

The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles

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Prologue

The plain was awash with flame. Fiery plumes rose high from horizon to horizon. War's gory maelstrom had descended on the world, laden with scents foul enough to confound the senses. The sky was clotted with black smoke. The earth was a sea of blood.

The nightmare continued without end, as far as the eye could see. A patch of newly grown wildflowers died where they budded. Beside them, a corpse smoldered, brutalized beyond recognition. A horse's hoof came down among the myriad swords protruding from the body, crushing its ruined flesh to mulch.

"Is anyone alive out there?!" the rider cried. Blood poured from his side as he galloped on, fleeing over corpses that had been laughing comrades only a day before. He looked around desperately, but there was no life to be seen—only an endless field of charnel blossoms blanketing the plain.

"Curse it all! How could this happen? How?!"

Sensing encroaching danger, he leaned forward and spurred his horse as fast as it would go...but life is cruel by nature, and miracles rarely deign to arrive in a man's darkest hour.

"Tell me, doomed soldier—to where do you run?"

Before him stood a girl holding a fan in one hand, her features oddly out of place on a battlefield and her attire wildly inappropriate for war.

"How is it that you can flee in so miserable a state?"

"Stay back!"

"There is nothing to fear. I am quite merciful. I offer the swiftest of ends."

With a depthless smile and chilling words, the girl took a single step forward —and the soldier's heart shattered. He had fought his way through countless killing fields and survived innumerable scenes of carnage, but something in that movement broke him utterly. Hope left his eyes and the blood drained from his cheeks. His mind was gone.

And then—

“Hyaaaaaaaaagh!”

He exploded. That was no simple turn of phrase. He quite literally burst apart from the inside out. A sickening noise shook the air, and ribbons of blood and gobbets of flesh rained down on their surroundings. Somehow, the girl remained untouched. Her lips drew into a beguiling smile as she flicked open her fan.

“You and your comrades have done no wrong, ’tis true—naught but the misfortune of being born on imperial soil. Yet that sin alone deserves a thousand deaths.”

The hour of ruin was at hand. The empire that had stood so steadfast for so long against every outside threat was crumbling at last. Now that events were in motion, they could not be halted. A human being could not stop a raging tempest in its tracks; they could only wait for it to pass. The sole recourse of the weak was to bar their doors and hold their breath.

“Butcher. Slaughter. Conquer.” She whispered the words like a prayer.

Screams echoed around her—not only one or two, but dozens, mingling and layering and swelling loud enough to split the sky. There could be no survivors here. The slightest exhaled breath would be met with thrusting spearpoints. Beasts stalked the battlefield, and they offered their prey no escape.

Even so, a valiant few still resisted.

“On your feet, men! All who can stand, to me!”

Like a conquering hero, his every swing sent corpses sprawling. Like a demon from hell, his every slice slicked the earth with blood. His unassuming appearance belied his overwhelming strength.

“Show these invaders no mercy!”

One of the champions known as the five high generals rallied the routed and charged into the fray.

“High General Vakish von Hass, the Shield of the West. Your head will make a fine prize.”

A woman stood in his way, splattered with blood from head to toe and wearing a ghoulish smile. She carried a warhammer longer than she was tall.

“Step aside, little lady. You won’t like what I’ll do to that ghastly face.”

“And you won’t like what I’ll do to your ribcage.” She braced her foot against the ground. Wind rushed inward, then exploded outward.

“Gaaahhh!”

“I see the five high generals are as mighty as they say. I had meant to leave only your head intact, but you’re sturdier than I expected.”

“This...cannot be...” Vakish fell to his knees. Blood bubbled from his mouth as he gazed down at the gaping hole in his torso.

“My, but you don’t die easily. I may get some entertainment from you yet.” The woman raised a hand. Her soldiers pulled out daggers, sporting wicked grins.

Vakish hacked up another gobbet of blood. “What are you...doing...?”

“Why, torturing you, of course. Aren’t you curious how long you can last?” Despite the cruelty in her words, her smile never faltered. “First we’ll pull out your nails, trim your ears, and cut off your nose.”

“Aha... Ha ha ha ha!” Summoning the last of his strength, Vakish hurled himself forward, sword in hand. “You rotten curs!”

His last stand was not to be, the weak defiance of a child. The bite of sharp blades in his flesh soon taught him the futility of resistance. Soldiers swarmed around him, submerging him in a maelstrom of hatred. The battlefield made no exceptions for the lauded. It was a place devoid of compassion, where anyone and everyone perished by steel.

At last, the commander’s head emerged from the press, cut free from his torso. A cheer rose from all sides.

“High General Vakish has fallen! Send word far and wide! String his head up high before every town! Let the imperials look upon it and tremble! Let them know that Six Kingdoms has come!”

Still, the soldiers did not stop. The commander might be dead, but they would

not let the battle end just yet.

