Rosa sighed.

Hiro agreed. Who in the throne room would have imagined that the first prince would give up on the crown there and then? Surely nobody...with the exception of the emperor.

“It caught me off guard too, but it’ll only make things harder for him. He’s thrown away half of what makes him valuable.”

The loss of status meant the loss of power—and without power, one could not survive in the devils’ den that was high society.

After a moment, Hiro spoke again. “Do you think he’s planning something?”

Rosa sighed and shrugged. “Who can say? It’s not like him to take such an unpredictable tack, and he’s doing a remarkable job of evading my spies. All we can really do is make sure not to give him the chance to plant a knife in our backs.” She cupped her chin in her hands, as though she had just remembered something. “I did hear one thing that struck me as peculiar, though.”

“Hm?”

“Do you recall von Loeing? The former high general who never left Stovell’s side? He’s nowhere to be seen.”

“‘Former’ high general? You mean he lost his rank?”

“Oh, of course. You wouldn’t have heard.”

With a nod, Rosa launched into an explanation. Under the shadow of Liz’s capture, a second incident had occurred in the empire in the past few weeks. As word of events in Faerzen arrived in the capital, the emperor had received a resignation letter from von Loeing.

“The emperor accepted, but he was furious that von Loeing had acted out of line. He demoted him to the position of a common infantryman.”

The repercussions had plunged von Loeing’s house into chaos. Ultimately, to avoid collateral damage, his son had cut ties and cast him out of the family.

“Things were messy in the capital at the time. With what happened to Liz, all sorts of speculation was flying around. It was impossible to tell what was true and what was false.”

After that, von Loeing had become far lower priority than House Krone.

“Still, I should have told you sooner.” Rosa bowed her head in apology.

Hiro shook his head. “No use crying over spilled milk. Besides, you made the right choice.”

With all of his focus on Liz, he might not even have had any brainpower to spare on von Loeing. The information would only have confused him, especially when it couldn’t even be verified. Still, now that he had time to think about it, von Loeing’s decision seemed nothing but foolish. Why insist on resignation to the point of losing his own home? What did he have to gain?

I suppose there’s no accounting for individual priorities...

Regardless, it was concerning that both Stovell and von Loeing were acting so erratically.

“I’m pleased to hear you say that.” Rosa looked genuinely relieved.

Hiro flashed her a small smile of his own and cocked his head. “So when was

he last seen?”

“I suppose you recall when he and Stovell vanished from the capital?”

“I remember. One of your men wrote to me about it just before I left for Draal.”

“Stovell returned to the capital a few days ago, but von Loeing wasn’t with him. Rumors are swirling that they’ve parted ways. So I suppose it’s been about a month now since anybody’s seen him.”

“Plenty of time to make all kinds of preparations.”

“Agreed. They’re up to something, there’s no question about that. But as I say, my spies keep drawing blanks.”

“I see.”

He could offer to lend her Huginn and Muninn, but Rosa’s spies were undoubtedly exceptional. He couldn’t send the siblings into danger when there was no guarantee they would do any better. If things went poorly and they lost their lives, he wouldn’t be able to stomach the regret.

“So, where do we go from here?” he asked. “I think we should keep prioritizing House Krone.”

“I agree. If they claw their way back now, everything we’ve worked for will have been for nothing.”

Their next priority would be the emperor. If they wanted to extract an apology from him, they would have to spread rumors of his misconduct among the people. Even he would not be able to ignore a groundswell of popular disapproval. Last was Stovell, but with his actions a mystery, moving against him too rashly could easily backfire. They had no choice but to leave him to his own devices for now.

“We just have to play the cards we have. If Stovell’s covering his tracks, send your spies after his aides, his noble associates, anyone he’s close to. And could you look into Second Prince Selene, too?”

“Of course. I’ll tell my men they aren’t to overlook the slightest detail.”

As Rosa gave a final nod, Hiro sensed somebody approaching from down the

corridor. He turned his eyes to the door just as the doorknob began to rattle.

"Hiro! The bath was *great!*" Liz entered with Cerberus in tow. "You should join me—" She stopped dead, cutting herself off as she sensed the tension in the room.

The atmosphere grew more and more awkward. She peered at Hiro and Rosa in turn.

"Umm...why haven't you put any lights on? Isn't Rosa supposed to be sleeping?"

"I...I meant to! But everything turned so cold and sober once my dear little sister left. Thank goodness you're back! I was about to die of loneliness!"

With an oddly forced voice, Rosa sprang up from her chair and flung her arms around Liz. Hiro looked on, a little confused. It wouldn't have done any harm to bring Liz up to speed on the conversation, but perhaps Rosa feared being blamed for her mistakes—or perhaps she had instinctively hidden the truth out of guilt. Either way, it was a rare opportunity to enjoy seeing her knocked off balance. He quietly resolved to fill Liz in later.

"You're still drunk, aren't you?"

"Who knows? My own actions are a mystery even to me, sister dear. Perhaps the wine really is getting to me."

"You're *definitely* still drunk."

Hiro stifled a smile as he watched their affectionate exchange. He found himself wishing that they would never change. Dark clouds might lie ahead, but if they joined hands and braved the storm, they could build a nation where their smiles could last forever.

And when that day comes, will I be there, smiling alongside you?

With a sad smile, he cast a glance at the night sky. The stars lay shrouded behind a thick blanket of cloud. The moon had hidden itself like a wicked thought, and its gentle light no longer reached the earth.

But I'll have already played my part by then, won't I?

Outside the window, the clouds began to weep.

Chapter 3: The Fires of War

The sixteenth day of the twelfth month of Imperial Year 1023

The rain had been falling since the tenth and showed no sign of letting up. Dawn broke on a sky dyed gray, roiling and dark from horizon to horizon as though trying to eradicate all light from the world. The imperial capital of Cladius was not outside its reach, and even the city's stately stone lost its age-old luster once drenched by the downpour. Beneath the towering ramparts, the central boulevard was devoid of its usual hustle and bustle. The rain and the winter chill left the commonfolk little choice but to stay in their homes.

Though the townspeople might shiver and the temperature might plummet, however, one thing continued unaffected: the life of the nobility. The western quarter of the palace, where the nobles' mansions lay, steamed with fervor. A large host of nobles stood in the freezing wind. They were arrayed around the entrance of one of the great houses—House Kelheit. It was not difficult to guess why they were there. Today, the Black Prince and the sixth princess would return south to Berg Fortress.

All eyes were on the entranceway, where the royals had just emerged. A cheer went up, loud enough to drive away the rain. For a short while the world was filled with unreserved joy.

The crimson-haired girl by Hiro's side—reverently called the Valditte, the Princess of Flame—looked around in surprise at the reception. A smile spread across her face as understanding dawned. "Thank you all!" she cried, waving so hard that it was audible as she stepped into her carriage. The white wolf Cerberus, a rare breed from the eastern isles, slunk in around her feet.

Hiro silently raised his right hand and followed Liz. Behind him came Rosa, her voluptuous body once again squeezed into a military uniform. At Rosa's sides were Aura and Scáthach. All three women received their own applause as they entered the carriage. The party departed to rousing cheers.

"This carriage is supposed to be large," Rosa remarked as the wheels ground into motion, "but I suppose five is enough to make anything feel cramped." She

loosened her collar to breathe a little easier. “Well, then. For the time being, my nobles will devote their efforts to eroding House Krone’s feet.”

A week had passed since the banquet. In that time, House Krone had been eerily quiet. Hiro had expected them to lash out wildly, but apparently that had been a mistake. They were Rosa’s responsibility now, in any case. Her vassals would remain in the capital and manipulate public opinion to erode their support among the central nobles.

“Meanwhile,” Rosa continued, “you four will return to the south and wait for word. Whether House Krone makes a move or not, you need to shore up your forces.”

Facing the Grand Duchy and the Faerzen Resistance in succession had significantly depleted the Crow Legion’s strength. Fatalities had been few, but the number of wounded was higher. Effective losses stood at around eight hundred men. Garda would soon be busy training more new recruits.

Rosa’s eye took on a dangerous glint. “Speaking of which, we ought to do something about the southern nobles, don’t you think?”

The southern nobles were led by House Muzuk. They had ostensibly come to the capital, but none had appeared at either the imperial audience or the subsequent banquet. Only now was Hiro beginning to realize why.

House Muzuk wanted information. To know who’s a loose cannon and who they can easily control.

In short, they had leveraged the audience to tighten their grip on their own supporters. With so many nobles gathered in the capital, some of the southern nobles would be tempted to attend the banquet for social reasons, while anybody selling intelligence to other factions would want to meet with their contacts. House Muzuk had used the occasion to identify who was trustworthy and who was treacherous. Their efforts must have been successful, because two days prior, they and all of their nobles had returned to their territories.

If we’re going back south, we should take the opportunity to meet with the head of the house in person.

After that, they could decide whether to let him live, or to kill him and replace

him with somebody more useful.

Hiro set an elbow on the windowsill and gazed outside with his cheek resting on his hand. Large raindrops battered the glass, furious at being repelled. The downpour was loud enough to drown out even the trundling of the carriage wheels. The weather would slow down travel—visibility would be limited for both coachman and horses, and both would tire faster physically and mentally than they would in fair weather. If the horses were dragging their feet, a patch of mud would block the road as surely as a stone wall, and that really *would* delay their return.

"Sorry, Rosa," Hiro said. "You're going to be the last of us to get home."

She was accompanying them because she intended to return to the eastern territories via the south. Hiro had insisted on her traveling with them as far as possible for her safety, although that didn't make him feel any less guilty about the imposition.

Rosa shook her head and smiled. "Think nothing of it. I'm rather looking forward to journeying with you all."

As the leader of a great house, she was constantly busy. A lot of problems were sure to be stagnating in her absence. Once she returned to House Kelheit's stronghold at Baldickgarten—the Eagle's Roost—nestled in the Twin Pass of Bersia in the Grausam Mountains, she would be working day and night.

"Whether I return sooner or later," she continued, "it makes no difference. Either way, I will be run off my feet the moment I step in the door. So, with apologies to the men I left in charge, I will at least enjoy my time with my sister to its fullest."

"Rosa's subordinates are very capable," Liz added, "so she can afford to be a little bit late."

"Some of them do seem to bear me a grudge, so I can't let my guard down." Rosa paused, then continued cheerfully. "Still, they all share my desire to see the east prosper. On that score I have no complaints."

"It must be so nice working with people like that." Liz's eyes sparkled as she gazed at her sister with renewed respect.

“In benevolence is the capacity for true greatness, they say,” Scáthach murmured, to herself as much as anybody else.

“It’s not hard to be a king,” Aura said. “Anyone can do it if they’re strong enough, or with the right connections. Children get crowns if they’re born to the right parents. It’s nothing impressive. But once the coronation is over, they have to prove their worth. Care for their people, honor their soldiers, love their country, and the people will adore them. Fall short and the history books will call them a fool. Maybe even the reason for their nation’s downfall.”

“You sure know some big words for someone so little! Who’s a good girl!” Liz patted Aura on the head, impressed.

Aura’s comment didn’t strike Hiro as particularly verbose—and she was older than Liz, anyway—so he expected her to be annoyed by all the fussing, but wonders never ceased. She puffed out her chest proudly, and her stoic expression took on a slightly pleased glow.

“It’s all thanks to this. You should read it too.”

The Black Chronicle materialized out of nowhere in her hand. All of a sudden, her excited glow and talkative mood made sense. Scáthach, who had already been on the receiving end of her enthusiasm, squeaked and looked away.

“Wait, I didn’t—” Liz’s hands froze mid-pat. She caught sight of the book and paled, but it was too late to run.

“Any citizen of the empire and anyone with royal blood has a duty to read it at least once. But they *should* read it a hundred times. I’m sure that won’t be a problem, of course. It’s so addictive that you’ll want to read it over and over. But just in case, let me tell you: it’s only after the two hundredth reading that you *truly* start to understand.”

Nobody dared to ask what Aura meant by that. They didn’t want to put themselves in the line of fire.

Liz looked tearfully around the carriage. Her crimson eyes pleaded for help, but nobody was willing.

Aura cocked her head. “Don’t worry. You can start right away. And I want a full report.”

“No way...”

“Those must be tears of joy. I’m glad.”

“Wait, no...”

Liz shook her head furiously, but in the narrow confines of the carriage, there was no escape. A lengthy essay was in her future. There was no telling how many times she would have to rewrite it until Aura was satisfied, but Scáthach, who had been through the same ordeal, seemed intent on fading out of existence and becoming part of the wall. Tears beaded in the corners of her eyes.

Rosa chuckled. “Liz did not used to be so expressive, you know. Before they sent her off to Berg Fortress, her smiles seemed etched in stone. She has changed a great deal since she met you.” She half-closed her eyes contentedly and leaned into Hiro’s shoulder, no doubt pleased to see her little sister enjoying herself.

“You almost sound like a grandmother,” Hiro murmured idly. A split-second later, he realized that he had misspoken.

“A grandmother, am I? I don’t even have children yet. As *you* know perfectly well.” Rosa’s lips pursed, and she wrapped an arm around Hiro’s neck. “You really *do* want to be smothered to death, I see. I’m certain many men would kill for the opportunity.”

Her two prospective murder weapons quivered with indignation.

“I-I’m very sorry.”

Hiro stammered out an apology, but it didn’t do anything to assuage Rosa’s anger. He grasped for a change of topic.

“Oh, that’s right. I meant to give you this.” He produced an envelope from his pocket as though he had only just remembered its existence.

“What’s this? A letter?”

“Could you send a messenger to give this to the archpriestess on your way back?”

“All right.” Rosa took the envelope and leaned forward. “I have secured

cooperation among the central nobles. Three thousand men await your orders."

She grasped his hand as she spoke, and the crinkle of paper passed into his palm. He looked down to see a single sheet lined with the names of Rosa's collaborators. It seemed she had been engaging in her own acts of subterfuge.

"If you need help, seek them out."

"Thanks. I owe you."

"Think nothing of it." Her eyes twinkled impishly. "Any woman would do the same for her future husband."

It won't take long for word to reach House Krone that we've left the capital.

When would the central nobles move into action? Hiro expected that it would be sooner rather than later. If they were going to rebel against the emperor, they would want to do it now while they retained their forces and their power.

That would be a bad move. Stupid, even.

But with their backs to the wall, that was all they had. The emperor had orchestrated events to make certain of it.

There truly are no limits to human greed. The more power someone gains, the less satisfied they become with their position.

Still, he couldn't help but question the emperor's course of action. Was the conquest of Soleil such a vital goal that it justified making enemies on all sides? Hiro didn't think so. Artheus, certainly, would have called the man a fool. They had dreamed of many things one thousand years ago, but unifying the continent wasn't one of them. They had never even wanted the empire to grow as large as it had.

Seeking a distraction from his thoughts, he looked out of the window. The rain still showed no sign of letting up. The sky cracked with thunder as it showered the land with tears.

* * * * *

As every soul in Soleil knew well, the Grantzian Empire was vast in scope, and the emperor's gaze now struggled to reach its borders. Fearing the empire collapsing from the outside in, the forty-third emperor—the fifth before

Greiheit—had partitioned its lands into five: the north, south, east, west, and central territories. Commonly known simply as the five territories, they were nominally ruled by the emperor but administered in practice by the five powerful noble families known as the great houses.

Of the five, House Krone was a particularly long-standing fixture, with a lineage dating back to the early days of the empire's founding. Their stable history and noble blood had seen them granted oversight of the central territories, including the imperial capital of Cladius.

House Krone's lands were located thirty sel—or ninety kilometers—from the capital, in the fertile lands fed by the River Trident. The house had grown wealthy on the region's agriculture, and the presence of several foreign trade routes secured their status as the greatest power in the central territories. Their stronghold in the city of Greif—the Gryphon's Claws—was a testament to their prosperity. Vying with the imperial capital for splendor, its grand iron gates opened into a bustling market town, with busy stalls and smiling townsfolk as far as the eye could see. Continue through and one would again be met with high walls—a fortress within the town, complete with watchtowers. Inside that castle, in Brius von Krone's private chambers, sat Prince Stovell.

"Well, Grandfather. It appears that the emperor has outplayed us." Stovell's smile widened with amusement.

"That doddering old fool has forgotten all we've done for him," Brius spat at the floor, fury steaming from every pore. "So he thinks he can cut us away, does he? Bah! The history of the empire is the history of House Krone. The two are one. Who does that blithering oaf believe has propped up his rule all these years?!"

Stovell met the man's tirade with a cool stare. "Perhaps a little calm might be in order, Grandfather."

"Calm, Stovell? Do you believe this is a time for *calm*?" Brius advanced, his face reddening. "Resigning your claim to the throne? What were you thinking? You may well have doomed our house!"

"Perhaps I have." Stovell was unperturbed. It almost seemed like he was scoffing at his grandfather's outrage.

“You were a common cause for the central nobles to unite behind. It was foolish to throw that away.”

Stovell was the child of Brius’s daughter and the emperor, making Brius his grandfather. However, his mother—the empress consort—died tragically on his twentieth birthday, leaving House Krone’s ties to the emperor cut with suspicious convenience.

“You are not as young as you once were, Grandfather. Calm yourself or you will rupture an artery.”

“You have rather a talent for getting under people’s skin, don’t you?” Brius sighed in disbelief. His eye swiveled to fix Stovell with a clouded stare. “So, what are we to do with these men you asked me to muster? Your notion of sending the emperor a message was all well and good, but it seems to have borne no fruit.”

“If His Majesty did not confront us on the matter, then it is of no concern.”

“No concern but to our pride, perhaps. As if the emperor stealing our lands and raiding our coffers for Faerzen wasn’t enough, we also have to secure provisions for forty thousand wayward soldiers.”

“You gathered forty thousand?” Stovell’s eyes narrowed sharply. “I am impressed.”

“It’s less than I had hoped for. Some meddling fool took it upon themselves to break into the homes of our less loyal supporters. More than a few grew too skittish to join the cause.” Brius set a hand to his temple as though suppressing a headache.

“That is no cause for concern, Grandfather. Forty thousand men is more than enough to take the capital and drag the emperor from his throne. As I see it, your dream lies at last within your grasp.”

Brius shot Stovell a suspicious look. “That would mean the end of House Krone. I would achieve nothing but our own destruction. What are you plotting?”

“‘The end of House Krone,’ you say...” Stovell’s voice abruptly dropped in pitch. “Has that not already come?”

Brius's eyebrows twisted dubiously. "What did you say?"

"You know the truth of three hundred years ago, do you not, Grandfather? About the first and last assassination of an emperor?"

Brius gulped in fear as his grandson's eyes took on an eerie intensity.

"The old must be pruned. If new seeds are to flourish, last season's rotten fruit must be crushed to pulp—just as a putrefied world was once reborn." Stovell's lips twisted into an unsettling smile. *To this,* he seemed to say, *the empire is no exception.*

"I give you rein to speak and you give me this *drivel?* How could our house stand if the empire were to fall?!"

In a fit of anger, Brius's hand lashed out toward Stovell, but the latter was faster. He caught his grandfather's aged arm in a crushing grip. The crunch of breaking bone echoed through the room.

"Agh!" Brius fell to his knees, overcome by pain. "You would lay your hand on me?!"

He glared up at Stovell with a mixture of rage and agony, but to no avail. Stovell slowly rose from his chair.

"Do you mean to chide me, Grandfather? It was you who struck first, was it not?"

"Do you think you will get away with this?! There will be consequences!"

"What have I to fear from a doddering old man with no power?"

Lightning crackled from Stovell's body, mirroring his flaring temper. A howling storm exploded into the room. It scored furrows into the walls, split the floorboards, scorched the ceiling, and flooded the chamber with light.

"What now, Grandfather? Or perhaps I should better call you 'cur'?"

Stovell's face contorted in delight as he raised a hand. His eyes glinted with glee, like a farmer gazing at a fattened calf at last grown enough for the slaughter.

"You have served your purpose. But worry not. Your dream will not die with

you. The vengeance I shall exact on the emperor will bring peace to your soul."

"Stop this madness, Stovell! You would kill your own grandfather?!"

"Never once have I thought of you as my blood." Stovell's voice dripped with more contempt than any normal man could muster. "You are a canker infesting this world, nothing more."

He gazed down with eyes devoid of emotion. Brius stared back, aghast, as though some past sin was playing back behind his eyes.

With a sudden *crack*, lightning speared the man's body. He had no time to scream. The bolt ran him through like a lance and snuffed out his life in an instant. The stench of charred flesh filled the room, a nauseating stink that clung to the skin and lingered in the nostrils.

"A canker indeed. Even in death, you find ways to disgust me." With a dismissive snort, Stovell sank back into his chair.

At that moment, there came a knock on the door.

"My lord?" asked a voice from outside. The portal swung open without waiting for an answer. "Your business is concluded, I see."

In stepped the man who could rightfully be called Stovell's right hand. The burly old soldier carried his rugged frame with a gravitas that no ordinary man could dream of attaining—fitting for a general whose name was known across the empire. With a sword in his hand, he could split a river; with a spear in his hand, he could shatter a castle wall. In his youth, the nations whose borders he prowled had dubbed him the Demon. Former High General Trye Hlín von Loeing looked down at the corpse on the ground without an ounce of pity.

"For a man of such great ambition, he could muster so little courage when it was called for."

"Still, he left us much. For that, if nothing else, we must be grateful." Stovell took a sip from the bottle of wine on the desk and grinned. "Von Loeing, it appears that my beloved grandfather has been assassinated. The emperor's work, no doubt."

Von Loeing cast the prince a dubious look, but it only took him a moment to

understand. “Then it seems that vengeance is called for.” The pleased tone of his voice drifted down to settle on the corpse of Bruis von Krone.

“Dispatch a messenger to the forty thousand men this senile old fool scrabbled together,” Stovell said.

“With what message, Your Highness?”

“Tell them only that the emperor has slain one of the empire’s most stalwart contributors in cold blood. That ought to rile them up enough to set them on the path for the capital.”

A path which led to the collapse of the empire. A chuckle rose in Stovell’s throat to imagine the capital’s thousand years of prosperity going up in flames. He dashed his wine glass against the floor.