“Slay them all! Leave none alive! Cut down highborn and commonfolk alike!”

The call went out and the corpses piled high, sacrifices to satisfy countless years of resentment. The girl watched the horror unfold, and not once did the smile leave her face.

“’Tis time for our forebears to have their vengeance.”

Chapter 1: The Calm Before the Storm

The fourth day of the first month of Imperial Year 1024

A winter wind blew, bitter enough to cut like a blade. Anyone bold enough to venture outside could not keep themselves from shivering. A man could catch his death in such cold. Yet oddly, despite the unforgiving weather, a cloud of warmth hung over the imperial capital of Cladius.

The central boulevard was thronged so tightly with people that there was hardly any space left for more pairs of feet. The crowd trudged toward the main gate, laden with heavy packs and luggage. Their faces were tinged with desperation, as though they were running from something. They made for the gate with a singlemindedness that could only be born of fear.

“Hurry it up!” shouted a merchant as he tried to barge through the column. “Six Kingdoms is coming to kill us all!”

In ordinary times, the man’s conduct would have earned him disapproving glares, but nobody chided him now. He was far from the only one forcing his way through the press. Many others were doing the same, pushing and shoving to be the first through the gates.

Countless pairs of hate-filled eyes glared at the crowd as it shuffled past. The watchers said nothing, but there was no doubt that they were nursing contempt for the departing throng’s mercenary allegiances. They were the city’s long-term residents. An army might be encroaching on the capital, but the crisis neither made them willing to abandon the homes they had inherited nor furnished them with the savings to emigrate to other lands. Besides, even with enough coin to start afresh and enough luck to make their escape, they could not expect to continue their current standard of living if the empire fell. Staying or leaving made little difference. Unlike the merchants currently filing out through the gates, their fate was tied to the capital itself.

“Cold-hearted bastards, the lot of ’em. Have they forgotten we’re the Grantzian Empire? What could Six Kingdoms do to us?”

“You say that, but those rebels got right into the palace. I hear they dealt His Majesty a nasty wound.”

“Aye, and word is, Six Kingdoms has a hundred and fifty thousand men. The empire’s big, all spread out like. It’ll take time to get our forces all in one place like they are. Time we don’t have.”

The Grantzian Empire encompassed a vast amount of land, partitioned into five territories, with several neighboring hostile nations. The vast majority of its military strength was deployed along the border, dealing with the various minor conflicts that flared up on a daily basis. If it suddenly recalled all those men, the balance they maintained would quickly deteriorate. In such situations, it was the role of the five great houses to maintain order in their territories, but that was only possible if they were in a fit state to rule.

“House Krone’s rebellion stopped all the goods coming in. Now everyone who cares for their own hide is giving the capital a wide berth. And if that weren’t enough, we’ve got those Six Kingdoms savages knocking on our western border.”

“You reckon we can stop ’em?”

“I wouldn’t hold your breath. It’s lookin’ like House Maruk will take House Krone’s place, but seeing as half the central nobles turned rebel, they won’t have much of an army to call on. Our best bet is the western nobles, but the Divines only know how long they can hold out.”

“Word is the other nations are massing for war, and not just Steissen. If they all attack at once, the empire really will be done for.”

“And just after we made it another year, too... What’s to become of us?”

The townsfolk turned uncertain gazes toward the imperial palace. The edifice gleamed as brightly as ever beneath a cloudless blue sky, high and proud and indifferent to the worries of the people below. At that very moment, the highest echelons of the empire were meeting within its walls. Stovell’s attack had rendered the throne room unusable, so a temporary center of command had been set up in the antechamber. There, Hiro and the rest of the royal family —along with a collection of powerful nobles—had gathered to coordinate their plans.

“What’s to be done now?” one of the nobles moaned. “His Majesty is dead, and most of the palace officials with him.”

The rebellion of several days prior had been explained to the people as the work of the former high general von Loeing. The details of First Prince Stovell’s slaughter of the emperor and his retainers had been suppressed so as to prevent panic. All that the people knew was that rebels had attacked the palace, leaving the emperor wounded and some number of officials dead.

“Indeed,” another agreed. “We face a nigh-unprecedented crisis...aside from the events of three hundred years ago, of course.”

“Even that hardly compares. Three hundred years ago, the empire did not have a hundred and fifty thousand men knocking at its door.”

Every nation had experienced similar events during the dark age of three hundred years prior, but even then, only the emperor had perished. The history books made no mention of his officials following him to the grave.

“The people might believe our lie for now, but we cannot conceal His Majesty’s passing forever.”

The truth would have to come out sometime, but it would have to wait until the next emperor was decided. Resisting the incursion from Six Kingdoms would require unity; the last thing the empire needed was for the imperial heirs to start squabbling over the throne. There was nothing to be done but shelve the matter for the time being. Even if a prospective emperor were declared, dissenting nobles would continue to back other heirs, potentially installing a coregency—a state of affairs that could split the empire apart.