“The time has come. The road here has not been an easy one, but now, at last, we need no longer play the jesters.”

“Yet His Majesty the Emperor suspects our plans,” von Loeing mused. “He has summoned the realm’s nobles to the capital in full force.”

“A vain attempt. After a week of silence, they will have let their vigilance lapse. Many will already be on the road home.”

For all Stovell’s insistence that they had the upper hand, von Loeing still looked unconvinced. “The same could be said of us. We have mustered forty thousand, but I cannot imagine more than half will stay to follow a neutered house.”

“That will be no concern. Why do you think I am appealing to their sense of justice? Brius von Krone may have been a selfish old snake, but many owed him debts, and many more will find themselves caught in the current of events. Thirty thousand will stay, by my reckoning. And I want you to lead them.”

As the words left Stovell’s mouth, a third voice spoke.

“Then I shall gladly serve as vice-commander.”

The two men spun around in alarm. Neither had sensed a third presence in the room. Von Loeing’s eyes narrowed as he planted his legs wide in a battle stance. Stovell rose from his chair as though propelled, his body crackling with

electricity. Their eyes converged on the sudden intruder.

“I do apologize if I have surprised you. It is only I, your humble servant.” The hooded figure of the álf who called themselves Nameless lifted a hand, their voice an amused lilt.

“How long have you been here?”

Stovell’s mouth twisted with guarded annoyance. Von Loeing glared at the figure, his hand hovering on the hilt of his sword.

“Oh, please. I did not come to be subject to such banal questions.” Nameless raised both hands like a merchant gesturing to their wares. “I cannot imagine that prickly Lord Stovell here has amassed many collaborators. You have one old soldier and nobody else. Well, fear not—I can offer my services. If you will have me, of course.” A nonchalant shrug underlined the point.

A vein throbbed in von Loeing’s temple. “You would mock me?”

“Not at all! I spoke the truth, nothing more.”

As animosity swirled between them, the air cracked with lightning. Both swiveled to face Stovell.

The prince snorted in exasperation as he thudded back down into his chair. “Von Loeing, this is no time for petty spats.”

“Apologies, Your Highness.”

Stovell spared von Loeing only a glance before turning a sharp gaze on Nameless. “Know that your plans are nothing before mine, schemer. But give me any cause to suspect you, and I will plant your head on a spike and leave it for the crows.”

“I must take care, then, my lord. I would not want to meet such a fearsome fate.” Nameless’s voice was mirthful in spite of its mock fear.

Von Loeing glared at the strange intruder for a moment, but relented and turned to Stovell. “What now, Your Highness?”

“What else?” Stovell’s eyes shone with a fearsome delight as he patted his own neck. “The reprise of chaos. I will take the old lion’s head.”

* * * * *

The twenty-third day of the twelfth month of Imperial Year 1023

Verrat, in the north of the southern territories

At last, the rain lifted. The sky was unmarred blue, clear from horizon to horizon as though the earlier clouds had been nothing but a bad dream. A gentle breeze blew over the land, carrying a chill and setting newly budding greenery dancing.

Twenty-five sel from Berg Fortress, Hiro and his allies had parted ways with Rosa and set up by the roadside. A command tent stood in the center of the camp, with Hiro's, Scáthach's, and Aura's tents arrayed around it. A short distance away, Liz and Scáthach were sparring.

"Yaaagh!"

Liz swung her wooden sword in a downward chop. Scáthach caught the blow with her own weapon. Their two training blades smacked into one another with an ominous crack, but neither noticed. They had no attention to spare for anything but one another.

"Fine! How about this?!" Liz threw a distracting punch, then dropped low. She braced one hand on the ground and launched a kick at her opponent's ankle.

A grunt of surprise left Scáthach's lips as her leg buckled. Reacting quickly, she planted her sword in the ground and launched herself into a flying kick.

Liz cried out, plunging forward without hesitation, and met the kick with her own fist. Her inhuman strength sent Scáthach flying back. The woman didn't resist the blow, however, instead converting its momentum into a backflip and landing gracefully on the ground. As Liz overcommitted and stumbled, Scáthach launched herself back into close range.

"I have you now!" Scáthach cried, swinging her wooden sword.

Liz leaned into the momentum of her fall, twisted, and sprang away. Scáthach saw the move coming and launched a punch at the right of Liz's head, but Liz batted it away with little effort.

"I can no longer contest you in strength, I see!"

Then skill would have to make up the difference. Scáthach's strikes became

sweeping slashes. Liz ducked evenly out of the way of the blows, looking for an opening in which to plant her fist. With the Lævateinn's Might behind her, a single punch could knock an opponent unconscious. That was one of the reasons her Spiritblade was so fearsome—she did not need it in her hand to land a killing blow.

Hiro sat in silence, watching the two blossoms dance. With the ground turned to mud by the rain, he was reclining in a chair.

"Who do you think will win, Aura?"

By his side, Aura looked up from the Black Chronicle on her knees and turned her unfeeling gray eyes toward the fight. "I'm not sure."

He should probably have counted himself lucky that she had answered at all. Her focus had been on the Black Chronicle, not on Liz and Scáthach. Even now, the book was pulling her gaze back down. The intensity of their battle didn't seem to interest her whatsoever. It wasn't a surprise that she wasn't sure.

"You need to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses, you know. Someday, you might have to decide where to assign them."

Just like certain occupations suited some people more than others, knowing who to place where on the battlefield was key to success. A force that played to its commanders' strengths could prevail over a much larger one. A force that didn't would know only defeat, no matter its size.

"Perhaps." Aura gave a little nod, but she kept staring at Hiro in silence. She was probing for something, trying to feel out his heart.

"Um...is something wrong?"

Her intensity took Hiro a little aback. She cocked her head, as though searching for the right words.

"Where do *you* belong?"

That was enough for him to guess what she was thinking. For a moment, he forgot how to breathe. As he searched for words, Aura reached out and laid a hand on his chest. She looked up at him, her eyes filled with concern.

"Where's your heart?"

He struggled for an answer. The depth of her compassion was humbling—moving, even. It would be wrong to play dumb in the face of that. He opened his mouth to speak—and a panicked voice rang out from his right hand side.

“Urgent news! I bring urgent news! Where is Lord Hiro?!”

Hiro spun toward the noise. A harried-looking man ran into view, desperately scanning his surroundings.

“Lord Hiro! I must find Lord Hiro!”

Liz and Scáthach stopped their exchange, also distracted.

“That’s a House Kelheit messenger,” Hiro murmured. He raised a hand and waved, signaling his position.

The messenger saw the gesture and made a beeline for him. “Please forgive this breach of protocol, Your Highness! I fear this is a most pressing matter!” He produced an envelope and handed it over. “The head of House Krone has been assassinated!”

“Assassinated?” Hiro half-rose to his feet in surprise. Next to him, Aura’s eyes went wide with shock.

“Rumors are spreading that the emperor was the culprit! Even now, the central nobles are marching on the capital to take revenge!” The messenger’s voice trembled. “Von Loeing has called on the houses of the region to join his cause, and his forces swell in number as he approaches the city! We believe they may grow to as many as thirty thousand!”

Hiro nodded. “I see.” He signaled to one of his guards to bring the messenger water. Just as the man made to leave, he added, “Actually, could you fetch Garda while you’re at it?”

“At once, Your Highness!” The man bowed and sprinted away.

Hiro turned his attention back to the messenger and commanded him to rest. Finally, he examined the letter. It was from one of Rosa’s collaborators among the central nobles. He read it through, measuring its contents against the messenger’s report.

“Hiro!”

He looked up at the sound of Liz's voice. She was standing where she had been sparring, a stone-faced Scáthach beside her. Judging by their expressions, they had already heard the exchange, although it didn't hurt to check that they were on the same page.

"I'm guessing you heard that?"

"I was. The head of House Krone, assassinated... Who would have thought?"

Liz gave a helpless shrug and sighed. It was hard to fault her. All signs had pointed to House Krone being the one to make the first move, yet all of a sudden their leader was dead and fingers were being pointed at the emperor. Why would he take such a step? An effective means of suppression it might be, but it was far too heavy-handed. Nobody would benefit from this but foreign nations looking for their chance.

"Don't lose sight of the truth," Aura murmured.

Scáthach nodded sagely. "Lady Aura speaks wisely. Seeing with a blinkered view leads only to regrets."

Sowing confusion to obscure the truth was a time-honored tactic. The thoughts of others were ultimately a mystery; their true intentions were invisible by nature, shrouded in darkness. Hence, human beings were easily misled by words. They had a way of focusing only on what they wanted to believe.

What if that's the goal here? If there really is some plot at work...

Then the situation was critical. They needed to return to the capital at once.

"Liz, we need to go back."

She nodded. "Got it."

If they allowed themselves to fall any further behind their enemies, the situation would quickly become unsalvageable. One could only place so much trust in the words of others. They had to face reality with their own eyes, hear the truth with their own ears—and that meant they needed to act. Now.

"Liz, you should—"

Hiro opened his mouth to issue advice, but Liz didn't need it. She was already

barking orders to the nearby soldiers.

“Prepare to march! Abandon the camp! Leave your provisions to lie! And be quick about it!”

“An army can’t march on an empty stomach.” Aura took up position by Liz’s side. A pen and paper had appeared in her hands as if by magic.

“Not every army, but we can. We’d need our own provisions if we were in foreign territory, but we aren’t. We’re in the empire. We can request food from the local nobles, or buy from nearby towns if they won’t share.”

“Full marks.” Aura nodded, pleased. Evidently that had been a test.



“Oh, and one more thing. Do you think we could contact the local nobles to clean up after us?”

If they left the camp intact, it could turn into a bandit hideout. Besides, leaving unclaimed provisions behind would soon attract monsters—and that was if impoverished townsfolk didn’t kill one another over it first.

“I’ll take care of that. You take charge of the men.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Aura! Oh, and we should change out of our heavy armor. If we’re traveling fast, we can’t let the mud slow us down.”

“We’ll bury it. That way nobody can steal it.”

“Good idea. Can I leave that to you as well?”

“Of course.”

Hiro’s eyes closed fondly as he watched the exchange. A sense of familiarity welled up from within him, as though he were watching a scene from bygone days.

“You called for me, One-Eyed Dragon?”

A gruff voice drew his attention. Garda stood nearby, clad from head to toe in black armor.

“What has you so slack-jawed?” the zlosta asked. “Is this truly the time to be getting distracted?”

“Lord Hiro is simply surprised by Lady Liz’s growth.” Scáthach turned her eyes to the girl in question, grinning broadly. “She has become quite impressive of late.”

Garda nodded in agreement. “I could say the same. I struggle for the right word, but she seems...newly focused, perhaps.”

She had always had talent—Lævateinn would never have chosen her otherwise. The problem had been that she had lost sight of the way to go. That lack of clarity had stifled her natural ability. All along, however, she had only ever needed the opportunity to break her shell, which the fighting in Faerzen had provided. She really did never cease to amaze—all the more reason to

cultivate her talents to their fullest.

She could do it, Artheus. She could inherit your will.

Once a fledgling learned to spread its wings, what could stand in its way? It could soar forever and ever, to the farthest skies.

Hiro cast one more glance at Liz and then turned to Garda. “The enemy has thirty thousand men. We have eight hundred.”

The zlosta snorted. “Hopeless odds if ever I saw them. We go to our graves.”

“At least we have eight hundred cavalry. That gives us some flexibility. Still, it’s not exactly enough to turn the tables.”

“But that look on your face tells me you have a plan.”

“You’re right. The odds are hopeless as they stand. But we can even them a little.”

It seemed Hiro would be calling on Rosa’s three thousand sooner than planned. Aside from that, he could appeal for assistance to whatever nobles would listen.

“And we’ll need to send out messengers.”

“To whom?” Garda asked.

“To the central nobles. A lot of them will be standing back, waiting to see which way the wind is blowing.”

Many were no doubt planning to sit back and watch until the victor became apparent, but he wouldn’t let them get away with that kind of spinelessness this time. He would force them to choose a side.

“Besides, there’s something I need them to prepare for me. Numbers won’t get us out of this one; we’ll need some kind of clever scheme. I’ll draw up the letters later. Could you get the messengers ready to leave as soon as I’m done?”

“Of course. I’ll see it done.”

“Thank you.”

As Garda left, Hiro turned his gaze to the ground. The rain might have lifted, but the mud remained to impede their progress. Still, they were small in

number, and light cavalry on top of that. They could make it back to the capital quickly enough. Assuming the rebel army was working under the same conditions, and considering the time their forces would take to assemble, they shouldn't have reached the city's walls—yet. Besides, the emperor had the Knights of the Golden Lion under his command, and while the First Legion was scattered across the central territories, at least some of it had to remain in the vicinity. The capital would not fall so easily.

I really don't see how the rebels win this one.

If word of the crisis had reached Hiro and his allies, it would also have reached every other noble, triggering a rush back to their home territories. Even if the rebel army struck fast and hard enough to take the capital—and even that would be a matter of luck—it would soon be wiped out by an incoming wave of noble reinforcements.

Unless there's some hidden dimension to this. Something they're hellbent on doing even if it means their deaths...

Hiro cupped his chin in his hand and pondered. There didn't seem to be any advantage at all to them wiping themselves out. Did they have some guaranteed way of taking the capital? Or perhaps some means of repelling any reinforcements? No matter how hard he thought, he couldn't see an answer. In any case, it would be dangerous to make assumptions with so little information to work with. For now, the best he could do was file the question in a corner of his mind and move on.

He collected his thoughts and looked around. Soldiers were hurrying to and fro. None of them seemed disgruntled at being commanded to march at short notice. The drumming of horseshoes wove its way through the press—officers returning to their units or rounding up their subordinates. Morale still seemed high. A healthy tension hung over the departure proceedings. The Crow Legion was in good enough condition to fight.

"Liz!" Hiro called. "I need to talk to you!"

Liz had been discussing something with Aura, but she bounded over with a spring in her step. "What is it? Something you need?" If she'd had a tail, it would have been wagging up a storm.

Hiro pulled a strained smile. “If we’ve gotten word of what’s happened, the other nobles will too.”

“Right. Maybe the fighting will be over by the time we get there.”

“It won’t be that easy, sadly. We’ll be the first to engage the rebel army.”

Their Crow Legion escort numbered eight hundred. The other nobles’ forces would be at least twice that. That alone would produce a disparity in travel time. Second Prince Selene in particular was leading an army of twenty thousand soldiers. Unlike Hiro’s men, they couldn’t afford to drop their provisions and march. Reversing their course would take time.

“Why don’t we meet up with Rosa?” Liz suggested. “She could be here in two days.”

Hiro shook his head. It wasn’t a bad plan in principle—Rosa’s assistance would give them an army ten thousand strong, easily enough to even the odds—but time was too precious. Waiting around wasn’t an option.

“We can send her a message, but we shouldn’t join forces. Combining our armies could take days, and we’ll travel a whole lot slower. What we’ll gain in strength, we’ll lose in time, and we might end up arriving late to the capital.”

Striking the first blow would bolster Liz’s authority if they did happen to join up with other nobles later. More to the point, it was important to impress upon the people that she had been first to the scene.

“But how can we fight with eight hundred men?”

“Rosa’s made inroads with the central nobles. A few of them are willing to fight for us. That only accounts for three thousand men at the moment, but three thousand is better than nothing.”

“Still...” Liz’s gaze dropped to Excalibur at Hiro’s hip before flicking quickly back up to his face. Her brow knitted with concern. “Thirty thousand is a lot, even with two Spiritblades on our side. And if House Krone is backing the rebels, they’ll have plenty of spirit weapons.”

Spirits flocked to the banks of pure water sources, where, on rare occasion, they left behind crystals imbued with their essence. These crystals, which shone

with a luster to rival any gemstone, had become known among the people as spirit stones. Between three and seven per year were produced on imperial lands. Through a special smithing process, they could be forged into spirit weapons—blades that harbored a small amount of the spirit's power and bolstered the wielder's strength. Accordingly, spirit stones were highly prized, to the point that a single one could fund a life of leisure, while spirit weapons were wielded only by the royal family and their most trusted vassals.

"Probably so. But they'll have ten at most. A threat, certainly, but nothing you and Scáthach couldn't take care of."

If a spirit weapon showed itself on the battlefield, one of them could find its wielder and cut off their head—as simple as that. In the first place, such valuable arms wouldn't be handed out to rank-and-file infantry. They would be given to commanders, and judging by the central nobles' instincts for self-preservation, those commanders would stay well away from the front lines.

"See? There's nothing to worry about." Hiro laid a hand on Liz's shoulder and stared deep into her eyes. "Show them how you fight, Liz. You don't have to win the first battle, only the last. And by that time, you'll have plenty of nobles behind you."

He had several plans in place to ensure that. It was time to put everything that he had learned to use.

"We'll turn the tables. The favor of the heavens, the fealty of the earth, the devotion of men—they're all with you now."

Liz gazed back uncertainly. "Okay," she said finally. "I'll trust you on that." She looked away and gave a little nod.

"Good. Then let's go."

"All right." Liz fell in beside him, glancing occasionally at his face as she went.

Aura watched them leave with stony eyes.

"I have your mount, Lady Aura." Scáthach approached with two horses in tow.

Aura didn't respond. "He was smiling."

"Who?" A question mark popped up over Scáthach's head.

At that moment, Hiro bellowed loud enough to drown out the crunch of boots. “Mount up! The Crow Legion rides for the capital!”

“As impressive as ever, is he not? His voice truly has a way of commanding attention.” Scáthach swung herself up onto her horse. “You had best mount up as well, Lady Aura, or you will be left behind.”

“Mm...”

“Now, what was bothering you so? You are not usually so distracted.”

“Hiro was smiling.”

“What?”

“No, forget it. I was probably just seeing things.”

But she couldn’t shake the memory—the whole time Hiro had been speaking to Liz, he’d had a wide smile on his face.

* * * * *

As Hiro and his allies set out back toward the capital, another army was making camp near the northern border. They numbered twenty thousand. Above the central tent, a stately flag fluttered gracefully on the freezing wind: a silver wolf on a white field.

Plumes of white smoke rose here and there across the camp, signaling the onset of dinner. Some soldiers conversed with bottles in their hands; others cheered on drinking contests; yet more sang and danced, stripped to the waist in defiance of the biting cold. There was no gloom to be seen. The bright mood brought warmth to the chill of the snowfields.

The presence of such an unruly force might usually invite unease, but the nearby villages, towns, and border forts showed no sign of concern. The army was commanded by a man they knew and trusted: Lupus Scharm Selene von Grantz, the second prince of the empire and fourth in line to the throne. Some of the commonfolk called him the King of the North. Others called him Twinfangs.

Selene stifled a yawn as he looked around. Four burly soldiers had him surrounded. The vicious weapons in their hands glinted dully in the sunlight,

honed points glittering with rainbow halos. A single blow from any one would be fatal.

One of the men chuckled. “Well, boss, looks like today’s the day we put a scar on that pretty face.”

“Aye, you said it. Time to settle old scores.”

“You’ve been so busy recently, boss. We’ve been missing you terribly.”

“Are you certain about this, Your Highness? Is four not too many?” The last voice, more concerned than the rest, belonged to a new recruit.

Selene’s lips pulled into just the hint of a smile. “Come at me like you mean it. I could do with a little entertainment.”

“He’s a fair one, the boss,” another of the soldiers said. “His looks are wasted on a man, if you ask me.”

“Speak for yourself. I’m glad of it.”

“Aye, right enough. With a face like that, what does it matter what’s below?”

Selene was often praised as a great beauty, and to look at him, it was not difficult to see why. His sky-blue hair hung soft as silk, his limbs were slender, his skin was pale, and his face seemed carved from porcelain. His androgynous features drew the attention of men and women alike.

One particular feature, however, stood out above the rest. His left eye was blue, and his right was gold—the mismatched coloration known as the Baldick. Common to figures of myth, it was said to denote somebody of heroic caliber. True to form, Selene’s regal bearing could have belonged to a king stepped straight out of the old legends.

“That’s enough chit-chat. Shall we begin?”

Selene grasped the twin swords at his hips. A puff of white breath escaped his mouth as his lips widened into an elegant smile—and then he vanished in a soundless blur.

“Look out! He’s comi— Gah!”

One of the soldiers went flying, as if he had been struck by a charging bull. His

neighbor crumpled to the ground, foaming at the mouth. The third man slashed around wildly but hit only air. A blow to the cheek knocked him out cold.

The new recruit looked around desperately. “Eh? What just...? Are you three—”

He got no further. Some invisible force struck him hard, sending him bouncing across the ground until he eventually came to a stop.

Selene looked down at the four unconscious men and sighed. “That wasn’t even a warm-up.”

For a beat, there was silence, and then a roar went up from around him.

“Well, well. Where did you all come from?”

He looked around to see soldiers cheering and whooping. Strange—he hadn’t noticed any spectators before the bout had started. Still, best to acknowledge his supporters. He raised a hand and waved.

“At this rate, our drink isn’t going to last the night.”

They would have to buy more from one of the nearby towns. With a shrug, Selene began to walk away, but before he could go more than a pace, somebody called out to him.

“May I ask what you are doing, Your Highness?”

Without so much as a whisper, a man appeared in Selene’s path. He wore no hood today, seeming not to care about concealing his face. He was a member of Vang, the cadre of assassins who served Selene’s uncle, Chancellor Graeci, and until recently, he had been in Hiro’s service.

“Ah, Drix. As miserable as ever, I see.”

“I do not think my disposition is relevant, Your Highness. I ask again, why are you wasting your time on these ‘amusements’?”

“I don’t see what that has to do with you. Or are you here to tell me that you need something?”

“The situation has been explained to you at great length, Your Highness.” Drix’s eyes hardened with anger. “You *have* been reading our letters, I hope?”

Selene cocked his head. “Your letters?”

“Yes, Your Highness. The letters that Chancellor Graeci has sent you. Repeatedly.”

“Oh, of course. Now I remember.” Selene produced an envelope from his pocket. It was stamped with the seal of House Scharm. He hadn’t bothered to open it, assuming it contained nothing more than Graeci’s usual complaining. “I take it this was something important?”

“Gravely so, Your Highness.” Drix’s voice took on a note of impatience. “With respect, I must ask you to read it at once!”

With a shrug, Selene broke the seal and pulled out the contents. Written in flawless cursive, the letter summed up its subject matter quickly and competently. Without its usual barbs, it made for remarkably easy reading.

“Oh?” A smile spread across Selene’s face as he read. “Brius von Krone, dead? My father responsible? Well, I never. And now House Krone is in open rebellion? Things are happening awfully fast.”

“The situation calls for urgency. Chancellor Graeci requests that you recall your forces to the capital immediately.”

“Understandably so. This would certainly qualify as a national crisis.”

“The rebel army may already have reached the capital’s walls. You must turn your forces about and dispatch these interlopers.”

“I see.” Selene’s smile deepened. “But that sounds terribly boring.”

His expression never faltered as he tore Graeci’s letter to shreds.

“Y-Your Highness?!” Drix yelped in horror as the scraps of paper blew away on the wind.

Selene regarded the man with frigid eyes. “With apologies to your master, I care only for the north.”

“But... But the entire nation is in peril!”

“And what about it? The north has Friedhof. The security of the empire pales in importance next to that of the Spirit Wall.”

“But if the empire should fall, the north will be left exposed! Besides, nobody has heard from the yaldabaoth in years!”

In addition to the five humanoid races—humans, álfar, dwarves, zlosta, and beastfolk—known as the five peoples, the world of Aletia also contained three more outlandish species known as the wild races. Monsters, who prowled all corners of the world, were one. The other two were the ferocious peoples known as the archons and the yaldabaoth. Both could only be found on the central continent of Soleil, where they had established a nation of their own in the untamed lands known as the Sanctuarium beyond the Spirit Wall of Friedhof.

“They are waiting, not dormant,” Selene drawled. “They will swarm over the wall if we give them the slightest opportunity.”

“Be that as it may, Your Highness, you must still make for the capital.”

“Why? To claim the throne?”

Drix fell silent under Selene’s piercing gaze.

“As I have told you before, I am not interested.”

“Then you are happy to watch the people of the empire suffer so long as they are not people of the north?”

Drix’s argument didn’t follow, but that only spoke to how flustered he was. If Selene didn’t make for the capital, one of the other imperial heirs would engage the rebel army instead, and a victory would secure their position as the next emperor or empress. Those who wanted to see Selene become emperor would be desperate to avoid that outcome. In particular, Chancellor Graeci had been plotting for a long time to seat Selene on the throne, although a portion of the northern nobles were also eager to see him claim the crown.

“The people of the central territories look to you for salvation, Your Highness,” Drix said. “You must answer their pleas.”

His appeal to emotion was so desperate, it was hard to watch. Selene heaved a heavy sigh. “I think not.”

“Your Highness?”

“I’ve never seen the appeal in walking the path others have laid out for me. If my uncle wants the throne for House Scharm so badly, he can sit in it himself. Stovell can take it for all I care.”

“If Stovell were to claim the throne, the empire would be ruined! Have you lost your mind?”

“How many men do you think could endure court politics since the moment they could walk and *not* lose their minds?”

In that sense, Stovell was equally pitiful. The first prince had been used by his grandfather from early in his youth all the way up until being chosen by Mjollnir, whereupon he had become his father’s pawn instead. In the end, his heart had withered away to nothing. It was hard to look at his life without feeling sympathy.

“I...” The rebuke left Drix lost for words.

With a final scornful glance, Selene looked away. “Although, come to think of it...”

The thought of a black-haired boy crossed his mind. He cupped his chin and sank into thought.

What will he *do, I wonder?*

Hiro didn’t seem to have any political ambitions, but Liz did. Selene didn’t care for the throne, but he did very much want to see where their roads would take them. What moves might they make in response to this crisis? Perhaps it was worth revising his course of action after all.

Selene beckoned one of his aides.

“Yes, Your Highness?” the man asked.

“Assemble a task force. Four thousand men will do.”

Drix, still on one knee, started. His eyes filled with anticipation. The smile that spread across his face could have been perfectly designed to irritate Selene. The second prince looked away contemptuously and returned his attention to the aide.

“What of the rest of the army, Your Highness?”

“Send them on to Friedhof. We shall return to the capital at a leisurely pace.”

“At once, Your Highness. We will make ready to depart.”

As the aide disappeared, Selene turned back to Drix, who was looking visibly relieved at the second prince’s change of heart. “I don’t know what you’re looking so pleased about. I’m not going to be who my uncle wants.”

Drix’s brows pulled together doubtfully. “Then why are you marching for the capital, Your Highness?”

“Why, to watch, of course. The struggle for the empire’s future is about to play out on a grand stage, and I mean to be there to see it.”

Selene grinned in anticipation as his hands found their place on the hilts of his twin swords.

Chapter 4: Lævateinn Alights, the Valditte Takes Flight

The twenty-sixth day of the twelfth month of Imperial Year 1023

Hoffnung Plains, in the south of the central territories

Ranks of horses and men milled about. Armor clanked and spearpoints glinted. The sun hung high in the sky, showering the land with its rays and lighting the way for the people who dwelled below. A black dragon standard fluttered in the gentle breeze alongside a crimson banner emblazoned with a lily—the livery of the fourth prince and sixth princess.

Beneath the flags' dignified gazes, soldiers rushed to and fro. None had time to stop and talk. They attended to their duties in tense silence.

One spot stood out among the neat ranks: the command tent, where the most important persons in the army were gathered. A grave air filled the interior ahead of the start of the strategy meeting. All eyes were on the sixth princess at the head of the table, as well as the fourth prince who stood at her side.

Hiro was first to address the audience. "It looks like everybody's present. May I have your report?" His gaze fell on one of the central noble collaborators.

"Yes, Your Highness!" The man's voice squeaked with stress, but he stood up. With a trembling finger, he pointed to the map of the central territories on the table. "The rebel army has stopped within sight of the capital," he said, choosing his words with audible care. "Von Loeing has taken command of the enemy forces, with the álf known as Nameless as his vice-commander."

"Have they made any demands?"

"None, Your Highness. Although they have sent threats to the surrounding nobles."

Side with us or stay out of this. Defy us and we'll annihilate you. That was the gist, at any rate. Von Loeing might have lost his rank, but his prowess was

known throughout the empire. The nobles were probably quaking in their boots. Given how fixated many of the central houses were on satisfying their various appetites, it was doubtful any of them had the spine to stand up to von Loeing.

"It'll be difficult to convince those nobles to side with us, then." Hiro and his allies had three thousand eight hundred men; the enemy had thirty thousand. They were like a pebble trying to stop a river. Every observer probably expected them to be swallowed up in an instant.

"So it seems, Your Highness. The local nobles fear inviting the rebel army's wrath. They have holed themselves up in their castles and appear to have no intention of leaving. As soon as the rebels show any sign of weakness, I imagine they will gladly sally forth, but until then, they will watch and wait."

Hiro breathed a sigh of disappointment. "What about the nobles from the other four territories?"

"With regard to the north, we received word several days ago that Second Prince Selene is marching for the capital. No recent news has come from the western nobles, but it would be safe to assume that they are preoccupied with the administration and reconstruction of Faerzen." The man cleared his throat. "Little is known of the southern nobles' intentions, and that little know is uncertain. For the moment, however, it appears that they intend to watch and wait."

The eastern nobles were rising for the capital with all haste, according to a letter from Rosa that had arrived the previous day, but they were unlikely to arrive before Hiro and Liz's forces engaged the rebel army.

"So in other words we've gotten here first," Hiro remarked. This was a chance they could not pass up. He shot Liz a meaningful glance.

She nodded firmly. "Then we will rest here for two days and get ready for battle. While we're waiting, I'll write back to the local nobles. Perhaps I can persuade some of them to help."

Her plan was sound. Rosa's collaborators had bolstered their forces by three thousand, but the Crow Legion had ridden up from the south at top speed and needed to recover their strength before fighting. A difference of even eight

hundred men could tip the scales of battle. Fortunately, their early arrival had bought them time to rest.

“We should still be cautious, though,” Hiro said.

Word of their arrival was bound to have reached von Loeing. Their camp was at risk of a night raid. The man had once occupied the highest seat in the imperial military; he would know battle like the back of his hand. He would almost certainly come to crush them before moving on the capital.

“I know,” Liz replied. “The rebels will have to deal with us first or their backs will be wide open.”

Hiro agreed. The rebels would have to commit every last man in order to take the capital. They could not afford to split their forces. They would come for him and Liz with all their might.

“Come to think of it, why don’t we join forces with the Knights of the Golden Lion? They’re defending the capital, aren’t they? While we’re fighting, they could ride out and attack the rebels from behind.”

That was a natural question. Hiro opened his mouth to answer, but before he could speak, Aura rose from her seat.

“That would be dangerous.”

Liz cocked her head quizzically. “Why?”

Aura reached for the map and began moving pawns. “It’s what von Loeing wants.”

If the rebel army engaged Liz’s forces, she explained, they would end up with their backs to the capital. That would present a tempting target—but if von Loeing’s intent was to draw the Knights of the Golden Lion out of the city, the battle could quickly take a disastrous turn.

“If it were me, I would assemble a separate task force. Have them ride past the knights and through the open gates.”

The men would be free to slaughter the people, torch the buildings, raze the palace and plunder the treasury. With the empire’s heart gouged out, foreign nations would close in and its collapse would be assured. The knights had no

choice; they had to remain inside the city.

Liz groaned. “So we can’t count on their support.”

“No. Consider them out of the fight.”

In short...

The Knights of the Golden Lion are trapped where they are until our battle is over.

If the knights left the city, it could spell disaster, but by the same token, as long as they stayed put, the capital would be spared the fires of war. They might sortie if the emperor felt desperate enough, but with noble reinforcements riding to the rescue, he currently had no need for anything so reckless.

What are the rebels thinking?

All the capital needed to do was dig in for a siege and wait for help to arrive from the other four great houses. The city might not have seen conflict for many years, but its walls were high, sturdy, and well-maintained.

They checkmated themselves before they even started. They’ve basically already lost.

Perhaps the enemy’s plan would become clearer after they had clashed. At any rate, Hiro had no choice but to tell himself that and move on. More pressing was the question of how they were supposed to fight with less than four thousand men.

“Let’s discuss our next moves.”

Hiro approached the table. The seated members of the gathering all rose to their feet.

He shot a glance at the central noble. “Could you tell us where von Loeing is camped?”

The man swallowed hard and moved a pawn across the map. “Here, Your Majesty. About two sel from the capital.”

The area was barren, with no cover. There was nowhere from which to launch

a surprise attack—and even if there had been, the many days of rain had turned the ground to mud, which would make a quiet approach impossible. Defeating thirty thousand men would be impossible without some kind of clever plan.

“Does anybody have any ideas?” Hiro looked at each of the faces around the table in turn.

“You know,” Liz piped up, “do we really need to win?”

As soon as the words left her mouth, Hiro could tell exactly what she was thinking. He had also considered the possibility, although he had dismissed it as unwise. Still, rejecting it outright would damage her confidence, and she had only just gotten comfortable voicing her own ideas. Her growth was promising. Right now, it was best to stay quiet and listen.

“They only have thirty thousand, right? They aren’t expecting any more reinforcements?”

“That’s right. They might be able to find more allies in future, depending on how things play out, but right now, that’s all they have.”

“And we only have three thousand eight hundred, correct? But we’d end up with a lot more if we waited to join forces with the other nobles.”

“Correct. We could probably gather at least twenty thousand.”

“Then we don’t need to fight to win, do we? We can just keep them busy with small skirmishes while we coordinate with our allies, then surround them and wipe them out.” Liz gazed at Hiro with upturned eyes, trying to judge his reaction.

Hiro smiled faintly. “That’s not a bad plan. I like it.”

“Really?” Liz looked doubtful.

Hiro’s smile turned a little sheepish. He would need to take care to explain why it wouldn’t work without bruising her ego.

“The only problem,” he said, “is the Grantzian Empire isn’t a monolith.”

Her plan truly wasn’t a bad one. If possible, he would have liked to let it see the light of day. Unfortunately, the situation would not permit it.

“If the rebel army and the empire were the only sides at play, there wouldn’t be any issues.”

But the race for the throne complicated matters. If Hiro and Liz joined forces with the other nobles, the other imperial heirs would race ahead in the hopes of winning glory. They might end up tripping over one another trying to distinguish themselves—a competition that might devolve into outright conflict.

Bring political squabbles to the battlefield and they would never get a restful night’s sleep again. They would spend their days in fear of assassins’ daggers. Gathering the heirs to the throne in one place would give every one of them the opportunity to eliminate their rivals in one fell swoop. It would be impossible to unite and destroy the rebel army under those conditions. Their alliance would descend into paranoia and mistrust.

And if I were the rebels, I’d take advantage of that. I’d spread fear and doubt to break us up.

Treachery would abound. Their mental fortitude would wear thin. Their union would become so uncoordinated as to be no threat at all. It would be reckless to face the rebel army like that, even with greater numbers. Put a foot wrong and they would be annihilated.

“So we’ll have to win by ourselves,” Liz sighed. “With three thousand eight hundred men.” She looked back at the map and groaned.

Hiro cast her a fond glance before turning his attention to the others. “Does anybody else have any ideas? How about you, Aura?”

Aura made a noise. “I’m thinking.”

“Scáthach?”

“All I can think is to catch them by surprise. The ground may be muddy, but we would fare better attacking under cover of night than in open battle.” Scáthach folded her arms and regarded Hiro with turquoise eyes. “And there is groundwork we might lay. I doubt many of the enemy soldiers share their commanders’ righteous fury. Their loyalty is frail. At the threat of death, many will desert.”

If the enemy had consisted entirely of nobles without renown, Hiro would

have agreed. However, they were led by von Loeing. The nobles would acknowledge his authority, and their soldiers would revere his impressive military record. A half-hearted attempt at subterfuge would not be enough to split the enemy apart, and failure might even strengthen their cohesion. It was better to be careful. Von Loeing was bound to have predicted many of their prospective plans. The battle would be decided by how well the two sides could read one another's hands.

"Are you not second-guessing yourself?" Scáthach asked. "Even if this von Loeing is as formidable as you claim, I cannot imagine he has foreseen farther than you."

"Maybe. But it always pays to be cautious."

"I do not disagree, but..." Scáthach looked as though she was about to say something, but she relented. "No, never mind." She stared at Hiro for a while, but closed her mouth and said no more.

Her reaction struck Hiro as a little strange, but he didn't have time to ponder it. Aura spoke up.

"Do *you* have a plan?"

"I do, yes," he said, filing away his misgivings in the corner of his mind. He looked down at the ground, and his smile widened. "I was thinking we should put all this mud to use."

"How so?" Aura's eyes shone as she tilted her head, not following where he was going but eager to find out.

Hiro picked up a pawn and laid it on the map, six sel north of their camp in the Hoffnung Plains and four sel south of the rebel army. "Our scouts report this area has turned into swampland. We'll draw the enemy into here, spring our trap, and finish the battle in one fell swoop." He turned a steely gaze on Liz and Scáthach. "And I'll use both of your plans. It would be a shame to waste them."

Liz looked like she could hardly contain her excitement. Scáthach, by contrast, raised only one graceful eyebrow.

Hiro faced the gathered with a theatrical gesture. "You will all have important roles to play in the days to come." He placed a series of pawns on the map as he

spoke. “First, I would like you to buy up all the oil you can from the neighboring towns and villages. We will lay it on the ground, disguised as mud.”

“A pyre,” Aura said.

Hiro nodded and pointed to the map. “Second, I need you to fetch a number of small trees from this forest. They’ll form a wall between our forces and theirs.”

The discussion continued. They hammered out the procurement of arrows, the assignment of roles, the division of command, and the necessary preparation time; stirred in Scáthach’s and Liz’s ideas; and refined the whole mix into a plan that everybody at the table was happy with.

“This is all just theoretical, of course. There will be unexpected setbacks. But as long as you’re ready for that, we’ll be fine.” Hiro looked up from the map and gave a faint smile. “Let me change our failures into successes. You just focus on winning the battle.” After a moment to let that sink in, he signaled the end of the meeting. “Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s get started.”

“Leave it to me! You just sit tight and wait for the good news!” Liz rushed from the tent, eager to get to work.

“I’ll stop her from getting into trouble.” Aura scrunched up her face, perhaps wary of giving Liz total free rein, and followed. Garda and the rest also left to see to their respective tasks.

With nothing to do, the central noble collaborator lingered behind. “And what of me, Your Highness?” he asked, his face a picture of uncertainty.

Hiro produced a pouch full of golden grantzes and laid it on the table. A metallic jangle rang through the tent. “Take all the coin you need. Spread word of Liz’s valor throughout the central territories, to commonfolk and nobles alike.”

“Is that all, Your Highness? Should I not also speak of the rebel army?”

“No, just Liz. The more rumors we spread, the more we’ll risk confusing the message. Best to keep it simple to begin with.”

Liz was riding into a national crisis at the head of only three thousand eight

hundred men. Her courage in defense of the empire would set the people's hearts aflame, and they would not be reserved with their praise. Bards would compose songs about her to which dancers would dance in taverns.

"Understood, Your Highness. I shall see to it forthwith." The noble accepted the command but refused the gold. "Consider it an investment in the future." With that, he excused himself.

Hiro thanked him as he left before turning to the last remaining figure in the tent: Scáthach. "Is there something you need?"

"There is...a matter I wish to discuss." She stepped closer, rubbing the back of her head awkwardly, and stopped in front of him, peering into his eyes with irises of vivid turquoise. "You must not overburden yourself. You have many allies. Let them carry some of the weight."

Hiro looked back, nonplussed.

She scratched her nose in embarrassment. "I realize that I have yet to earn your trust, but you ought to speak with Lady Aura and Lady Liz. They worry for you."

"They do?"

"You have become easier to read of late. Make the time to talk with them once this battle is done. You would not want to regret words left unsaid." She raised a hand and brushed his cheek. "Now, duty calls. I must assist Lady Liz."

With that, she, too, swept from the tent.

Her words had weight. It ached to long to speak to someone, only to find them absent but for the scars they left in the heart. She knew better than anybody—she had lost her entire family. He couldn't blame her for advising him to speak his heart while he could. Right now, however, he couldn't find the right words.

"And besides, what the right words are will depend on how this battle plays out."

He knocked down one, two, three pawns on the map and lowered his eyes. There was one thing he hadn't brought up at the meeting—and indeed, it would

be inconvenient if somebody noticed the omission. Throughout all of the discussion, he had never once mentioned a certain nameless individual.

“A ha...ha ha...”

He hadn’t even noticed.

“Ha ha...ha ha ha ha ha!”

Delight welled up from the depths of his heart. An irresistible glee swirled in his chest.

“Ha ha...ha... Ngh!”

In an instant, his face turned pained. Sweat beaded on his forehead. His heart pounded in his ribcage. He clenched his chest, trying to resist. Slowly, as though he were catching his breath, he leaned back against a chair and gazed up at the ceiling with vacant eyes.

“I’m sorry, Liz.”

The manic glee within him craved war. Malice swirled within his heart. Tendrils of darkness wrapped around his mind, and he felt himself turning into someone else. He stared at the map as though trying to distract himself, focusing on the pawns showing the locations of the opposing forces.

“If things keep going as planned...”

Soon, he would reach the world he sought. How could he contain his joy? He *thirsted* for war. Logic was no use. Reason held no sway.

“I don’t think I can hold this in any more.”

Despite the defeat in his voice, a broad smile spread across his face. He laid a hand to his eyepatch and extended his senses. From outside came the hustle and bustle of soldiers readying for war. Only the command tent was strangely silent, as though it had been cut off from the rest of the world.

He looked up to the heavens and narrowed Uranos. The night sky was filled with stars, a view unchanged from one thousand years ago.

“At last... At last, they’ve come.”

He grasped the edge of his eyepatch and tore it away.

“Someone fit to inherit your will, Artheus.”

His left eye glowed with an unearthly light, and yet it billowed with a darkness that struck the heart with sorrow.

The air creaked. The world groaned. Space buckled around him as it succumbed to the weight—and the muted clamor that had occupied the corner of his mind for so long at last rang clear and true.

“Someone fit to take up your dream...Rey.”

Stovell's eyes widened in surprise. He sprang from his chair and rushed outside, his face twisted into a demon's grimace—but all was quiet. Sentries patrolled rows of tents with torches in hand. The night was too cold for anybody else to venture outside. The same old encampment spread out before him, unchanged and perfectly ordinary.

"Curses," he muttered. The light of alarm did not fade from his eyes as he glared around. Overhead, the sun had set and the moon had risen, glowing with warm radiance. That, too, was an appraisal permitted by the blessing of his Spiritblade. To an ordinary soldier, with no such protection, the moon's light would do little to assuage the wind's biting chill.

"Is something amiss, Your Highness?"

A familiar voice issued from behind him. He did not need to turn to recognize von Loeing. The old soldier must have followed him out, concerned by his sudden departure.

"I sensed...a presence. One very like my own. No...alike, yet unlike."

"I fear I sensed no such thing. Could it be that your mind is playing tricks on you?" Von Loeing rubbed the back of his neck. "You have had ale tonight, Your Highness. A drunken mind is apt to conjure all manner of illusions."

The old soldier spoke, as ever, without fear or tact. He had long forgotten what it meant to watch his words. Stovell was too used to von Loeing's ways to be perturbed, however. In any case, his thoughts were preoccupied by the mysterious presence.

He returned to the tent and resettled himself in his chair. "Me, drunk? Not after that. Sensing such power would render any man sober."

"Then it must have been remarkable indeed," Von Loeing said drily. He stifled a yawn. "Well, I for one would welcome the presence of a worthy adversary. I never tire of new opportunities to test my strength."

The old soldier reached for a bottle of ale and gulped it down. Another followed, and another. No matter how much he drank, his cheeks never reddened and his balance never faltered. He did not even seem drunk at all.

“Wine, women, and war. Once upon a time, that was all a man needed.”

“Another of your old tales?” Stovell snorted. “I have heard them all to death.”