The war against Six Kingdoms has to come first. We can decide on the next emperor after that...provided nobody else joins the invasion, that is.

Bordered by Six Kingdoms to the west, the Republic of Steissen to the south, and various smaller nations all around, the Grantzian Empire was built on an extremely fragile balance. If its enemies chose to join hands, they could carve up its territory in short order, and it would quickly be wiped from the map.

And if we want to avoid that...we have to get rid of the nobles who only care about fattening their own purses.

Treachery birthed treachery, and nobles who coveted power and status would be loath to relinquish what they had. Such people didn't have a single patriotic bone in their bodies. At least some of them would be swayed by honeyed words. If promised that their own lands would be spared, it would be an easy matter to turn their coats.

But going about it too crudely will only move them to action. We'll need to do this methodically. That said, with Six Kingdoms at our door, time is a luxury we don't have...which means getting a little heavy-handed.

Hiro expelled a sigh as he looked over the assembly. Almost every face was heavy with worry for the fate of the nation. Only one man stood out, surveying the room with unruffled composure: Second Prince Lupus Scharm Selene von Grantz. Beloved by the people of the northern territories, who knew him as "the King of the North" or "Twinfangs," his androgynous features drew the eye of all alike. Even more remarkable than his looks were his heterochromatic eyes —a quality known as the Baldick, said to be characteristic of heroes of myth. In Selene's case, his left eye was blue and the right was gold, lending him a curious mystique. His sky-blue hair was soft as silk, and his limbs were lithe. Silver armor glinted from beneath his cape of brown furs.

The prince did not seem to have hostile intentions for the moment, but his true goals were, as ever, a mystery. He didn't seem to have any interest in the throne, but he was fiercely protective of the northern territories he called home and appeared prepared to defend them by any means necessary. It would be far more prudent to remove him now than face his opposition later.

But it would be a shame to dispose of him when he could still be useful. First, I'll take advantage of him as much as I can. Or until Liz's position is secure, at least.

Hiro shot a glance at Liz. A deep shadow lay over her porcelain features. Her loss to Stovell seemed to be weighing on her mind, and the fact that Scáthach was yet to wake from her battle wounds could not be helping.

She didn't manage to beat him, but the battle accelerated Lævateinn's awakening, so it wasn't a total loss. Still, there's cause for concern as well. She's not yet mentally mature enough to become an empress.

As she was now, she wouldn't be able to command the nobles' hearts. The sun showered its light equally upon all of its people. It did not reserve its attention for a special few. If she mourned one, she would mourn all. She cared for her people, valued her soldiers, loved her nation.

That's something that a lot of rulers forget.

Liz was well capable of shedding tears for those she did not know. He himself was no stranger to her compassionate nature.

But that's not what she needs right now. She can't afford to let her emotions cloud her judgment.

One month ago, when the emperor was still alive, she could have taken the throne even with that naivete. Now, however, with the emperor dead and a foreign nation invading, it would be far, far more difficult.

The first quality people will look for in the next emperor is level-headed decision-making. They'll need to be able to analyze situations without being influenced by their hearts. Liz has made remarkable progress, but she still hasn't learned how to suppress her emotions.

Bound by no one, ruled by no one, beholden to no one. Those were the qualities of an emperor, and the ideals for which those who desired the throne should strive. Liz was certainly strong enough, but strength alone did not beget a lion's dignity.

And that's not the only problem.

Hiro loosened his collar and heaved a sigh, casting a sidelong glance at Rosa. Her alluring features wore a grave expression, and not just because of the emperor's death. Her plans to seat Liz on the throne would now require significant rewriting.

I've become an obstacle. I should have had her declare her support for Liz earlier.

Recent events had upended the order of succession dramatically. Stovell had led a rebellion on the capital, and even aside from that, he had already relinquished his claim to the throne. After him came Third Prince Brutahl, but the western nobles' power was rapidly waning. Second Prince Selene had rarely

visited the central territories—citing illness, but more likely due to a lack of interest in ruling—and as such was ranked low on the ladder. So who in this room was currently highest? Everybody present would point to Liz.

That was where the problem Hiro was mulling over came into play. Liz had no faction of her own. Nobody supported her claim to the throne. Without noble patrons, her position in the order of succession was only a number, and that made him, the next in line, an obstacle to her ascension. He had the backing of the eastern nobles, and the people loved him for being Mars's descendant. What was more, in the short time since being inducted into the royal family by Artheus's will, he had amassed an impressive string of military accomplishments.

If I declared myself the next emperor right now, nobody could stop me.

And yet...