Von Loeing’s wry smile only widened. “We may live as free as we please in our youths, but sooner or later, we all come to desire the comfort of stability. One might call it inevitable.” His eyes took on a faraway look. “Men age from the moment they are born, Your Highness. That is a fate we cannot escape. Seek a bough to rest beneath before you grow too old. There are worse things in this world than family.”

“Were you not chased out from beneath your own bough?”

The old soldier chuckled. “Indeed I was. But I have lived a full enough life. The loss of my shelter pains or grieves me none. I once stood at the apex of the Grantzian Empire, did I not? High General, they called me. It has not been a bad life, all told.”

Empty bottles amassed around his knees as he spoke. His eyes grew dark with sorrow as he abruptly caught sight of the pile. Stovell only watched, sipping his ale in silence. Although perhaps not conscious of the prince’s gaze, von Loeing shifted uncomfortably.

“But I digress. Do you still sense this queer presence?”

Stovell drew no attention to the change of subject. “And what would you do if I told you?” he asked in his usual sardonic tone. “What would a man who failed to master the power of the Origin hope to understand?”

“I fear the strength of the Demiurgos was too much for these old bones, Your Highness.” A note of genuine regret crept into von Loeing’s voice. “But come, do not berate me further. Was falling not punishment enough?”

Stovell snorted and moved on. “What state are our forces in?”

“An acceptable one. The Fiend Brigade is more or less assembled.”

“And are they battle-ready?”

“They will follow my orders, if that is what you mean. Still, there is no substitute for practical experience. This battle will teach us much. I hope you enjoy the spectacle.” Von Loeing stroked his goatee with anticipation. “But I can

tell you this for certain, Your Highness: They are strong. Very strong."

Stovell grinned. "And as luck would have it, there is more than one Spiritblade's chosen on the field. A fitting stage for this experiment."

"Then you would have me ignore the capital and engage Lady Celia Estrella?"

"With all your strength. The better to deceive the gale. And then, once I have accomplished my purpose, we shall bid this rotten nation a final farewell."

"Farewell, is it?" Von Loeing lowered his eyes. A shadow crept over his features.

Stovell's tone hardened. "Why so reluctant? Does something still tie you to this place?"

"No, Your Highness. Now that I have become...this, my bonds have been severed. So long as I can serve you until my last breath, I will have no regrets."

"Good." Sensing von Loeing's resolve, Stovell said no more. For a while, the two men drank in silence.

Finally, Stovell got to his feet. "The time has come. I can tarry no longer. I may leave this field in your capable hands, I trust?"

"I will see your will done, Your Highness. I swear it on my life. Attend to your own work and spare no more thought for mine."

Stovell turned and walked away. Von Loeing had made his will plain—there was nothing more to be said.

Brown leaves swirled past as he stepped outside, carried on an errant gust. Evenly spaced bonfires cast uneasy pools of light in the darkness. Their flames flickered wildly against the wind. Only the squelch of Stovell's boots on mud and the occasional bark of laughter from drinking soldiers cut through the midnight chill. The sky was cloudless and clear, putting the lie to the storm of several days prior. In the clouds' absence, the moon shone all the prouder.

Stovell rolled his shoulders with amusement. "We are here at last. Just as planned." He stopped and stretched a hand up toward the stars. "Is there anything quite so dull as a world teeming with humans?"

The words took voice as a question, but no answer came back.

“The strong survive. The weak perish. That was the way one thousand years ago. What choice is left but to return us to that age of chaos?”

Might mantled him. The air began to buckle under the strain.

“The gods languish impotent in their heavens. I shall take their place...as the most fiendish of divinities.”

He squeezed his fist tight and crushed the full moon in his grasp.

* * * * *

The thirty-first day of the twelfth month of Imperial Year 1023

Von Loeing’s rebel army numbered thirty thousand. Liz and Hiro’s alliance came to three thousand eight hundred. The forces met on the Hoffnung Plains. The sky was clear and carefree—almost refreshing—but hot winds swirled over the field, lighting a fire in the soldiers’ blood. The heat emanating from the two armies was more than enough to drive away the winter chill. Shouts came from all around as officers riled up their men. The center of the army, however, was shrouded in an uncanny silence.

“Lady Celia Estrella is in position, Your Highness.”

The messenger raised his head, although he remained on one knee. In front of him was a roofless carriage, inside which Hiro sat, cross-legged, surveying the field.

“Good. Raise the banners.” Hiro shot a glance at one of his guards.

“At once, Your Highness!” The man took the signal and raised his voice. “Put up the banners! Show these rebels the War God’s sacred standard!”

As the standard-bearer hoisted the flag high, similar banners bearing Hiro’s crest unfurled all across the army. An excited murmur went up from the ranks.

Amidst the noise, a rider approached—Garda. As ever, the zlosta was clad in black fluted plate to avoid unwelcome attention. “I see you’ve made ready,” he grunted.

“We have. How about you?”

“Well enough. I’ve left Muninn in charge. He awaits your signal.”

Hiro nodded and returned his attention to the battlefield. The force under his command numbered only one thousand eight hundred. The remaining two thousand were deployed one sel away, under Liz's command. As he watched, their flags rose in response to his own, dancing daintily in the wind.

"Morale's low, for all that there is to be done about it. You can smell the fear in the ranks."

Garda's observation hit the nail on the head. Even an amateur could have seen that Hiro's troops were stiff with nerves, let alone a seasoned veteran.

"I can't exactly blame them."

Anybody would balk to see the horizon crowded with enemies. Besides, his soldiers were not Garda's hardened Crow Legion, but Rosa's men, with homes far to the east. No man wanted to die on unfamiliar soil. Their resolve was fragile, and they looked like they might pass out if someone shouted loud enough in their ear. As if that weren't enough, they faced von Loeing, a living legend. Hiro could only imagine their trepidation. He counted himself lucky that they hadn't turned to run.

"And look at our enemy's lines, One-Eyed Dragon. Quite the difference, is it not?"

By contrast, the rebels' morale was high. Pounding drumbeats and wild horn blasts stoked their soldiers' battle lust. Every roar that issued from their ranks set Hiro's men quaking in their boots.

"Perhaps we ought to do something to raise their spirits."

Hiro shook his head. "Not yet. We'll hold out until the very last moment. Fire the men up too early and they'll cool before we're ready to fight."

His focus since the previous day had been on maintaining morale. He had allowed the men a little drink, thanked them profusely for their efforts, and spread whispers of generous compensation once the fighting was done. In order to prevent desertion, he had also circulated the rumor that the day's battle wasn't a serious engagement, only a ruse intended to keep the enemy preoccupied. Judging by the fact that the ranks were holding, it seemed to have done its job.

All that's left is the finishing touch.

But that was best saved until just before battle was joined.

"I've scouted out their lines, Your Lordship!"

A cheerful voice rang out like a bell. Hiro turned from the enemy lines to see Huginn kneeling before his carriage, sporting a dauntless grin.

"Good work, Huginn. I'll hear your report on the way to the front lines."

He beckoned the swiftdrake standing leisurely by her side. The beast approached obediently and he climbed onto its back.

"They've split in two, Your Lordship. There's fifteen thousand headed our way. A line of five thousand cavalry makes up their vanguard."

Hiro turned his swiftdrake toward the front lines. Huginn fell in beside him, still talking.

"There's a central cohort of eight thousand behind...and von Loeing's among them."

"So he's come for us himself, has he? Then he doesn't intend to show us any mercy."

That formation was concerning too. Its frontal line of cavalry was bound to transform once the battle began. Several of Schwartz's eight formations unfolded in Hiro's mind. Which was the best suited for a large force on an open field?

"He's a formidable opponent," Garda muttered.

Hiro made a noise of agreement. "If he was being cautious, we could make use of that, but that formation says that he doesn't care what we're scheming."

While the enemy was certainly emboldened by their superior numbers, they clearly also weren't afraid to suffer losses. Even a force of fewer than four thousand could cause damage if it broke through their lines. If their commander's caliber was inadequate, a great deal of blood would be spilled this day.

"He's fighting this battle like he doesn't care about the next...or perhaps he

just intends to cross that bridge when he gets there."

Garda pulled a face atop his horse. "Better too much than not enough" seemed to be the enemy's attitude; von Loeing would meet them with full force, no matter how small their numbers. In a sense, it was flattering that he regarded them as a genuine threat, but even so, the enemy had no reinforcements in sight with which to replenish their numbers.

"Even if they get through us, they still have to deal with the Knights of the Golden Lion. They'll want to keep losses to a minimum...or at least, they should, but a formation this bold suggests they want to wager the battle on one big play."

"Perhaps they are feeling bold because they have seen through our plans," Garda remarked.

Hiro nodded. "It's possible."

After selecting a location pockmarked with newly created swampland for the battle, he had bought up all the oil and arrows he could find from nearby settlements and laden the soldiers with as much of both as they could carry. His formation reflected his strategy: a vanguard of archers with a center and rearguard of cavalry behind, all in the shape of an arrowhead. The archers would strip away the foe's armor before splitting to either side and letting the cavalry ride through to gouge their belly. It was one of Schwartz's eight formations, designed to break open an enemy line: the spearhead formation.

"They've guessed we mean to use fire, like as not, or they would not have come at all," Garda said.

"Really? I don't think they're so certain."

The enemy would undoubtedly suspect as much. Hiro had taken pains to buy up more oil than he needed in order to plant the notion in their heads, and word was sure to have reached them by now. Combine that with the knowledge that he had chosen this marshy terrain for a battlefield, and a layman would assume that he meant to disguise the oil as swampland and set it alight. Von Loeing, however, was a seasoned commander and former high general. He would suspect some further trick. He would want to come and sniff the bait to check whether it was truly safe to eat.

“But it doesn’t matter. As long as Liz and her troops survive, we win.”

They arrived at the front line. Hiro looked around. An oil-soaked anti-cavalry palisade extended back along both flanks, boxing the army in. There was no such fence to the fore, but twenty rue—or sixty meters—distant there was a stack of tree trunks low enough to ride over.

“Garda, you have command of the task force.”

Garda’s task force of eight hundred Crow Legion. Six hundred cavalry from Hiro’s remaining thousand. The battle would hinge on those two forces.

“Aye, I’ll see to it. Try not to get yourself killed, One-Eyed Dragon.”

“Don’t worry about me. Just focus on playing your part.”

Hiro was prepared to lose this battle. As long as Liz’s forces survived, it didn’t matter—no matter how much he might be mocked or scorned for his defeat.

If that’s what’s required to live without regrets, I’ll take all that on and more.

That was war—and he had shed his naivete long ago.

“It’s your call when to move. Just be sure not to miss your cue.”

Garda snorted. “I know what to look for. I’ll do my duty.”

Hiro nodded and turned back to the fore.

“Here they come...”

A cry rumbled from the enemy lines like distant thunder. “An emperor who buys assassins has no honor! All who stand with him are complicit! Show these interlopers no mercy but the sword! The Spirit King smiles upon us this day!”

Drumbeats resounded to the sky. A volley of horn blasts rang out across the plain.

“First cohort, charge! Show these spineless traitors our wrath!”

The crunch of armored boots filled the air. The ground thrummed with hoofbeats.

“H-Here they come...”

“Do we really have to fight all that?”

“How can we beat those numbers?”

Worried voices went up from the soldiers. Disquiet, distrust, discontent, displeasure—all manner of negative sentiment spread quickly through the ranks. Hiro sensed their will to fight ebbing away.

“Looks like it’s about time we played our hand.”

He unsheathed Excalibur and raised it high. Its tip caught the sun, showering the battlefield with a fierce halo of rainbow light.

“Tell me, men! What have you to fear?”

His words carried with natural ease. The voice of a born king bore them through the ranks like a wild gust.

“They are only fifteen thousand, are they not?” His lips drew into a smile. “The name of Mars sounds only for victory. I dedicate this promised triumph to the Spirit King!”

Silence fell as his voice faded away. An indescribable hush settled over the battlefield. The soldiers stared up at him, stunned, as though they had forgotten how to breathe. Yet as the seconds dragged on, the meaning of his words sank in. They returned to reality with a fire in their bellies.

A moment passed, and then a roar erupted. Battle cries went up as armored fists raised spears, bows, and swords to the sky. Morale soared. The cold winter air began to take on a formidable heat.

“Ever the orator,” Garda remarked. “I still believe you might make a better player than a prince.”

Ignoring the quip, Hiro pointed Excalibur forward. Beyond the blade’s tip, the enemy’s first cohort was approaching with tremendous speed. Judging by the fact that they were charging straight ahead, they intended to ride right over the low barrier of trees.

“Ready the fire arrows!”

Several of the archers were slow to follow the command, intimidated perhaps by the enemy’s war cries. The thunder of approaching hoofbeats bred unease, which quickly propagated through the ranks.

If only they were Crow Legion. Garda's men wouldn't be so easily spooked.

Still, a little friction was within his expectations, and the enemy was still distant. It wasn't time to panic yet. In the end, he said nothing, waiting silently for the men to get into position. Rushing them would only cause further mishaps. Before the battle, he had instructed the officers not to scold their men for minor mistakes for that very reason.

"I see the signal from the standard-bearer, Your Lordship!" Huginn called. "The archers are ready!"

Hiro turned to look. There, in the corner of his eye, a black dragon banner was waving. He raised his left arm high and swung it back down. Hundreds of arrows took flight at once, their burning tips forming a false night sky beneath the midday sun. They fell short of the enemy charge, arcing back down after twenty rue to land on the row of piled-up tree trunks. The oil-soaked wood burned readily. Flames sprouted and quickly spread, transforming in moments into a wall of fire.

The enemy's first cohort didn't seem surprised. They began to slow, as though they had been expecting the maneuver. Even so, they couldn't quite check themselves in time. A handful of horses strayed too close to the flames and panicked, bucking their riders off.

"Launch the second wave."

Hiro issued the next command. Another volley of arrows sliced through the air, spreading out like a great fan to descend on the enemy troops. The unhorsed soldiers died beneath the deluge. Some tried to raise their shields, only to lose their balance in the mud and take arrows through their windpipes. Others died begging for help beneath their fallen steeds.

Even so, the enemy's losses were slight—a few dozen lives swallowed by the mud, nothing more.

"Looks like they're splitting in two around the trees, Your Lordship. They're still coming!"

So that hadn't been enough to arrest their momentum. Very well. He would have to strike again, and deeper.

“Time for our next play.”

Again, he signaled to the standard-bearer. The Crow Legion cavalry waiting in the wings began to move—in the opposite direction of the encroaching force.

“Ready the third volley.”

As he gave the order, the ground around the burning trees began to churn. Ropes rose out of the mud, one end tied to the tree trunks, the other leading to the retreating cavalry. As the Crow Legion fell back, the ropes pulled taut, tangling the legs of enemy riders too slow to get out of the way.

“Fire.”

Another volley of arrows rose into the air. Once more, they fell mercilessly on the dismounted soldiers, plucking their lives one by one. Screams, groans, and throat-splitting shrieks rose to the sky. The ground grew dark with blood-churned muck, and the air turned foul with the red mist exuded by lifeless corpses. Yet even so...

“The enemy’s giving the ropes a wide berth, Your Lordship! They’ve read our every move!”

“They predicted that? Impressive.”

The enemy was meant to have suffered heavy losses from that maneuver, enough to take the entire cohort out of commission. Instead, they were still charging and barely scathed.

“So this is von Loeing’s strength.”

The arrows had claimed maybe two hundred lives, if that. While it might have seemed that the enemy had been forced to split up, judging by their cohesion, the movement had been planned from the start. Now they formed a perfect dragon-wing formation. The two halves of the first cohort spread across the field like a pair of wings—a little wider than was typical, probably for fear of any oil hidden in the discolored patches of ground.

“Ha ha... Wonderful. What a flexible mind you have.”

Von Loeing clearly had the wherewithal to study a situation carefully but act boldly. Not many commanders were capable of being so pliable yet so firm. His

military record must have earned his soldiers' trust, because they were following his commands without hesitation; the rebel army's movements were crisp and precise. He was coming without mercy even as he worked to minimize his losses.

"I wish I could tell you how impressed I am."

The man had seen magnificently through every trap Hiro had set, and had chosen precisely which to avoid and which to ignore as he came for his head. Any oil still lying on the field would be little use now.

"I'm sorry."

Hiro looked down. His shoulders began to tremble. A gust of wind caught his hair, sending its silken strands gleaming as they danced in the sun.

"I really, truly am."

He raised his head.

"But I've caught you hook, line, and sinker. There never was any oil at all."

A smirk lay on his face, quiet and cold. It had all been a trick from the start. His only purpose in choosing this site and buying up all the oil had been to make the enemy expect a fire trap. Such a ploy would have been foolish in the first place; it would only have harmed his own forces.

"Showtime, I think." His left eye twinged, and his smile widened as he brought a hand to his eyepatch to cover it. "Garda?"

The zlosta sprang down from his horse. "Ready and waiting. But I won't be able to hold it for long."

"That's all right. I only need you to distract them for a moment."

Garda snorted. "A harsh taskmaster indeed." He slammed both of his palms down on the ground. "Hurry, One-Eyed Dragon! With this mud, a sandstorm will be of little use!"

Power exploded from his body. Mana surged through his hands and down into the earth. Out in the field, the ground churned, erupting into a sandstorm flecked with globs of mud.

His work done, he heaved himself back onto his horse. “Now, time for me to do my part.”

“Thank you.”

As the zlosta rode away, Hiro shot Huginn a glance.

She caught his meaning. “Torch the palisades! Vanguard, clear the way! Cavalry, prepare to charge!”

The soldiers faithfully carried out her commands. Archers rained down fire arrows onto the palisades to the left and right. Flames quickly sprouted from the oil-soaked wood, sending up plumes of smoke. A black stain spread across the blue sky. Beneath the ominous cloud, Hiro’s forces moved smoothly into position.

“The men are ready, Your Highness! They await your orders!”

“Let’s find out what kind of man von Loeing really is.”

With an easy motion, Hiro leveled Excalibur at the enemy. The sandstorm showed no sign of relenting. He narrowed his eyes and peered through the raging winds, as though marking an unseen target beyond.

“Hear me, men—”

With those words, all sound vanished from the world. The foe, the wind, the earth, the heavens—all fell away, leaving no voice but his. Its irresistible magnetism bent every ear to its words.

“Stand firm. Take heart. If fear slows your steps, raise your eyes and look ahead.”

They watched him, rapt, recalling perhaps a story from their childhood days. A legend known to every soul in the Grantzian Empire.

“Follow me, and you will follow victory.”

One thousand years ago, a boy had appeared. At first, the people had regarded his unusual features with fear, but in time, they had come to admire his strength and courage.

He had never once retreated, for his might was boundless.

He had never once fled, for his cunning was depthless.

He had never once lost, for his strategies were peerless.

Unrivaled on earth with one thousand, unrivaled in heaven with ten.

They called him the Hero King, and he had never known defeat.

“By Mars’s banner, strike down these traitors for the glory of the Divines!”

As Hiro’s last words left his mouth, Excalibur glittered with radiance. The black dragon standards streamed and snapped at the air, clearing away the dust. A great cheer welled up from his audience. Spears beat against shields, making an air-shaking racket. He listened for a while, taking in their fervor, stoking the fire within himself and marshaling his strength.

“Let’s finish this. Charge!”

His bellow rang to the heavens as he gave the decisive order. He drove his heels into his swiftdrake’s flank, and with a proud roar, the beast set off running across the plain.

“Aim for von Loeing’s head! Ignore everything else!”

Brilliance spilled from Excalibur’s gleaming blade, forming a thread of light to illuminate the way. Five hundred men thundered in its wake. The archers swapped their bows out for spears or swords and followed behind. While the weapons they carried were varied, their faces all bore the same grim set of veteran warriors. Even split in two and with several hundred lost to arrows, the enemy comprised upward of fourteen thousand men, but the imperial soldiers showed no fear. So long as they followed the black-haired boy, he would lead them to victory.

“The only difference between courage and recklessness is success.”

The sandstorm’s fury melted away as though it had never been there at all. Across the smoke-smeared battlefield, Hiro saw that the wall to their fore had disappeared. The Crow Legion’s task force had pulled the burning trees clear. The way through the center was open. In the distance, on the other end of the newly formed path, he could make out an astonished von Loeing.

“Did you really think I would fight fifteen thousand men head-on?”

He didn’t know whether the man could hear him, but he couldn’t help but ask.

“Don’t look so surprised. Breaking up the enemy’s forces is an elementary tactic.”

The eight thousand men of the enemy’s first cohort had split in two, riding at breakneck speed to encircle Hiro’s forces. The five thousand men of the second cohort followed behind them. Now that the burning wall separating the two armies had been dismantled, the enemy’s core was exposed.

Even so, the rebels still had numbers on their side. The true test was yet to come, and it would be bloody. Hiro might have tweaked the enemy’s nose, but the odds remained overwhelmingly in their favor.

“Sorry, but I don’t have time for mercy.”

“Wha—?!”

Excalibur traced a streak through the air. An enemy soldier’s head rolled from his shoulders. Hiro followed through and set about cutting down every man in his way. His cavalry followed his example, striving to outdo him with their ferocity, cutting down those in the path of their charge and leaving the rest in the dust. Although only five hundred, they bored into the rebel ranks like a needle sharpened to a deadly point.

Crimson rain slicked the ground. The grisly crunch of armor beneath horseshoes rang through the air. Screams and groans wove together as the slaughter set in, painting the enemy formation in the gory reds of some savage beast’s hunting ground.

“We’ll wipe them out before they can rally.”

As yet, the imperial forces had only broken the skin. If the enemy’s scattered forces regrouped and returned, they would be easily wiped out. But if the needle drove just a little deeper, it would pierce the heart.

Then sink your teeth into your enemy’s throat and devour him down to his soul.

Rend his flesh, shatter his bones, crush his innards, and proclaim your victory

for all to hear.

“There you are. You’re not very good at hiding.” Hiro launched himself from his swiftdrake’s back. “Hello, High General. It’s been too long.”

“Lord Hiro?!”

“Sorry I can't stop and talk—but I’m here for your head!”

Excalibur swept towards von Loeing’s neck, seeking to carve his head from his shoulders.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, Liz and her allies were hard-pressed. Sparks flared across the battlefield as steel rang against steel. Battle cries rose from both sides, their furious roars drowning out the screams of the wounded and dying. Boots and hooves trampled corpses underfoot, sending up a red mist that blinded the combatants. The air was so clotted with the stench of death that it was hard to breathe.

Even so, neither side gave way. Each laid the other open with blades and crushed their bones with battle axes before moving on in search of the next victim.

“Lady Aura!” Tris bellowed as he cut down an enemy soldier. “The right flank is signaling they need to fall back!” The old soldier’s wounds from Faerzen had not yet fully healed, but he fought so fiercely that it was hard to imagine he was injured.

Liz’s two thousand men were enduring a vicious assault from fifteen thousand rebel troops, and their numbers were gradually being ground down. If anything, it was a wonder that they had lasted so long against so many. Only thanks to Aura’s calm judgment and timely orders did they continue to hold out.

“We can’t afford it. Send two hundred men to reinforce them. They need to hold the line.”

She sent the signal to the standard-bearer. Immediately, two hundred men detached from the rear and set off for the flank.

“Sir Tarmier, the center is buckling. You have to push it back, or Liz will be cut off.”

“As you command, my lady! Come on, you layabouts! After me!”

Spear in hand, Tris charged into the torrent of foes. He and his unit carved a swathe through the enemy troops, forcing back the center line. Aura followed behind them, keeping a healthy distance. Suddenly, a flag went up from the left flank, requesting reinforcements. Aura’s dainty eyebrows knitted, and her face clouded with consternation.

“Divert a hundred men from the core to the left flank,” she said after a long moment.

“The center’s barely holding as it is, my lady!” Tris shouted back. “If we lose any more men, it won’t hold out for long!”

“I know.”

The enemy had already cut deep into their core. The defenders needed every man they could get. If the left flank went down, however, the entire battlefront would quickly follow suit. They had no other choice.

Hoping against hope, Aura looked to the fore. “This is in Liz’s hands now.”

The battlefield was a brutal world where only the quick of instinct survived. On the front lines, where friend blurred with foe, an instant’s hesitation could mean death—and though that maelstrom of violence, a crimson-haired girl danced.

“Yaaah!”

Her scarlet blade belched forth a blast of flame. Soldiers fell to the ground screaming, their armor ablaze. Those who did not perish outright made easy prey for spears as they rolled around in agony.

“Stop Lady Celia Estrella!” cried an enemy soldier. “Strike her down and this battle is ours!”

“Out of my way!” Liz cried as she unleashed a mighty blow.

The man collapsed, spilling blood from a great gash across his stomach. She didn’t even spare him a glance as she stepped forward, leaning back to dodge a spear thrust from the side. The point skimmed past her nose. She twisted and lashed out with Lævateinn, slicing the shaft in half like a ripe fruit. As the wielder reeled back, she stepped in and ran him through.

“Gah!” he grunted.

She pulled her blade out again and swept it sideways, lopping off another man’s head. A switch to a reverse grip and she cut off a third soldier’s arm, then drove her bare fist into a fourth man’s face as he barreled toward her.

“Open the way!” she cried. “Or I’ll show you no mercy!”

The enemy hesitated at the taunt. As they backed away in fear, she took the chance to charge in with her blade. Despite her show of overwhelming might,

however, her crimson eyes were colored with urgency.

"I told you to *get out of my way!*"

She surged forward, spitting fury and flame as she closed on the mass of soldiers. She would let none of them pass. Yet her focus was elsewhere, somewhere farther ahead—not that she was making light of them, but her goal lay beyond their ranks, and her faint panic spurred her toward it.

"I'm coming! Just hold out a little longer!"

Her blade swung without pity. Each slash brought death, leaving corpses scattered in her wake. None could stop her advance. She did not hesitate to take life—it was kill or be killed in this world, and every soul on the battlefield had come prepared for both. To protect those she cared for, to save those she loved, she could afford no mercy.

"Scáthach!"

She called out the name of her stranded ally, but there was no response—only the melody of death, played with steel and screams.

Had everything gone to plan, they would have been in the capital by now. Instead, an unexpected arrival on the battlefield had thrown everything into disarray. Scáthach had plunged into the fray to confront them, drawing their attention so that her forces could reform their battered front line.

Liz bit her lip in chagrin as she raced toward where she had last seen her ally, cutting men down left and right. In time, she began to see soldiers facing the other way. Something up ahead was drawing their attention.

"Clear the way!" She crouched low and launched herself forward.

Naturally, the enemy did not let her pass so easily.

"Lay down your sword, Lady Celia Estre—"

"Enough already!"

A thrust of Lævateinn laid open the enemy soldier's throat. She spun around and struck another man's helmet with the hilt, crushing his skull. Brain matter sprayed across the ground as the metal caved in with a gruesome crunch. As the rebels stared, aghast, she swung again, carving a path like a one-woman

army. Her bladework warned the enemies around her to keep their distance as she struck cowering men out cold. At last, she returned her attention to the fore...

“Wha—?!”

...just as something came flying toward her through the ranks.

“Urgh!”

She caught the shape in both hands, but its momentum bowled her over. She bounced across the ground, plowing up mud and soil, until eventually she came to a stop.

“Nnn...” A groan issued from somewhere near her chest. She leaped to her feet. In her arms, a turquoise-haired woman grimaced in pain.

“Scáthach!” she cried, slapping the woman’s cheek to check whether she was conscious. “Stay with me!”

Scáthach’s eyes opened weakly. She had no visible injuries, but her forehead was soaked with sweat. “Ah... Lady Liz...”

“Are you all right?”

“Ah... My apologies. I fear I have somewhat overused my powers...”

With a murmur of thanks, she got to her feet and hefted Gáe Bolg. Her eyes locked on something to the fore. Liz followed her gaze and was met with a fearsome sight. Vacant eyes gazing wildly at nothing. Flesh so sturdy that it would heal from any wound in seconds. Before them, four monstrous creatures towered as tall as ogres.

“Take care, my lady.” Scáthach’s voice took on an edge of wariness.

Liz immediately understood. She had seen their kind before, if only once—on the battlefield outside of Berg Fortress, just days after meeting Hiro. The first son of Duke Lichtein had transformed into a similar creature.

He had, in other words, fallen.

It was an old term. A reviled term. A word for the profane fate that awaited those foolish enough to take the power of the spirits into their own bodies.

Over a thousand years ago, there had been a king afflicted with an insatiable curiosity. He had taken to experimenting with spirit stones, crushing them to powder and synthesizing them into a concoction he called a spirit elixir, which he fed to a certain soldier. Tragedy ensued. The spirit elixir might take shorter or longer to act depending on the individual, but its effects were certain. Later that night, when all were abed, the man became afflicted by terrible agonies before transforming into a horrifying monstrosity that lived only to slay. The first to fall victim to his bloodlust was a sentry drawn by the noise. The next, after the beast had learned the taste of flesh, was the king. Thereafter, he fell upon the rest of the castle, devouring all he encountered in an orgy of slaughter.

"So this is a Fallen..." Scáthach looked surprised. "I had heard the tales, but...to think such creatures truly existed..."

Liz did not reply. She was even more confused. "Why Fallen? Why here?"

She knew well that the process for synthesizing spirit elixir had been passed down to the modern day. Many coveted the blessing of the spirits, and for good reason. Still, it was not a thing to be consumed. The danger exceeded that of a simple overdose; such power was too great for human flesh to contain, and those who tried would not remain human for long. Indeed, the spirit elixir's dangers grew so notorious that the people dubbed it the "felldraft."

"Creating the elixir is forbidden in the empire. Who in the world could have...?"

Yet not all who fell succumbed to madness. A handful withstood the corrosive effects of the bane they had consumed, gaining bodies far mightier than any human while their minds remained intact. They had a name, these fell creations of the spirits' magick.

The people called them "fiends."

A grating roar erupted from the Fallen. The air trembled as though it were about to split. Liz and Scáthach instinctively raised their weapons and settled into fighting stances.

"We may ponder the particulars later, my lady."

“You’re right.”

The Fallen were not their only opponents. Hordes of soldiers still surrounded them, spearpoints glinting dully as they awaited their chance to strike.

Suddenly, Liz noticed something. “The Fallen I saw at Berg Fortress couldn’t tell friend from foe, but these...”

The four monstrosities showed no sign of turning on their allies. They merely stared at Liz and Scáthach, intimidating growls issuing from their throats.

“So it seems,” Scáthach said. “Although I did just have to slay one that was less composed.”

She had brought all her power to bear to cut it down first. That had put her on the back foot, which had ended with her being flung into Liz. She grinned ruefully.

Just then, the Fallen moved.

“Here they come!” Scáthach shouted, diving to the side. “Out of the way!”

Liz raised Lævateinn above her head. One of the Fallen closed on her with a speed that belied its bulk, swinging down with an arm like a tree trunk. The shock of the blow rang down her arms and through her bones.

“Haaaaaah!”

She pushed her opponent back with the strength of Lævateinn’s Graal, delivering a crosswise slash, then launched a fireball forward. A gale exploded outward in all directions, sending several enemy soldiers flying. Dry heat filled the vicinity as the flames scorched the air.

“No mercy, indeed,” Scáthach murmured some distance away as the blast wave swept over her. Her admiration was short-lived, however. Four wavering shadows coalesced within the sea of fire.

“What can surpass their regeneration, if they can survive that?” She shot Liz a sidelong glance. “Must we tear them to shreds if we are to best them?”

“Maybe we will...but didn’t you say you just killed one? How did you do it?”

“Age-old wisdom says that monsters are best dealt with by severing their

limbs. I froze them with Sainglend and shattered them."

With a shrug, Scáthach pointed to the site of the battle. Chunks of mud-smeared ice littered the ground.

"Enough fire might do the trick, then. From the inside." Liz wet her lips and resettled her hands on the hilt of her sword.

"As soon as they step out of the flames, we finish this. Time is against us."

"Right. We're not the only ones fighting."

Liz looked around. Allies mingled with rebel soldiers in the melee. They fought fiercely to hold the line, standing against overwhelming odds to keep the enemy away from her and Scáthach, but their time was numbered. The odds against them were too great for zeal alone to overcome. Soon they would be surrounded and annihilated.

"Let's go!"

The four Fallen burst from the curtain of flame like wildfire. Liz launched herself forward. Beside her, Scáthach leveled her lance and charged.

A colossal fist swung with wicked speed, sending Liz's hair fluttering as it closed the distance. She slid low under the blow and heard the ground crack behind her. Planting a hand on the ground to check her slide, she lashed out with Lævateinn, carving deep into the Fallen's foot. The wound began to close in an instant. She swung again, this time severing the limb completely.

With a roar of agony, the Fallen sank to one knee, glaring at her hatefully. She stared back with cold scorn, as though she were looking at roadside refuse.

"Hiro wouldn't spare you. And neither will I."

With a light step, she leaped high, passing over the Fallen's head as it unleashed an unearthly roar. Her blade flashed as she spun in midair. The monster's head soared free from its neck, trailing blood. Her next blows laid open its shoulders as she unleashed a flurry of slashes.

"You're finished!"

The final strike drove Lævateinn deep into the Fallen's abdomen. It exploded in a flood of crimson light. Viscera skimmed her cheek as blood showered the

battlefield, but her expression did not so much as flinch as she watched her opponent topple, a ragged hole blown in its torso.

“Who’s next?!”

Three Fallen remained. Scáthach had engaged two, but the third was lumbering toward Liz’s men as they held off the rebel troops.

“Stand firm! Hold the line! Hold the— Gah!”

“Fend them off until Lady Celia Estre— Aagh!”

Soldier after soldier flew high into the air, trailing gore. Still, they refused to run, standing firm even in the face of impossible odds.

“It’s me you’re fighting!” Liz shouted.

She closed the distance in an instant, cutting open the Fallen’s back from shoulder to hip. Its eyes swiveled to face her as irregular wheezes spilled from its lips.

“Get away from my men!”

She punched it with all her might, even though its colossal frame was several times her size. The force of the blow sent it rolling across the ground like a boulder down a slope.

“Watch out, my lady!” Scáthach shouted. “There’s one headed your way!”

Whether to help its comrade or simply spotting an opportunity, none could say, but another Fallen came running. Before Liz could react, it swung for her face.

“Ngh!”

She managed to dodge the blow, but her foot caught in the mud. As she stumbled, the Fallen she had sent flying lunged at her from behind.

“Tch!”

She let her legs slip out from under her and dropped flat against the ground. The roaring tempest of the Fallen’s fist swung by overhead. Once it had passed, she levered herself back up with both hands and attacked. Blows like swirling storms rained down on her, but she dodged them all as she pressed the assault.

“Too slow!”

But wounds that would kill a mortal man outright were nothing more than scratches to a Fallen. With a scowl, she began to conjure a fireball, hoping to buy herself some space.

“My lady!” Scáthach yelled. “Behind you!”

“Wha—?”

Liz spun around, but not fast enough. At first, she didn’t know what had happened. One of the Fallen was busy fighting Scáthach, and the other two were in front of her.

“Gah!”

First came the impact, a savage blow that caught her in the back and drove the breath from her lungs. Next was the sound, a cracking in her eardrums as though every bone in her body were creaking. She tried to step forward to brace herself, but her legs buckled and she slammed face-down into the dirt. She bounced with the impact, once, twice, thrice, four times.

“Agh...”

Her vision darkened. Her consciousness was fading. Through her faltering sight, she made out Scáthach engaging four Fallen. One of them had an enormous hole blown open in its belly. She had thought she had left that one for dead, but evidently that had not been enough.

“My lady! Are you all right?” Scáthach shouted.

Liz flexed her fingertips, but she didn’t have the strength to stand. She raised her head, biting her lip bitterly.

“Hold on, my lady!”

Scáthach flourished her spear with a vicious snarl. She speared the first Fallen through the throat, then kicked off its shoulder and launched into the air, crushing the second one’s skull with Gáe Bolg’s haft. As brain matter sprayed across the field, she sent the third flying with a backhanded swipe, before finally beating the fourth to the ground with her bare hands. She fought like a demon. Even the nearby rebel soldiers were astonished.

“But you will not die so easily, will you?”

She radiated cold anger. Her power burgeoned. Clearly, she was about to unleash her Spiritblade’s gift—but she was exhausted and had used it several times already. Any more would render her unconscious, perhaps even killing her. Liz opened her mouth to cry out, but—

“No!” Scáthach cried. “Never again! I could not bear to lose another!”

So don’t try to stop me. Her words were at once a rebuttal and a reassurance, promising that everything would be all right.

With that, Liz’s consciousness winked out, and the battle became Scáthach’s alone.

“Prepare yourselves. There is nothing in this world Gáe Bolg cannot pierce.”

A chill settled over the battlefield as her spear took control of the skies. Gray mist descended, blanketing the ground with fog. To see her strength made manifest, her enemies knew that the end was upon them. Terror rooted them to the spot, both living and dead alike.

Then came Macha—Godpiercer.

The spear of ice left her hand like a lightning bolt, freezing the ground around it as it sped toward the Fallen. It crashed through the first, smashing it to smithereens, and carried on through, burying itself in the ground behind. An explosion detonated where it landed.

Even so, three Fallen remained.

“Gáe Bolg! Lend me your strength—the strength to shatter my enemies!”

Her spear glowed the color of the unclouded sky in answer to her plea, but while her power remained undiminished, strain began to show on her face.

“Ngh... I can stand worse than this!”

A cracking sound split the air. The temperature plummeted. White mist enveloped the vicinity as the water vapor in the air began to freeze. In short order, innumerable icy spears crystallized around Scáthach.

“My name is Culann Scáthach du Faerzen.” She brought a hand to her chest

and steadied her breathing as she stared the three Fallen down. “And by my royal blood, I will strike you down.”

And she unleashed Gáe Bolg’s Graal: Sainglend.



She forced herself into a run. Grimacing with exertion, she charged, the spears of ice her weapons, their points trailing snowflakes as she sped onward. Her first target was frozen from the knees down, but she showed the Fallen no mercy as her armaments shot forward to pierce it. Before long, it resembled a pincushion, but even then, the rain of ice did not stop. Only once it had been reduced to scraps of flesh did she finally relent.

“Haah... Haah... I am not yet done!”

Two more. Breathing raggedly, she took a step forward—and all at once, her spears burst apart. Shards of ice rained down onto the earth.

To look at her standing, dazed, the cause was clear. She had run out of strength. The small reserve that had kept her going had finally burned out.

She sank to one knee, still fighting to rise.

“Ngh... Haah... Just...a little more.” She smiled at Liz’s unconscious form. “I shall tend to your wounds soon enough. This will not take long.” Driving Gáe Bolg into the earth, she forced herself to her feet, but two Fallen still blocked her path.

“Urgh!”

A mighty fist struck home. Scáthach soared through the air. Even so, her tempered fortitude did not permit her to fall unconscious. The Fallen seized her leg and flung her around like a toy. In her exhaustion, she was powerless to resist. Some of the nearby soldiers tried to rush to her aid, but they were surrounded by the enemy forces before they could come near enough to help. The sickening smack of flesh against dirt echoed through the clashing of steel.

At last, the Fallen tired of tossing her about and hurled her into the air like a sack of flour, where it seized her by the throat. It leaned close to bite off her head, yet still, she was defiant.

“Is that...all you have? That was...barely a warmup.” Blood trickled from her brow and the corner of her mouth, but she grinned against the pain. “Now...my turn.”

And she called Gáe Bolg to her hand and thrust its point into the Fallen’s

looming maw.

“You make an ardent case...but I am yet unwed, and I have the right to refuse my suitors.”

With an azure flash, the monster’s head froze over. Its grasp loosened enough for Scáthach to pry herself from its fingers. Alighting on the ground once more, she shot her opponent a cold glance. Its head was already regenerating.

“Curses...I had hoped that would kill you.” A sudden shadow fell over her. She looked up and laughed bitterly. “Ah, yes. There was one more, wasn’t there?”

The impact sent her bouncing across the ground. Still, she picked herself back up, hefting Gáe Bolg with her battered body and standing against her foes. Even the rebel soldiers could not bear to look.

“Urgh...”

Liz groaned as she awakened. Through bleary eyes, she saw Scáthach struck again and slump to the ground.

“Aahh...”

No matter how desperately Liz wanted to help, her limbs wouldn’t move. She could do nothing to protect the woman trying to shield her from harm. Even now, as the weight of regret settled on her back, the two Fallen loomed over their prey, drooling.

A call for help slipped from her lips. “Hiro...”

Her cheeks colored crimson with shame as she realized what she had said. She bit her lip and smacked her forehead hard into the dirt.

“Haven’t I learned anything?!”

She was speaking like the person she had been before Faerzen. A spoiled princess spouting bold platitudes to cover up her own weakness, only to hide behind others when the going got tough.

“I swore...that I would stand...by his side...”

She could not look to Hiro for help. She could not lean on him to solve her every problem.

“That I would fight alongside him...as an equal!”

Liz rose, tightening her trembling fingers around Lævateinn’s hilt. Her ears rang so loud that she could barely hear. Blood trickled down her forehead into her eyes. She ignored both as she looked around. Her soldiers were fighting, refusing to give in. In the distance, Aura issued frantic orders to her troops from behind a wall of bodyguards. Even Scáthach, lying slumped on the ground, had fought valiantly to fend off the Fallen.

But what had she done?

Failed to slay a Fallen and endangered Scáthach’s life? Passed out pathetically and foisted all the work onto her ally? Given up on standing on her own two feet and begged Hiro for help instead?

She had been nothing but a burden.

“Aah... Aaaaaah!”

Liz clenched her fist and struck the earth. A crack spread beneath her fingers. The ground trembled, drawing the attention of the Fallen. She stared down, breathing quietly. Anger burned in her crimson eyes—not at her enemies, but her own naïveté.

“Lævateinn, lend me your strength.”

She remembered how she had vowed to one day stand at Hiro’s side.

Fear not failure. Fear not death. Believe now in the conviction you felt then.

“Grant me the power to overcome this trial!”

As she gave voice to the fury within, Lævateinn took on a crimson glow. Her heart blazed, and a great power welled up from its depths, surging through her veins and filling her up—and as it did, she heard a voice.

“I know you...”

An undying flame raged within her breast. So long as her heart stood firm, it would burn ever higher until it blossomed into a raging inferno.

“You’re...the first emperor...”

A smile came unbidden to her lips as a pleasant clarity settled over her mind.

“RAAAAAARGH!”

Alarmed by her mysterious power, one of the Fallen streaked toward her.

“Stand aside.”

She thrust Lævateinn through its chest and smoothly sheared its head from its shoulders.

“GRAAAH!”

Yet her opponent’s monstrosity was not to be underestimated. Thanks to its accelerated regeneration, its head quickly reattached.

“Enough!”

Liz unleashed a dismissive slash with Lævateinn. The Fallen’s head erupted in flames and fell to the ground with a grisly smack. With so much power flowing through her limbs, it felt like time had slowed down.

The final Fallen charged toward her with a roar, but she picked up a spear from the ground and swung it in a sweeping arc. The monstrosity toppled, sheared clean in half. As it stared in confusion at its own exposed viscera, Liz planted a foot on its shoulder. Her spear glowed with blue fire. She thrust the point through its head and demolished its brain.

Her head grew clearer. Her limbs grew lighter. Her senses grew sharper. Power surged through her. Twice, three times, she clenched her fingers, taken aback by her own strength. Joy kindled in her crimson eyes.

“At last, I can walk by his side...”

Yet her opponents were still Fallen. Two great shadows loomed over her once more as they rose to block her path.

“Scáthach needs healing...so I need you gone.”

She stepped forward and the ground beneath her foot burst into flame. The fire burned blue and clear, coiling around her like a pair of wings. Emperor Artheus’s most beloved blade unveiled its true strength.

Its flames were Sheol.

Its flames were Inferno.

Its flames were Purgatorium.

With a roar, Lævateinn voiced its birthing cry.

Chapter 5: The Black-Winged Lord

Sunset dyed the horizon a fiery orange. Darkness swept across the sky like water seeping into wool. Night and day's struggle for supremacy was mirrored on the ground below, where the battle had reached its decisive phase. Cries and curses filled the air. Every man fought desperately, thinking only of cutting down his enemies and living another day.

As the battle raged on, the black-haired, black-eyed boy looked down curiously at his own hands.

"I sensed that something was wrong. I should have been more suspicious."

The impact of the blow still lingered in his fingers. It had struck home, of that there was no doubt. But when he turned to look, von Loeing was still standing, unharmed.

"I never expected a man like you to take the plunge."

It hadn't taken long to surmise the reason, but the question remained—why would somebody so strong seek power so desperately?

Von Loeing's lips pulled into a smile wholly unsuited to the battlefield. "Is something amiss, Lord Hiro?"

His expressiveness was proof that he had full control of his newfound powers. Then again, perhaps that was only to be expected of one of the empire's five high generals.

"Raaaaaagh!" A rebel soldier came charging out of the melee.

"Hah!" Hiro cut the man down with a single slash and turned back to von Loeing. "May I ask why you've fallen?"

The battle was still in full swing around them. There wasn't much point in standing and talking when they could be interrupted at any moment. Even so, he couldn't help but ask. Von Loeing had been one of the most powerful men in the empire; he had possessed the trust of the nation, social status to rival the great houses, even a family of his own. Who would throw all that away for the

sake of the spirits' power?

"It is kind of you to ask, Lord Hiro. But cruel too."

Hiro said nothing, prompting the man to continue.

"I do love my family. That much is true. But I could not call myself a man unless I met my end in battle. A former high general's duty, you might call it."

"But why go so far? There's no going back once you've fallen. You'll be cursed to live forever as a monster."

"Forever, you say. An eternity as a warrior... I believe I would like that very much." With a crooked smile, von Loeing drew the spirit weapon at his belt and held it in a high guard. "But enough talk. I would not grow too fond of a man I must kill."

"It's a shame. It really is. But you've made the wrong choice." Hiro breathed a heavy sigh, and his demeanor changed. A smirk spread across his face.

Von Loeing moved before Hiro could ready Excalibur. The old soldier closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye, his sword clipping Hiro's fringe as it sliced past with incredible force. Hiro retreated a step, only to thrust back in with blinding speed. Sparks sprayed. Excalibur's point sailed skyward, while von Loeing's blade came seeking Hiro's heart.

Hiro angled his body a half-step to the side to dodge the thrust. Excalibur gleamed as he spun, but von Loeing blocked the slash and retaliated with a fist. The blow whistled past Hiro's ear. A moment later, Hiro's palm collided with von Loeing's chin.

"Guh... Raaagh!"

Von Loeing staggered, but struck back even as he reeled. Hiro's eyes widened.

He's tough.

The old soldier's every swing was razor-sharp and aimed at Hiro's vitals. Hiro dodged them with the barest necessary movements and then launched a counterattack, trying to recapture the initiative.

"Hah!"

Now that von Loeing had fallen, his strength was effectively bottomless. It was vital not to let him take the lead.

“Yah!”

Excalibur carved a perfect arc and slipped between the seams of von Loeing’s armor, but the old soldier had seen the swing coming. He batted the blade away with a gauntlet, then struck back with a dagger concealed within. Hiro spun to dodge and raised Excalibur to fend off a follow-up attack, but von Loeing kicked up a foot that he had buried in the earth, blinding Hiro with a cloud of dirt. He followed up with a vicious slash, slicing open Hiro’s cheek.

“Oh?”

“Do not let your guard down, Lord Hiro. I have fought my way through many a battlefield. I have learned well how to best a foe.”

Hiro hadn’t let his guard down, exactly, but nor had he been toying with his opponent. The problem was more an inability to regulate his power. If he were to unleash it fully, however, Liz and Scáthach would sense it immediately. That was something he wanted to avoid at all costs.

If only I could take off this eyepatch...

When he had first arrived in Aletia, his brain hadn’t been able to withstand the torrent of information pouring in through Uranos, so he had donned an eyepatch sewn with a spirit seal to suppress its effects. Now that he had grown strong enough, however, the once-helpful measure was becoming detrimental. Restricting his power to such a degree made it difficult to control.

“Just a little, then. You’ve left me no choice, after all,” he whispered, trying to convince himself as much as von Loeing.

With that, he surrendered to mania. Shadows lengthened on his upper body, and an uncanny smile settled on his face. His blade swung with wild abandon.

“Ha ha ha!”

“Oho?!” The weight of the blow drove von Loeing backward, forcing an exclamation from his lips. Surprise spread across the old soldier’s face as he looked down at his numb hands, but by the time he looked back up at Hiro, his

expression had changed to delight.

“Magnificent. What a formidable foe I have been blessed with. It has been a long time since last my heart danced so.”

“Is it now? Then you’ll love this.”

The pair readied their weapons and clashed again. Steel rang against steel, resonating through the air with vibrations that made the earth cry out in pain. Blood sprayed as countless cuts opened across von Loeing’s skin, many of them lethal—but he had fallen, and so they closed up again in an instant.

“It appears we are at a stalemate, Lord Hiro. Do you truly have time to squander on these old bones?”

Hiro shrugged. “This doesn’t seem to be going anywhere, does it?”

He detached his gaze from von Loeing and looked around. His allies were fighting for their lives. Without even the luxury of flinching at the rebel numbers, they flung themselves like wild beasts at whichever foe came next. Still, desperation could only carry them so far. Once the enemy’s first and second cohorts returned, they would be crushed in seconds, and that was if they held out that long.

“Without a commander, Lord Hiro, an army is nothing but a mob.”

“So it is.”

“Strike me down and the rebel army will crumble.” Von Loeing’s smile widened confidently. “But I must warn you, I will be no easy prey.”

Hiro regarded the man suspiciously.

At that moment, a riderless horse panicked and set off charging across the field, screaming at the bite of a stray arrow. Men, beasts, the land itself—all were equal on the battlefield. Death sowed the earth in vast quantities and oceans of blood dyed the soil red, and still the fighting never ended. Only when one side surrendered would the slaughter cease.

“This war was reckless from the start,” Hiro said.

Von Loeing caught his meaning and rubbed the back of his head. “True enough. We could not have started a more foolish fight. Even if we win today,

we will be surrounded by enemies come the morrow. If I were still in service to the empire, I would have disbanded my forces and sent my men home." His throat rattled with what might have been a chuckle. "But I stand here because I see hope in this foolishness. And my men follow because they believe we can prevail. I cannot very well betray their trust."

Hiro could not object to that. His men, too, were following him because they believed in him. They were one thousand eight hundred against fifteen thousand; only one thousand now, excluding the Crow Legion task force they had left behind. In the corner of his eye, he saw Huginn bark commands to her men, bow in hand. She was staying to keep the rebels at bay because she believed that he could win. Once he joined the fray, the enemy resistance would crumble quickly—but there was no need for his presence just yet. Someone else would take his place while he dispatched von Loeing.

"It's about time, I'd say."

"What's this?" Von Loeing's eyebrows rose. "Another scheme?"

"You see the dust cloud behind you. And I'm sure you hear it, too."

From the rebel army's rearguard, sparse now that they had run to the aid of the core, came the clashing of blades. Where there should have been no enemy and no battle, a plume of dust rose over the plain. The dying screams of rebel troops grew steadily closer.

"The rear! We're under attack from the re— Agh!"

A messenger came racing from the rearguard, but Huginn's arrow dispatched him. Bereft of its master, his horse turned and fled the field.

"How did you send troops behind us?" Von Loeing looked puzzled. "Surely Lady Celia Estrella could not not broken through..."

"Of course not. But I'm sure you can work it out. Considering the time they had and the distance they would have needed to travel, there's only one possibility—"

An enemy shriek cut Hiro off. The rearguard's focus must have been so occupied by the fighting in front of them that they hadn't paid any attention to their rear. As though to prove it, Garda, the leader of the ambush, burst into

the fray. With his demonic visage, he looked like something crawled up from hell, soaked in blood from head to toe and radiating fell might.

“So your men still draw breath, One-Eyed Dragon! It seems we were not too late!” A swing of his greatsword sent enemy bodies flying across the field. “Hunt down the officers!” he bellowed. “Kill their commanders! Leave the rest!”

The eight hundred Crow Legion poured into the fray with unstoppable force, saving Hiro’s thousand men from the brink of destruction. While the reprieve was only temporary, it granted them enough momentum to escape the battlefield.

“You planned this from the start,” von Loeing said.

“Of course.”

The task force had detached from the rest of the army under cover of Garda’s sandstorm. The rebel army had been too distracted by the storm’s appearance to notice their departure, and Hiro’s charge through the middle of the field had further drawn their attention. The rearguard had sent reinforcements to bolster the exposed core, but that had left them vulnerable in turn—a weakness that Garda and his men had taken full advantage of, as they circled around the battle to sink their teeth into the enemy’s back. The odds were still against Hiro’s forces, but the tide was now firmly in their favor.

“Well, I suppose we’ve both outplayed each other.”

Von Loeing expelled an impressed sigh. “So you have seen straight through us.”

“Not entirely. But I have a broad idea what you’re up to.”

“You truly are a fearsome individual. I recognize now what His Highness saw in you at a glance, that day at Berg Fortress.”

The old soldier readied his spirit weapon. He fixed Hiro with a level stare, challenging him to settle their match once and for all. Victory would be his if he could simply draw the battle out, but he was a warrior to the bone, and he loved combat more than anything.

Hiro retreated to a comfortable distance. He, too, was ready to end the fight.

“Well, then. Shall we begin?”

Power swelled within him. The Black Camellia danced merrily in a sudden gale. Excalibur’s gleaming blade began to take on a dark light.

Von Loeing’s eyes narrowed at the spectacle. “Now I see. All along, His Highness knew...” He gave a slight nod, as though some piece had clicked into place.

As Hiro frowned, the old soldier stepped forward. In spite of his affable grin, inhuman power radiated from his muscular frame.

“Come, then!” he cried. “One last duel to the death!”

He was a veteran of countless battles, and his senses were honed to a point. He did not need to be able to see Hiro’s strike to block it.

“Impressive reflexes,” Hiro said. Then he planted a savage kick in von Loeing’s solar plexus. The old soldier grunted and staggered back, clutching his gut.

Hiro launched himself forward, closing the distance with lightning speed, and unleashed a flurry of slashes. Once, twice, their blades clashed. The keening of metal echoed across the battlefield. As time wore on, however, the difference in their respective speeds became apparent. Vicious slashes opened up all over von Loeing’s body. His mouth twisted in pain.

“Hnnraaaaaagh!”

With a mighty roar, he summoned all of his strength, but his resistance was child’s play before Hiro. A lightning flurry of slashes flayed him open faster than his regeneration could restore him.

“Haah!”

Hiro drove Excalibur into his enemy’s chest. The blade struck home. He made to pull it out again, intending to lop off von Loeing’s limbs and finish him off.

“Guh... Now I have you, boy.” Von Loeing seized Hiro’s arm, grinning even as a gobbet of blood burst from his mouth.

By the time Hiro realized he had been outwitted, it was too late. A gasp of surprise escaped his lips as von Loeing’s sword swung down toward his shoulder, seeking to cleave him in two.

Unfortunately, the result was not what his enemy had hoped.

“The Black Camellia! I should have known.” Von Loeing all but spat the words out, his features twisting in disappointment. If not for Hiro’s black garb, he would have struck a mortal blow.

Hiro landed a front kick in von Loeing’s chest and forced him back. As the old soldier sailed away, his regeneration took effect once more.

“You would have been strong enough without a Fallen’s powers, you know.”

“One so blessed ought not to speak so, Lord Hiro.” A pall of loneliness came over von Loeing’s face, and for a moment he looked so frail that he might shatter. “You are still young. You do not yet know the terror of watching yourself grow old.”

The Grantzian Empire’s size meant that it had no shortage of talent. Even the most exceptional of men faced the inevitability of one day being overtaken by younger, fresher blood.

“What will you do when that time comes? When a man has only ever found his worth in battle, can he truly be satisfied with breathing his last on a sickbed surrounded by his family?”

“I can’t imagine a better way to go.”

The peoples of Aletia had rebelled against the zlosta one thousand years ago for the right to exactly that kind of peace. Hiro knew well that mundane happiness was the greatest blessing one could have.

“To pass away free of regrets, with my family at my bedside... I couldn’t ask for anything more.”

“Then we are very different men.”

Hiro’s words were met with flat rejection. Evidently, his answer hadn’t been what the veteran soldier was hoping to hear. There was no chance of finding common ground, then. He and von Loeing were simply incompatible.

“Indulge me one last time, Lord Hiro. This old body can still put on a show!”

So fundamentally different that they would never see eye to eye.

“GRAAAAAAAAAHHH!!!”

Von Loeing unleashed a roar. His body swelled in size as he surrendered his mind to the spirits’ magick. His eyes grew bloodshot and drool dripped from his mouth. Second by second, he grew more grotesque, until he was almost too hideous to look at.

“It’s a bad play, abandoning your reason,” Hiro murmured. “You won’t get far relying on instinct alone.”

He spun Excalibur nimbly in his grip so that he held it backhanded. With a series of pops, space split apart around him, bathing the earth in luminescence. Forth from the rents came spirit weapons—two, five, ten, twenty. Before long, they filled the sky. The ground beneath Hiro’s feet cracked under the weight of his might. A wicked presence surged out into the void, seeking dominion.

“Let’s finish this.”

He braced his foot against the earth...

...and left the realm of sound behind.

He left nothing in his wake but an unearthly rush of wind. A hundred sparks of light, a thousand blazing bonfires, a million newborn stars crashed to earth in burning splendor. This was the privilege and the Graal bestowed upon Excalibur’s chosen.

Divine Lightning—Liegegrazalt. An inescapable attack unleashed at the speed of light.

Divine bladework scored the ground with innumerable furrows. Every glimmering trail sent a gout of blood spraying from von Loeing’s frame. Although he pursued Hiro with a hunter’s persistence, his body could not take the strain. His arm flew, his leg fell away, his throat split open, his heart was pierced through. The damage overwhelmed his regeneration until at last he collapsed into the dirt like a starved beast.

As Hiro lifted his sword to his enemy’s throat to deliver the final blow, something strange occurred. Second by second, von Loeing’s body shrank until he returned to his previous form. Hiro watched in astonishment.

Von Loeing's wrinkled features creased into a satisfied smile. "Lord Hiro..." he whispered through ragged breaths. "You have...my thanks... Now, I can die...with no regrets..."

He wheezed. Blood trickled from his lips.

"I just want to know one thing," Hiro said. "Where is Stovell?"

The old soldier kept his silence until the light faded from his eyes. To the end, he could not bring himself to betray his master. Still, his reticence was as good as an answer—and that meant that there was only one path to take.

Now I just need to regroup with Liz...

As Hiro affirmed his resolve, von Loeing's body crumbled and blew away like dust on the wind. Hiro watched it go, turning to look up at the sky with lifeless black eyes. At the edge of the canopy of vibrant colors, darkness was beginning to set in. Despite the serenity in the sky, wild winds blew across the plain. Screams and roars rose across the battlefield, mingling with one another to create an unearthly atmosphere.

Von Loeing, the commander of the rebel army, was dead, but his remaining subordinates were still holding out. Vengeance, honor, pride—with so much to fight for, their spirits yet endured.

Hiro flung himself back into the fray. Excalibur danced as he fell on the enemy soldiers encircling his allies, hoping to save as many of his men as he could. His victims did not even have time to scream. Every slash took a life as he set about cutting them down.

At that moment, a cavalry unit burst in from the side, skewering the soldiers around Hiro with their lances. Those who survived were trampled by the charge and finished off with gleaming lance points before they could so much as cry out.

"One-Eyed Dragon! Where is von Loeing?!"

A horse detached from the rest and came in front of Hiro, bearing Garda on its back.

Blood arced through the air as Hiro withdrew Excalibur from a rebel soldier's

throat. “Dead, although I didn’t get his head.”

“Then we have no more purpose here. We must fall back at once!” Garda kicked a charging rebel away and spilled the man’s life across the ground, then raised his blade to the standard-bearer. “Sound the victory cry! Beat the drums and blow the horns! Let every soul on this field know that von Loeing has fallen!”

Now all that remained was to make good their escape. Once the rebel army had no more enemies left to fight, they would come to understand their situation. They were an army without a leader, and their only choice was surrender.

“We’re ready to leave whenever, Your Lordship! Just give the order!”

Huginn rode up on horseback. The quiver on her belt was empty, and she carried a bloodstained sword. Hiro’s swiftdrake trotted next to her, equally covered in gore, none of which was its own. Hiro took the beast’s reins and swung himself onto its back.

It was then, as a cheer rose from his allies, that a great plume of fire erupted from the west, where Liz’s forces were stationed.

“It can’t be... It’s... It’s...!”

It’s a dragon, someone whispered.

The beast soared skyward on wings of flame, then plunged back down to devour its prey. The ensuing explosion was enough to shake the world, all but obliterating the noise of battle. Its overwhelming might struck Hiro’s body like a shock wave. Screams drifted through the air, not from his allies, but from the rebels.

“Now that’s a familiar sight.”

The power had the flavor of Lævateinn. Indeed, that had been one of Artheus’s favorite tricks. So Liz had reached greater heights. He could only wonder what had pushed her to grow so. Still, there were more pressing matters at hand.

“This isn’t good. She might not have the strength to retreat.”

Such an expenditure of power would quickly exhaust her.

“Garda!” he shouted to where the zlosta was busy mopping up resistance. “We have to leave at once! As soon as the men are gathered!”

With von Loeing dead, the rebel army had no choice but to surrender, but with the chain of command in disarray and information unable to disseminate, they were yet to realize it. They would continue fighting blindly. That would not only lead to needless deaths, it could wipe out Hiro’s forces entirely. First, they had to escape the fighting. Then they could present the enemy with surrender demands.

“Huginn, spread word among their ranks that nobles are flocking to support us. That will persuade them to give in quicker.” Now that von Loeing was gone, it was unlikely that anybody else would have the spine to keep fighting.

“At once, Your Lordship!” With a crisp reply, Huginn departed.

Garda approached, his shoulders heaving. “And what will you do, One-Eyed Dragon?”

“We’re done here.”

There was only one place left to go. With a glance at the sky that the dragon of flame had so recently occupied, Hiro dug his heels into his swiftdrake’s flank and sped off across the plain.

* * * * *

The field belonged to the dead now. Around her lay nothing but corpses. A pungent stench befouled the air, rising from scattered hunks of charred flesh. None of the bodies were still intact. It was like they had been hit by an artillery bombardment.

A gale blew, threatening to push her over, but she stepped forward to catch herself. She would not fall. Not yet.

“Ah... Aah...”

It was plain to see that she was on the brink of passing out. She swayed like a rotten tree in a gale. Empty eyes scanned her surroundings, where blue flames still licked at what remained of the corpses of the Fallen.

“That was quite the sight to behold.” Scáthach limped closer. “Are you all right?”

Liz showed no reaction to her concern. Gritting her teeth, Scáthach laid a hand on the crimson-haired girl’s shoulder.

“That was reckless. Just how deep did you delve?”

Even now, remnants of Lævateinn’s power lingered in the air. Liz must have plunged deep into the Spiritblade’s domain, and fast. Without help, her mind might not return.

“Gáe Bolg, lend me your strength. Call her back.”

It would take an outside injection of power to restore her now. Gáe Bolg began to glow with azure light.

“Forgive me for this.”

Suddenly, a warmth enveloped her hand.

“I’m all right.”

Scáthach looked up to see Liz’s crimson eyes staring into her own. The princess was breathing raggedly and her face was pale, but her smile was one of satisfaction. Lævateinn glowed a fiery crimson in her grip.

“Oh, thank goodness. I’m so glad you’re unhurt. I feared you were too far gone...” Scáthach flung her arms around Liz, her voice cracking.

Liz patted her back, a faint smile on her lips. “And you.”

But they had no time to celebrate. Their expressions grew alert once more as the situation set in. This was a battlefield, where the weak were first to die. In the blink of an eye, they were surrounded.

A knight stepped forward. “Lay down your sword, Lady Celia Estrella,” he announced, seemingly unintimidated.

Liz brushed a stray lock of hair back and smiled. “I respectfully decline.”

“Then you leave us no choice but to take you by force. Draw your blades.”

The knight’s sword hissed from its sheath. The surrounding soldiers readied their swords and spears. To look at the weapons’ trembling points, however, it

was clear that they feared their prey.

“It looks like the battle’s not over.” Liz pointed Lævateinn at her foes, warning them back.

“We must break through and regroup with Lady Aura.” Scáthach’s eyes flashed as she readied Gáe Bolg.

The soldiers hesitated, seeing that the duo would not go quietly.

All of a sudden, a voice rang out across the battlefield. “Help’s on its way, Your Highness!”

It belonged to Tris. The rumble of hoofbeats filled the air, and the sound of clashing steel drifted from the back lines of the enemy circle. The rebel lines fell into disarray and rapidly collapsed. A dozen and a half riders poured through the breach.

One of them, a girl of short stature, brought her horse near. “Are you alright?” she asked, flicking blood from her spirit weapon.

Liz broke into a smile. “Aura! You’re safe!”

Aura’s expression remained as stoic as ever, but she nodded. “I’m glad you’re both unhurt.”

“How fares the battle, Lady Aura?”

“It’s over. Nameless has retreated.”

Despite having the numerical advantage, the rebel army’s mysterious vice-commander had taken a small force and fled the field. As Aura finished her summary, one of her guards approached with two riderless horses in tow.

“Most of the units have fallen back. We’re the only ones left.”

As soon as Aura had seen the plume of fire engulf the battlefield, she had dispatched messengers to the other units, telling them that further fighting was meaningless and they were to retreat.

“We should get moving too, then,” Liz said. The rebel army still comprised in excess of ten thousand men. Now that their foes had retreated, there was a chance they might converge on her location. “We’ll strike hard and break

through. After me!” She mounted up and turned her horse about, gesturing forward with Lævateinn.

Clearly, persuading her to rest would be fruitles. Aura sighed and turned to her own soldiers. She brandished her spirit weapon. “We’re retreating. Quickly.”

Scáthach hauled herself onto horseback. “Worry not, Lady Aura,” she said breezily. “I have some practice with fighting withdrawals.”

Aura glared at the pair, as though to say that had very much not been the cause of her concern, but it seemed to have no effect. “You’re both wounded,” she said finally.

“Follow me and it’ll be fine!” Liz called back.

Ordinarily, Aura would have protested. This time, she only slumped her shoulders, tired of arguing.

Liz, oblivious, set her sights on Hiro’s formation. “Do you think they’re all right over there?”

“I cannot say—” Scáthach cut herself off. A smile spread across her face. “No, it seems so.”

Whatever she had picked up on, Aura seemed to have noticed it too. “That way,” she said, pointing into the distance.

Liz turned to look and understanding dawned in her eyes. A dust cloud was rising in the east, growing steadily closer. “After me!” she called.

As one, they cut a straight line toward the source of the disturbance. Although they only numbered twenty, that was more than enough to punch through the enemy’s ranks. The wall of infantry quickly crumbled, stricken with fear at the sight of two Spiritblade wielders, and the following riders speared them in the back as they turned to flee.

Riding at full speed, it did not take long to reach the heart of the battle. Shrieks and battle cries rose into the air. At the center of the press, a boy in black laid the rebel soldiers to waste from atop a reptilian steed. His gleaming blade trailed motes of light with every slash, even as it dyed the field crimson

with gore. Dying screams went muffled by the earth as he sowed the ground with corpses.

One soldier's sword was deflected and his throat crushed. Another's spear was broken and his skull shattered. Armor was no use; the boy's gleaming blade pierced through it like paper. He was only one soldier, but he fought with the strength of a thousand in a blood-chilling display.

Aura cocked her head. "Liz?"

The crimson-haired girl's momentum had vanished, and she had frozen in her saddle. The path that she had fought so hard to open was threatening to close. Their escort, too, looked alarmed as they hacked at the enemies around them. Aura didn't bother asking what was wrong. She already knew.

That's Hiro...but at the same time, it isn't.

When Hiro fought, he suppressed his emotions, cutting his enemies down dispassionately. Sympathy led to fatal mistakes. Regrets lasted forever. It was kill or be killed on the battlefield, and so he compartmentalized every time he entered combat. He spared those who were useful and cut down those who were not, but he never, ever sought amusement in it.

This Hiro was different. His mouth twisted in ghoulish glee as he cut down soldier after soldier. He lopped the heads off men who had lost the will to fight, stabbed deserters in the back, and showed no mercy to those who surrendered. At last, as he crushed a weeping man's skull, he noticed their presence and turned.

"You're all safe, I see."

His black eyes were pools of darkness, reflecting nothing, but the air he wore was one of sorrow. A choking sadness suffused him, like a lost child searching desperately for an absent mother.

"I'm glad you're all right."

He smiled, but it was cold. Blood dripped from his gore-soaked hands to seep into the earth.

Liz's hands tightened on her reins, stricken by the pitiful sight. She opened her

mouth to speak but thought better of it and shook her head, donning a smile to fend off her unease as she approached.

“You too.” Her voice was full of forced cheer. “I’m happy you’re safe, Hiro.”

She was strong, Aura thought. There were plenty of questions that needed answers, but she was ignoring them all.

Hiro’s expression relaxed, and suddenly the fugue that had gripped him was gone. “Thank you. But we don’t have time to stand around.”

“What? Why?”

“Stovell’s making for the palace. He’s going to try and kill the emperor.”

“What?” Liz paled. “You mean...he’s trying to steal the throne?!”

Beside her, Scáthach bristled with bloodlust at the name of her nemesis. Only Aura cocked her head in confusion.

Hiro shook his head. “Surely not. He wouldn’t have any legitimacy after this. Emperors without clothes get their heads cut off.”

“I suppose so...but then, what’s he doing?”

“We can consider this later,” Scáthach interrupted. “First, we must escape this battlefield.”

Aura watched the trio converse from afar, a discontented expression on her face.

Why did he come here first?

Suspicion filled her leaden eyes, but she had no space to voice it.

“Anyway, Liz, you need to make for the capital. Scáthach, go with her. It’s time for me to make good on our promise.”

What sort of vow they had exchanged, Aura couldn’t guess, but Scáthach nodded firmly enough to make it clear that turning back wasn’t an option.

“Good. Then it’s settled. You two go on ahead.”

“What about you? Aren’t you coming with us?”

“I’ll join you soon enough. But first, I’ll give this something to remember.”

Rebel soldiers had gathered around them, forming a thick wall of steel that was gradually closing in. Now that their group had lost their momentum, it would not be easy to break free.

“Then we’ll see you there! And you’d better not be late!”

“I can only apologize. Would that I could stay to help...” Scáthach murmured.

“You’re allowed to put yourself first once in a while. Take care of Liz.”

Scáthach nodded. “It will be done.”

She and Liz cantered away, their wounds and fatigue already forgotten. A wall of soldiers blocked their path, but with two Spiritblades, they would have little trouble breaking through.

“What are you doing, Aura?” Hiro asked. “Take your men and follow them.”

He was right to hurry them along. There wasn’t much time. She kept her question brief.

“Who told you about Stovell?”

“Von Loeing, with his last breath. He said Stovell abandoned his claim to the throne to divert suspicion from himself, then orchestrated this battle to draw everyone’s attention. He never cared about winning, only taking the emperor’s head.”

“I see.”

“Aura, there’s no more time. You have to go.”

Aura made a noise of agreement. “Later, then.”

She turned her horse about and set off, but in the instant she passed Hiro—

“Ah—”

She spun in alarm, but already there was nothing behind her but a heaving mass of enemy soldiers. For a moment, she stared in silence.

“The enemy is coming, Lady Aura!” one of her men called. “We must make haste!”

“Hiro...”

With one last backward glance, she rode away.

* * * * *

The sun had set, and a gibbous moon peeked through the clouds. Dark staked claim to the land. The buzzing of insects in the undergrowth fell flat in the dead night air.

Liz and Scáthach arrived at the capital under the shroud of darkness. The guards at the gate recognized the sixth princess on sight and ushered them in. There was no sign of an enemy lying in wait, and besides, it would have been madness to refuse. The people had been whispering that Liz was on her way with small force to save the capital from peril. If word got out that they had chased her away, there might be riots.

“Your Highness!” The captain of the Knights of the Golden Lion hailed her with a formal bow.

Liz returned the gesture from atop her horse. “The fighting isn’t over yet. There are still plenty of rebels outside the walls. Keep your men at their posts and stay vigilant.”

“Then, if I may ask, Your Highness...what brings you here?”

“I need to make certain my father is safe.”

“Then there is nothing to fear on that score, Your Highness. All four of the city’s cardinal gates have been firmly secured, by my own men, no less. Besides, His Majesty has the imperial guard to protect him. I cannot imagine that any harm will befall him.”

“Excuse me? Father *only* has the imperial guard to protect him? No one else?”

The captain nodded. “Broadly speaking, Your Highness. There are also the palace officials and their men.”

“Then he might as well not have any guards at all!”

If Stovell attacked the palace, the imperial guards would hardly be able to lay a finger on him, and the officials’ private troops would be even less of a threat. All told, there could not be more than a hundred men in Venezyne.

“Form up and ride for the palace immediately,” Liz commanded.

The captain pulled a sour face. Shadow danced across his features in the torchlight. “His Majesty instructed us to defend the walls with all our strength. If we were to contravene his orders, a reprimand would be the least of our concerns.”

“And it’ll be even less of one if Father was wrong!” Liz shouted. The captain flinched. “The first emperor founded your order, didn’t he? What would he say if you let the emperor come to harm on your watch? If you are true soldiers of the empire, you will assemble a unit and make for the palace! Let me take responsibility for the consequences!”

The captain looked taken aback for a moment, but he quickly composed himself and bowed. “As you command, Your Highness.”

“Good.” Liz nodded, satisfied. “We’ll ride ahead.” With that, she kicked her horse’s flanks and rode on.

“It’s quiet,” Scáthach remarked.

She spoke truly. Every house was locked and bolted in a flat refusal to have anything to do with events outside. As Liz made her way through the eerie quiet of the city streets, she sensed that she was being watched. On closer inspection, townsfolk were peeking out from inside their dwellings. Their eyes were filled with terror.

She smiled and waved as though to reassure them. “Everything will be all right! The rebel army will soon be defeated!”

Where usually the central boulevard was filled with the hustle and bustle of commerce, now only the clack of horseshoes echoed. It was as though they had wandered into a deserted ruin. Still, with no obstacles to bar their path, they arrived at the palace gates with unusual speed.

Liz was the first to spot something wrong. “That’s strange...” she murmured.

Scáthach quickly cottoned on. “Is the palace usually this quiet? Where are the sentries?”

They looked around, but there was no one to be seen. The guards were indeed absent. Darkness extended even past the gates. They made their way through the unsettling silence of the rose garden.

Liz dismounted before the palace proper and dashed up the steps. An imperial guard lay beside the doors in a pool of blood. There was no need to check whether he was still breathing. He had no head.

“Brutal work,” Scáthach observed.

“Come on. Let’s go.” Liz shot her a meaningful glance and readied Lævateinn.

Scáthach hefted Gáe Bolg, equally wary. “We ought to be careful. An arrow could come from anywhere.”

Liz nodded and pushed the doors open. The air trapped within belched forth. She grimaced at the foul-smelling gust. Scáthach frowned, holding her nose. Within seconds, the stench dispersed in the night air.

“I don’t sense any signs of life.”

“Vile deeds have been done here. The place reeks of death.”

They stepped inside. Corpses lay on the floor in horrific numbers. The palace officials had been butchered without mercy. Noblewomen clad in fine dresses—their spouses, perhaps—had been stricken down callously alongside them. Imperial guards who had fought back were also among the dead. All of their garments were singed, whether cloth or armor. Lingering flames still licked at several of the bodies.

The clack of footsteps resounded alone in the silent hall, their echo oddly unsettling. In ordinary times, Venezyne’s corridors never slept, but one would never think it to see them now.

“I see no survivors...and no sign of reinforcements. Were they unable to sound the alarm?”

Scáthach’s doubts were understandable, but a Spiritblade wielder would easily have been capable of such a feat. The dead would have had no time to call for help. The pair walked on through corpse-littered corridors, silent but for occasional noise of tension.

Eventually, Liz stopped and laid her hand on a pair of double doors. “This is the throne room.”

The throne room doors had welcomed many visitors in their time, even those

from foreign lands, and as such held a certain gravitas. Their finely decorated wood was emblazoned with a lion crest and a black dragon rising to the heavens.

Scáthach cocked her head. “It’s certainly easily defended, but it would be the first place anyone would look. Surely the emperor has some escape route prepared for times of trouble?”

“If he had no other option, I’m sure he’d already be underground. But...”

“But he wields a Spiritblade.”

“Precisely. Although not many people know about it. Only a few members of the royal family and the heads of the great houses.”

“I see.” Scáthach nodded in understanding. For a moment, she seemed to sink into thought, but then decided against it. “No, there is no use thinking about it. Forgive me. We ought to proceed.”

“I’m ready if you are.”

Scáthach nodded. Liz grasped the door handle, her features taut with trepidation.

“For how long do you mean to scurry about?”

With cries of surprise, the pair sprang back from the door and raised their weapons.

“Oh, don’t be so wary. Enter. I have readied no ambush.” A familiar voice issued from within the chamber—the low tones of First Prince Stovell.

“Let’s go, Scáthach. Stay alert.”

Liz steeled herself, kicked the doors open, stepped into the throne room...and fell silent. For a thousand long years, the throne room had persisted in grandeur and grace as the beating heart of imperial power. Now, it was awash with blood. An iron tang hung in the air, accompanied by a nauseating, charred stench.

Holding back the urge to vomit, Liz approached the throne. Since the empire’s founding, the seat had been the exclusive province of the reigning emperor, but Stovell sat in it now, radiating arrogance. She felt a rush of anger. Her rage

quickly evaporated, however, as she registered the shape lying at his feet.

“Father...?”

“Is that...the emperor?” Scáthach stared incredulously as her mind tried to catch up.

Liz, too, stood aghast. “It can’t be...”

The body was headless, but she knew that it was her father. Only the emperor would have worn such fine clothes, and only the emperor was permitted to don that golden sash.

“You’re late. Had you arrived a little sooner, you might have found this old fool’s head still attached.” The emperor’s head lay at Stovell’s feet, its face contorted with agony. “But then again, there is a certain drama to your timing. In fact, you could not have planned it better if you’d tried.” Stovell rested a boot on top of it and smiled. “He resisted, you see. I was left with no choice.”

“Do you realize what you’ve done?” Liz’s voice trembled as she spoke.

Stovell scowled. “One wonders if *you* do. Surely such a historic moment calls for a little more celebration?” He rose from the throne, and a terrible aura began to swirl about him. “Rejoice, sister mine. Today you will witness the birth of a new god.”

His right hand crackled with lightning, and suddenly it held Mjölnir. At the same time, a strange wind swirled around his left. He lifted the gale for Liz and Scáthach to see.

“There is no power quite so marvelous as that of the Demiurgos. It can bend even the Spiritblade Sovereigns to its will.”

“Is that...Gandiva? But...you killed Father! It would never choose you...”

The Spiritblades would only appear to those they acknowledged as their masters. Should anybody attempt to manifest them by force, they would retaliate with a terrible curse—or so the legends said—and there was little chance of the Gale Sovereign choosing the man who had killed its former master.

“Oh, it resisted. But before the power of the Demiurgos, it had no choice but to bend the knee. Now one might say that I wield it by force.”

“You *forced* it to serve you? Spirits have minds too!”

“What of it? Mind or no mind, in the end it is merely a tool of bloodshed.” Stovell expelled an exasperated sigh. His eyes flashed as he leveled his gaze at Liz. “Now, the choice is yours. Will you stand with me...or against me?”

“You think...!”

“What was that?” The latter half of Liz’s snarl seemed not to have reached Stovell’s ears.

“You think I would ever, *ever* stand with you?! I’d rather die!” Liz fixed Stovell with a murderous stare, her eyes burning with crimson fire.

The first prince snorted, unruffled. “Oh, sister mine. You were a fool when you adopted that black-furred mutt, and you are a fool now. You disgrace your royal blood. But at least that proves you are your father’s daughter!” He kicked the emperor’s head away and fixed Liz with a sneer. “That doddering old fool was much the same when he took in your mother. The emperor of the greatest power in Soleil, wedded to a destitute noblewoman with naught but a pretty face to her name—a tale to warm the heart in the theater, no doubt, but the real world is a far crueler stage. Fleeting affections beget lasting tragedy. False

virtue leads only to ruin, as they should have known."

Liz stared back hatefully.

"What, nothing to say? She may have made for a pathetic corpse, but she was still your mother." Silence fell between them, but Stovell smiled as he recognized the anger bubbling beneath. "Oh, but I say too much. Excuse me." His smirk widened cruelly. "They couldn't even be certain the body was hers, could they?"

His laughter rang through the throne room, an unpleasant noise that filled the hall.

"Aahh..." Liz's shoulders trembled. She raised her head, cheeks stained with tears. "Aaaaaahhh!!!"

She launched herself forward with a cry of anger, fury blazing in her crimson eyes. Tears trailed behind her, glittering with scarlet flame. Lævateinn shattered the flagstones. The throne room shuddered.

"Don't...mock...my...mother!"

The ground around her exploded with searing flames, an inferno hot enough to melt flesh.

Stovell stood where he had ducked away from the strike. His shoulders shook with laughter. "You've grown stronger since last we met."

"Usurper! You'll pay for your crimes!" Liz's voice was clear and proud, even as tears streamed from her eyes.

Stovell snorted. "Usurper? Please. I have no interest in the throne. If you care so much for this old chair, sister dear, you may have it."

Thunder cracked. A lightning bolt sped toward Liz, raising a chilling crunch as it scored a furrow in the stone, but Lævateinn's flames swallowed it whole.

Stovell did not seem surprised. He only grinned scornfully. "You may have the nation itself, if so you wish...but it will be a nation of one!"

Invisible blades sliced through the air. The objects scattered around Liz fell to pieces under their assault.

“Don’t waste your time. You’ll never hurt me with that!”

The ground beneath Liz’s feet erupted as power surged through her body. A wreath of blue flames settled around her, shielding her from harm. In the blink of an eye, the inferno knocked the invisible blades aside.

Stovell narrowed his eyes, intrigued. “Oh? So you have descended to deeper depths.” His voice was an impressed whisper. “Then allow me to return the favor. Witness for yourself the splendor of the Demiurgos!”

He made to stride forward, only to find that he could not. His foot was inexplicably frozen to the floor. Ice coated his leg, billowing with freezing mist and coursing with power.

“Do not forget about me, knave.”

He turned his head to see Scáthach. Gáe Bolg was in her hands, glowing with a silver-blue light.

Stovell’s eyes widened in surprise. “And who are you, exactly? Wait, that spear... Surely not...”

“I am Culann Scáthach du Faerzen. One of many you have wronged.”

“Ah, now I recall. The princess of Faerzen—”

“And the woman who will end your life.” Scáthach did not wait for Stovell to finish. She leaped high and flung Gáe Bolg.

“Wha—?!”

There was a thunderous boom. White mist enveloped the room. A great ice crystal erupted where Stovell had been standing, piercing through the fog. As the spectacle unfolded, Scáthach landed.

“Is your leg all right?” Liz shouted.

“Of course. With revenge at last within reach, I feel no pain.” She licked her dainty lips and steadied her breathing, staring into the depths of the fog. “Do not lower your guard. He lives still. I sense it.”

“Don’t worry. I know.”

As the duo readied their weapons, a sudden gust blew the mist apart. In its

place stood Stovell, unharmed. “Come, then,” he declared, spreading his arms wide in exultation. “Impress me. Show me how you defy my will.”

“I will slow him,” Scáthach whispered. “Let me create an opening. Think only of striking him down.”

For all her bravado about feeling no pain, her leg wound would only get in the way in a real fight, and she knew it. Her teeth ground bitterly as she stared at Stovell.

Liz did not question the instruction, sensing Scáthach’s chagrin. She raised Lævateinn and broke into a run. “Got it. He won’t get away!”

She accelerated further than she ever had before, carving through the air to close on Stovell in an instant. Her leading leg slid between his feet, and she unleashed a thrust up at his chin. He managed to move his head out of the way, but Liz’s sweep knocked him off balance. His enormous frame crashed to the floor.

“Yaaaaaah!” With a battle cry, Liz brought her fist down.

Stovell made to dodge, only to realize that he was encased in ice from the waist down. He scowled in annoyance. “Very well, the first blow is yours. Take it.” The scowl became a grin as he abandoned the attempt to evade the punch, challenging her to hurt him.

Liz smiled sweetly. “Do you remember what Lævateinn’s Graal is?”

Her fist struck with explosive force, the impact spearing straight through his unprepared body. The ground around them cratered, sending up a cloud of dust. Stovell’s face twisted in pain.

“And that’s not all!”

Another punch followed, which quickly became a volley. Blood splattered across the stone, but Liz’s fists did not stop. A grisly sound, part crunching bone, part tearing flesh, echoed as she brought her heel down on Stovell’s face.

“I’ll burn you to ashes!”

Her assault was not done yet. Her anger burned bright, and Lævateinn answered. Fiery orbs flared into being in the air above her and rained down on

Stovell.

The throne room shook so fiercely that it might have been falling apart. Liz leaped away to a safe distance and watched as the sea of flame burned. Dust trickled down from the ceiling.

Suddenly, a gale blew.

“Liz! Look out!”

“Huh?”

Scáthach’s warning came too late. Liz’s consciousness winked out. She came to seconds later, groaning, buried in a pile of rubble. The taste of iron filled her mouth, and she spat out blood.

“My lady! Stay with me!” Scáthach was shaking her shoulder.

“I’m all right... Urgh... What happened?”

Liz staggered to her feet and looked ahead. Where Stovell had been, a shape now stood—a man’s hulking figure, swathed in burns, glaring back with hatred in his eyes.

“Know your place, girl.”

It took several seconds to understand what she was looking at. The man’s skin was deep purple, like that of a zlosta, and his hair was white as snow. His eyes burned scarlet, and his muscular body was beginning to swell even as she watched. Mana empowered baleful strength to produce incredible might. A chill ran down Liz’s spine to see his transformation.

“Stovell... What have you done?”

“Behold the power of the Demiurgos! The power of the king who plunged this world into chaos one thousand years ago!”

Liz winced. The sheer power in his voice set her head spinning.

Stovell laughed. “A little much, perhaps, for children hardly even accustomed to their own power.”

He strode forward. The air warped around him. One step, and there came a sound like space tearing. Another step, and the floor shattered, the rubble

reduced to dust beneath his heel.

“The strength of the Demiurgos and two Spiritblades besides.” His joy burgeoned. Glee filled his face. “With so much power, a man might fell an empire.”

The baleful wind swirled, crackling with lightning, feeding on Stovell’s power and growing ever stronger.

“I will slay every last soul in this misbegotten capital...and you will be the first.”

Liz gritted her teeth as a wave of palpable malice washed over her. “You’re just as blind as you always were. There are men like you around every corner.” Her defiant grin carried a hint of disdain.

“You speak truly. His appearance has changed, but his nature remains what it ever was.” Scáthach seconded Liz, shooting Stovell a contemptuous glance.

Stovell snorted. “Bark all you wish.” He began to walk slowly toward them.

Scáthach turned to Liz. “Listen well. He is fast. Far faster than us.”

“I know. And he hits even harder than I do.” Liz wiped a trickle of blood from her mouth with the back of her hand.

“If we are to defeat him, we must hold nothing back.”

Their bodies were buckling under the strain of multiple battles, and their reserves were almost exhausted. Still, if they did not bring their full strength to bear, Stovell would take both of their heads.

“Let this battle be ugly if it must. Elegance comes second to victory.”

Liz paused for a moment. “Got it.”

“Now come! Let us end this!”

They dashed forward as one. Fire engulfed the room. A gust of wind dispelled the flames, but a rain of icy spears followed. They had no time to confirm whether Stovell was alive or dead. Any pause would be a chink that their opponent might exploit.

They closed the distance to find Stovell skewed on spears of ice. Without

hesitation, Liz rammed Lævateinn through his stomach and unleashed a fiery blast from within. Blood and smoke spewed from his mouth as the flames roasted his innards. His chin tipped toward the ceiling, and a shadow fell across his face.

“Too warm? Never fear, I’ll cool you soon enough.”

Scáthach carved a graceful arc through the air to drive Gáe Bolg through Stovell’s throat. As the spear struck home, Liz darted around behind his back and hacked off his arm with all her strength, turning the momentum of the cut into a spinning slice that bit deep into his leg. He staggered.

“Liz! Fall back!”

Scáthach leaped high, Gáe Bolg ready behind her back. With a burst of power, she unleashed Macha. The spear sliced through the air with a deafening *whoosh* and collided with Stovell, blasting a hole clean through his torso. Ice rapidly encased him. White mist billowed from the freezing mass and rolled across the floor.

For a moment, there was silence—and then there came a *crack*. The ice split. An eye swiveled grotesquely within Stovell’s frozen prison. Another beat, and then...

“Upstart brats.”

Lightning arced from his body. Invisible blades rained in all directions. Liz and Scáthach managed to dodge the assault, but while they were preoccupied, Stovell’s wounds began to heal.

“Know when you are outclassed!”

Mjölnir swung down. The impact split the floor and sent cracks running up the walls. Gandiva whipped up a storm, its invisible blades raging with a tempest’s fury. Fine slashes scored themselves into the floor, the ceiling, the pillars. Even so, Liz and Scáthach stood firm and weathered the assault. As soon as a lull came, they once again moved to attack.

“I tire of this farce.”

Stovell caught Lævateinn with a hand and Gáe Bolg with an arm. Blood

sprayed, but his face betrayed no hint of pain. As Liz's eyes widened, he seized her by the jaw and lifted her up, planting a foot on Lævateinn as it clattered to the floor. With his other hand, he grasped Scáthach by the leg and smashed her down onto the flagstones. He stood over her for a moment as she writhed in pain. As she tried to rise, he brought a crushing foot down on her back.

"Agh!"

Her lithe body bent like a bow. Blood spurted from her mouth.

"Scáthach, was it? A survivor of Faerzen's royal line."

"That's...right... What of it?"

"I was simply wondering if you enjoyed your reunion with your sisters." Stovell chuckled. "Did their heads reach you intact?"

Scáthach stiffened with anger. "Bastard!"

"Silence, cur."

Stovell struck her again. She fell silent. Seemingly dissatisfied, he grasped her unconscious body by the foot.

"What now, Liz? Will you stand by and watch this mongrel die?"

"Mmmph!"

Scáthach rose into the air, her limbs dangling helplessly. Blood dribbled from her mouth to form a puddle on the floor. Tears beaded in the corners of Liz's eyes as she struggled against Stovell's grasp, but with her mouth in his grip, she could not even form words to reply.

Stovell snorted in disdain. "Or would you have me let her live?"

Liz's jaw worked against his grip. Her eyes pleaded her answer.

"Very well." A smile spread across Stovell's face, kind yet cruel. "I will kill you both."

He flung Scáthach away and smashed Liz into the floor. Scáthach flew clear through two pillars with a great crash and vanished in a pile of rubble. A dust cloud rose where she had landed. Liz lay motionless where she had fallen. A pool of blood slowly grew around her. Once more, silence fell over the throne

room.

Stovell removed his foot from Lævateinn, grasped it by the hilt and raised it toward the ceiling.

“You, I will take for my own. The first emperor’s beloved blade, mine at last...”

The sword glowed crimson in protest, but Stovell paid it no notice. Ecstasy filled his face as his mouth opened wide. He would crush it in his jaws, devour it whole, and take its power for himself.

Abruptly, his body listed sideways and he toppled to the ground. Lævateinn skittered from his grasp.

“What...?”

He stretched out his arm after the Spiritblade, but his efforts were in vain. A hand seized his wrist and stopped it fast. The cracking of his bones echoed through the throne room, an unpleasant crunch like a falling tree.

“Don’t you dare touch my Lævateinn.”

Liz stood over him, wreathed in blue fire. Her eyes flashed with anger as she glared down.



“All that, and still you live?” Stovell tried to rise, only to realize that his leg was broken. As he finally registered the cause of his fall, searing pain assailed him.

“Gaaah!”

Neither his arm nor his leg were regenerating. On closer inspection, both were covered in blue welts.

“What...is this...?”

The welts slowly faded. His wounds began to heal once more. The pain ebbed away, giving him room to think again. His brows knitted in a frown.

“Liz... What have you done—?”

His face burst into flame. Blue fire consumed his skull.

“Gyaaaaaaaaahhh!!!”

As Stovell rolled around the floor in agony, Liz silently retrieved Lævateinn. She set her sights on Stovell’s back and raised her arm for the killing blow. Sensing danger, Mjölnir unleashed a mighty blast of lightning, sending her crashing into a pillar. She slid down to the floor in a heap, unconscious.

“Damn it! Damn it all! The pain won’t stop... My wounds won’t heal! What is this sorcery?!”

As Stovell cursed to himself, he caught sight of his reflection in the flagstones. His face was swathed in burns. His eyes widened in confusion.

At that moment, a new set of footsteps sounded through the hall.

“How many more of you upstarts must I endure?” Stovell cast a hate-filled glance toward the noise, a hand pressed to his wounds. “Do you not realize that you are outclassed?”

Before him stood a black-haired, black-eyed boy, his features soft, his stance relaxed.

“Time for you to die,” the boy said, and his mouth pulled into a savage grin.

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This, Hiro had not expected. Indeed, he could not hide his shock at just how far his predictions had missed the mark.

Everything had begun so smoothly. His plan to seat Liz on the throne had proceeded apace. Stovell abandoning his claim to the throne, House Krone's rebellion, the threat encroaching upon the capital—all had played out broadly as he had foreseen. The death of the emperor should have been the final nail. He would make Stovell a usurper and Liz the hero who brought him to justice. The nobles would have to support her after that.

With her newfound strength, she should have been able to do it. He had even sent Scáthach with her as insurance. But at the very last hurdle, everything had fallen apart.

"I should have joined them."

"What are you prattling about, boy?" Stovell fixed him with a bloodshot eye.

Hiro couldn't help but sigh in disappointment at the prince's transformation. "If I had been here, they wouldn't have gotten hurt. A fool like you wouldn't have gotten the better of them."

If he had joined them, fought with them, things would have been different. If only he had set aside his fear of them discovering his darkness. It was his own weakness of heart that had brought about this failure. If only he had thought more logically.

"Ever since that day, I've felt nothing but regret."

Excalibur's silver gleam faded, and the blade began to swirl with darkness. A wild squall blew through the chamber, although the windows were closed. The Black Camellia danced angrily on the wind.

"Who... What are you?" Stovell growled, a hand still nursing his injuries.

Hiro's lips twisted with dreadful amusement. "I'm afraid those wounds won't heal."

"What do you mean?"

"It's Lævateinn's Graal. Mikhael. Purification."

There was a moment of silence.

“What nonsense is this? Lævateinn’s Graal is Might.”

“Try to remember—just who was it that Emperor Artheus fought one thousand years ago?”

“Do you mock me? Even a child knows—” Stovell cut himself off in shock. Comprehension filled his eyes.

Hiro gave a mocking shrug, astounded that it had taken him so long. “Now do you understand why he was so fond of Lævateinn? Fools like you who consume magick will never know any relief from its wounds. Only an eternity of suffering.” He raised Excalibur so that it hovered level with his chest. “But I think that’s enough talking, don’t you?”

He grasped his eyepatch and tore it away. From beneath the covering appeared the ominous light of his left iris. His eyeball twinged.

Its gleam in the darkness lay beyond the realm of the mundane.

Its terrible hue exceeded the reach of mortal men.

Once, in awe, the people had dubbed it Uranos.

The mark of a hero. The eye of the monarch. Even now, one thousand years later, the legends called it one of the three great arcane eyes.

“I’m not going to hold back. I trust you can take it.”

Hiro cast his senses out across the room, glancing at where Liz and Scáthach lay sprawled on the ground.

“I don’t think there’s any danger that they’ll see this. So...”

The air shuddered as hostility poured forth from him, blending with his aura of might to produce a deeper shade. He whispered to Excalibur’s blackened blade, in a voice impossibly soft and boundlessly clear—

“Time to wake up.”

A moment passed—and then the sword split, fractured, crumbled away from tip to hilt. As though shedding an old husk, it dissolved into glittering flakes that burst into light as they spiraled away. White turned to black, like a sinner fleeing from their fate.

“Spread wide your maw, Dáinsleif—the Abyssal Sovereign.”

Darkness fell upon the world, a gloom no light could penetrate. Despair and hunger spread through the throne room.

Stovell watched, incredulous, as the anomaly made itself manifest. Before him, as before, stood Hiro, calm and composed. His relaxed stance had not changed, but for one thing: in place of his gleaming sword, he now held a dark blade. Its edge, its hilt, its guard, all were black—the lightless hue of midnight’s deepest shade.



“Aha... Ha ha ha ha ha!”

The laughter belonged not to Hiro, but to Stovell.

“What’s so funny?”

Stovell grinned wide enough to split his face in two. “Oh, this scent... I know it well.” He raised his Spiritblades, Mjölnir in his right hand, Gandiva in his left. “We truly are alike. You too possess the power of the Demiurgos!”

That name sealed his fate. He could not have chosen a more incendiary word.

Silence fell. All sound vanished from the chamber, as though the world had been submerged in cold water.

And then...

And then...

And then.

The air screamed. Groaned. Wailed.

Crushed by pressure. Flayed by malice. Swallowed whole by sheer power.

“You’d have to be very brave or very foolish to speak that name aloud.” Uranos flared bright in the freezing darkness. The Black Camellia beat angrily at the air, although there was no wind. “Keep your bleating to yourself. Or I’ll cut you down with your delusions.”

The boy’s outer shell fell away, and beneath it lay a darkness that none had ever seen.

“Bold words,” Stovell snarled. “Let’s see you match them!”

He leaped gleefully in for the kill, swinging Mjölnir overhand, but Hiro was no longer there. The battle axe shattered stone, sending up a plume of rubble. Stovell looked around and spotted Hiro’s silhouette in the debris.

“I shall put your strength to the test!”

He brandished Mjölnir like a twig. A crackling edge carved out a perfect arc as it swept toward its target. Hiro thrust out Dáinsleif, but otherwise, he did not move.

Impact.

Sparks sprayed as the blades ground together. A metallic keening filled the throne room. As a blast wave surged outward in all directions, lightning crashed and a razor gale blew, both converging on Hiro.

“Too slow. I can see every move you make.”

Hiro took one step back, and somehow, impossibly, everything missed him. A twitch of his head, a shift of his leg, a wave of his arm, a twist of his shoulders—he evaded every blow with the minimal necessary movement.

“Impressive. You have some skill, I’ll give you that!”

Delight spread across Stovell’s face, although it could not quite conceal his surprise. Nonetheless, he pressed the attack, giving Hiro no room to breathe. Countless sparks showered down around them. One strike, two strikes, three—time stretched on as they exchanged a seemingly endless series of blows.

“Not yet...” Stovell roared. “Not yet! I will surpass you! I shall cut you down and rise to greater heights!”

His elation spurred him on. His rage swelled his muscles. His might became a bottomless well of strength. Symbols flared into life all over his body like castigating brands. Growth became evolution became ascendance. Through battle with his nemesis, his body strove to perfect itself for combat.

Hiro scowled. For the first time, his keen composure seemed to waver. He leaned away from Mjölnir’s wild swings, deflected the blades of wind seeking to flay his skin, cut down a lightning bolt aimed at his feet with a dismissive slash. He kicked off against empty air and leaped backward.

“Does your heart not dance, Fourth Prince?” Stovell growled. “Only in mortal combat do our souls transcend.”

His piercing glare bored into Hiro. His shoulders shook with mirth. An arrogant grin spread impossibly wide across a face grown so demonic, it seemed unthinkable that he had ever been human.

“But in the end, it will be I who climbs to heaven...atop the corpses of all who would stand in my way.”

“Even if you could, I wouldn’t let you.” Hiro gave a helpless shrug and sighed. “Only one person can stand in heaven, and it won’t be you.”

Stovell’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

Hiro’s lips curved into a crescent smile. The light in his void-black eyes was nothing so half-hearted as bloodlust. He fixed Stovell with a chilling gaze born of unbridled murder.

“The heavens are mine to devour.”

His irises swirled with darkness. Animosity emanated from him, sharp as a blade.

“I will give them up when the sun rises again...and not a day before.”

He raised Dáinsleif and held it perfectly flat, its tip leveled at Stovell.

“All lives are beckoned likewise to nothingness.”

And he unleashed Schwartzwald—Deathly Stillness.

No change came upon the chamber. The pressure in the air merely intensified. The black-haired boy stood before Stovell just as he had before, his nonchalant stance unchanged. A wide distance remained between them—and so Stovell let his guard down.

“Ngh—?!”

Blood exploded from his chest. He sank to one knee, watching dumbly as it traced a crimson arc through the air. His face was a picture of incomprehension. A moment passed in silence, and then he exploded with anger

“What did you *do?!*”

His roar shook the air. His wound wasn’t healing. Like Liz’s touch earlier, the strike had done something to him. Blood dripped onto the flagstones beneath him in an ever-widening pool.

Fury overpowered pain. He rose to his feet, his features twisted in a vicious snarl.

“Raaaaaagh!”

He charged furiously at Hiro, roaring like a beast. Lightning ran amok. Razor

winds scored the stone in all directions. Mana poured forth from him in a display of overpowering might.

Hiro quietly closed his eyes, half-hidden in the darkness, and waited. His face bore nothing that could be called emotion. There was no fear, no anger, not even pride—only emptiness. Sweat beaded on his brow.

“You still haven’t learned to control your power. Without reason, you’re no better than a beast.” He laid a hand against Dáinsleif’s blade and lowered his center of gravity, sinking into an iai stance. “So I’d better kill you here. Or else you might cause me trouble down the road.”

As the sentence passed his lips—

Cling. The peal of bells rang through the chamber. For just a moment, the sound drew Hiro’s attention. When he looked back, Stovell was gone.

“Dáinsleif, cursed most foully.”

Cling. The bells chimed again, louder this time. The darkness around Hiro dissolved, blown away like confetti on the wind.

“Dáinsleif, blade of tragedy.”

Cling. The bell’s third note seized Hiro and bound him tight. Invisible chains gripped him like a vise.

“Who’s there?” He marshaled his strength and broke through his bonds, sweeping the room with an angry gaze.

“Don’t you remember me? And here I went to all that trouble to introduce myself. It is I, Nameless. An álf, as you might recall.” The figure placed two fingers on either side of their hood like mock ears. “I have come in the hope that you might be amenable to...negotiation.”

“I’m not interested in bargaining. Stovell dies, here and now.”

Hiro leaped forward, closing the distance to Nameless in a single bound. His blade bit into the figure’s cloak—but where blood should have sprayed, his target only shimmered like a mirage, and all at once they were gone.

“My, my. You are terribly aggressive today. Or perhaps I should say, you’ve finally shown your true self?”

A mocking voice issued from behind Hiro's back. He spun around to see Nameless seated on the throne. Stovell lay at the figure's feet.

Nameless laid an arm on the armrest and raised two fingers. "I have two pieces of information to offer, my lord, both of interest to you. Will that be enough to buy your mercy?"

Hiro planned a hand on his hip and sighed. When he looked back up, it was with a smirk. "All right. Let's hear them."

It wouldn't hurt to accept the offer. If worst came to worst, he could kill both Nameless and Stovell after hearing what the former had to say.

The álf's lips pulled into a grin. "Then first, this: I maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with the assassins of Orcus, so I happen to know that they seek the revival of their Father. Lord Stovell's present condition is part of their design. They are quite remarkable, you know. They are both everywhere and nowhere, and one might as well try to catch hold of smoke." A titter. "And the second morsel: my countrymen in Six Kingdoms intend to launch a full-scale invasion of the empire in the coming days. Lord Stovell has sold his nation out, I fear. Children cannot choose their parents, they say, but nor can parents choose their children...a truth I know only too well."

Nameless spread both arms wide, as though inviting Hiro's appraisal.

"Is that all?" Hiro asked.

"Oh, yes, quite all. I have said everything I came to say."

Then the álf was no more use. Hiro moved forward to strike.

"Is that wise, my lord? Think of what you will do to the first emperor's throne."

Hiro's hand froze mid-swing.

Nameless unleashed a laugh to see him relent so easily. "But you couldn't, could you? The throne has stood vigil over this chamber for one thousand years and borne nary a scratch." The álf's fingers caressed the armrest lasciviously. "What it is made of, I could not hope to guess, but I know that you could never destroy it."

With a graceful motion, Nameless leaned over and picked Stovell up by the scruff of the neck. “Allow me to offer you a warning, my lord, in view of the compassion you have shown. One’s true foes conceal themselves. They lurk in the dark and wait for their prey to grow weak. Is it not said that the real villain only reveals themselves in the final act?”

“I think people usually say that the hero only arrives at the eleventh hour.”

“Do they? Well, I suppose it makes little difference.”

“Are you trying to say that someone out there orchestrated all this? Everything that’s happened?”

“Who can say? But I wager you will understand soon enough.” Nameless struck a metal staff against the floor, and the world shivered once more with the sound of bells. “Let us meet again. After the empire has fallen, perhaps.”

Space swirled, swallowing the darkness. A large rift opened in the throne room.

Nameless giggled. “Well, then. Farewell for now...my Black-Winged Lord.”

With one last cryptic remark, both the álf and Stovell vanished. Silence fell once more, leaving only sorrow laced with solitude—and the footsteps rushing down the outside corridor soon shattered even that.

“Look for survivors! And keep your guard up! There’s no telling what might be lurking!”

Garda’s voice resounded from somewhere in the corridor. Soldiers began filing in through the doors. All at once, the throne room was filled with noise.

“Your Ladyship? Scáthach?! Guards! These two need healing!”

As Hiro stood in silence, a silver-haired girl approached him.

“Are you hurt?”

Aura peered into his face, concern in her eyes, but he could not hear her. One name swirled within his mind, occluding all else.

The Black-Winged Lord.

A name that had once brought terror to Aletia.

Epilogue

A gentle breeze blew, comparatively warm after the bitter winds of the north. High in the sky, a gibbous moon hung shrouded by clouds.

Second Prince Selene tore his gaze away from the moon and looked down toward the capital. The city lay shrouded in darkness. He stood one sel from its walls, on top of a small hill—one man with four thousand more at his back, waiting quietly in orderly ranks.

“It’s done, it seems.” White breath escaped his lips as he smiled gently. “Now, what change will our lord’s awakening bring to this world, I wonder?”

He stifled an amused giggle with his hand and looked down. “Is something the matter, Drix?”

“I worry for the chancellor’s safety.” Drix ground his fist into the earth in frustration as he stared at the capital.

Selene shrugged. “He lives, I don’t doubt. He will show himself soon enough. He’s as slippery as a snake, and just as difficult to discourage.”

“Your Highness! I bring urgent word!” A messenger came to a stop in front of him, breathing raggedly. “Six Kingdoms is attacking the west! I repeat, Six Kingdoms has launched an attack on the western territories!”

“Impossible!” Drix started to his feet, paling in surprise and fear. Why would they attack at such a critical time? They had moved so quickly, it was almost as though they had known what was coming.

“How many?”

“They ride with one hundred thousand, Your Highness! But their ranks are still swelling! There is no telling how large their numbers might grow!”

Selene closed his eyes and frowned. “Out of the frying pan and into the fire,” he said with a shrug. “How will this nation resist without its emperor?”

He opened his eyes and stretched out a hand toward the moon. A delicate smile played on his lips.

“Now, let us see what path you choose...my dear Black-Winged Lord.”

So began the first day of the first month of Imperial Year 1024—the year that would become known as the Year of Chaos.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up Volume 5 of *The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles*. If you're a returning reader, it's a pleasure to see you again. Did you enjoy this volume? If it kept you entertained, I'll be so happy that I could yell out of my window. You can find me howling at the moon at 2 a.m.

Antisocial behavior aside, in many ways, this volume is one that returns to the series' roots. The cast, the plot, the battles, the setting, even the cover—all sorts of things have gone back to where they began. Story-wise, it marks the start of a lot of twists and turns, and I only plan to pick up the pace in the next volume, as well as delve a little more into Hiro's past and the change that's come over him. I hope you enjoy that when it comes around.

I've mentioned the cover already, but Hiro does look cool up there, doesn't he? Although I'm sure Liz will be the one to burn herself into your minds with her dignified beauty...and her thighs! Those thighs! I want to frame them and hang them on the wall!

I have a feeling that Liz's popularity will spike with this volume, and I'm sure she'll soon be fighting Hiro for the top spot. Claudia is also a lot more popular among readers than you might expect. Scáthach is gaining fast from behind, and Aura is the top pick in my personal circles. I have no idea how that might change in the future, but I look forward to sharing the results.

In any case, it's time for the thank-yous.

To Ruria Miyuki-sama, I always look forward to receiving your sketches. Your gorgeous illustrations never disappoint and never fail to heal my soul.

To my editor, S-sama, I'm incredibly sorry for the trouble I cause you with every volume. I absolutely swear I'll do better next time, and I look forward to continuing to work together.

To everyone in the editing department, the proofreaders, the designers, and everybody else involved in the creation of this book, it wouldn't exist at all without your efforts. Thank you all very much.

To my coworkers, I’m terribly sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused you. I’m sure you must all want to give me a piece of your mind, but I hope you can find it in your hearts to forgive me.

And to everyone who’s been following this series, I could never have gotten this far without all of your support. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I plan to keep the chuuni waves on full blast over here, so I hope you’ll keep on supporting me.

Until we meet again.

奉 (Tatematsuri)