That would split the empire in half. They *wouldn't just roll over and let me take the throne.*

Hiro turned his gaze on House Maruk and the other nobles. The rest of the central nobles had already begun looking to House Maruk for instruction in place of the fallen House Krone. Evidently, they were not the loyal sorts. Even now, they were whispering amongst themselves anxiously, and it was not difficult to guess who they might be talking about.

"What hole did he crawl out of to show up now?"

"Well said. The man never left the emperor's side...so where was he on that night?"

All of their eyes were on the sallow, thin-faced figure of Byzan Graeci von Scharm—the former head of House Scharm, the emperor's right hand, and the uncle of Second Prince Selene. He had vanished during Stovell's attack on the palace, only to reappear several days later as though nothing was amiss. He, too, was taking part in the council.

As Hiro watched, one of the nobles grew tired of whispering and approached the man directly. "Chancellor Graeci," he said. "It's a marvel that you survived the horrors of that night." The barbs in his words were unmistakable, hinting at

collusion between Graeci and Stovell.

Graeci's expression did not move an inch. "It almost sounds as though you suspect me of something."

"Who wouldn't? Stovell butchered half of the people in the palace. The only survivors were women, children, and those who hid before the killing began...and yet somehow, His Majesty's own right hand miraculously survived. Surely you can see why a man might have his doubts."

Graeci shrugged dismissively. "At the time of the attack, I was absent from the throne room on His Majesty's orders."

"Oh? And what orders were those?"

"To increase the throne room's guard. I was on my way to the entrance hall to fetch a detachment of imperial guards when Stovell arrived—and I did not escape unscathed, as you can see. The man struck quickly and mercilessly." He seemed to shudder at the memory. "Fools that we were, we suspected nothing. We were even relieved to have a Spiritblade wielder in our midst. Quickly did we learn our folly. I suspect most died before they even realized that they were under attack. I myself lost an arm before I knew what was happening."

Graeci clasped a hand around his left sleeve, showing that there was nothing within.

"I tried to swallow my pride and flee to warn His Majesty, but I had lost a great deal of blood, and I fear I passed out. Fortunately, a servant girl intervened to save my life, which is why I stand before you now—alive and ashamed."

"Do you expect us to swallow that hogwash?!" Another noble slammed his hands on the table and rose to his feet. "Stovell wielded a Spiritblade! No man who stood in his way that night lived to tell the tale—none but you! How do you explain that?!"

Other nobles raised their voices in agreement.

"Mortal men are as babes before the Spiritblade Sovereigns. Would you have us accept that you only lost an arm? It defies belief."

“I say he and the first prince were in it together. One arm isn’t too high a price to deflect scrutiny, now is it? And then everything would fall into place.”

Hiro broadly agreed with their suspicions. The chancellor was second only to the emperor in authority. If Stovell’s goal had been to plunge the empire into chaos, he would never have let the man escape alive.

Stovell was strong enough to kill Graeci with one hand tied behind his back...but without any evidence, we have no choice but to let this lie for now.

Besides, a wily old fox like Graeci would not be easily caught.

“This is absurd,” the chancellor snapped at his detractors. “Are you not ashamed to make such baseless accusations?”

The show of anger was a rare sight from a man ordinarily so unflappable. The whispers fell silent as his remaining hand struck the table.

“This is no time to squabble amongst ourselves. As we speak, these western barbarians trample upon the holy soil of the Grantzian Empire—bestowed upon us by the Spirit King himself!”

There was truth in what he said. Bandying accusations without proof was a waste of time, especially with more important matters at hand. The question of his guilt could wait. Recognizing this, the nobles fell silent.

“Now is the time for unity. His Majesty would weep to see this sorry display. If you still wish to accuse me of these preposterous charges, at least have the good grace to wait until we have ousted these interlopers from our lands!”

Hiro internally scowled at Graeci’s audacity, but truth be told, that the chancellor had survived was something of a silver lining. In the emperor’s absence, he was unambiguously the next authority in line, which would make it much easier to decide on a plan of action.

“May we now discuss the matter of Six Kingdoms?” The noble presiding over the assembly sounded unimpressed by the squabbling. Satisfied that nobody objected, he motioned to the civil tribune by his side for a sheaf of paper. “As you are all surely aware, Six Kingdoms’ forces number one hundred and fifty thousand, but our agents report that reinforcements are still arriving from their homeland. Their numbers may swell to two hundred thousand once all is said

and done.”

The nobles listened quietly as he read, but cries of surprise filled the room as he reached the final figure.

“Two hundred thousand? If a force that size entered the central territories, how could we stop them?”

“Can we rely on reinforcements from the other territories?”

“It would take a month or two just to assemble them in the capital. Factor in readying them for battle, and we would need three months at the least.”

“That’s a long time... Could the western nobles hold out that long?”

The final question went unanswered. An air of unease fell over the antechamber.

Seeing the rest fall silent, the presiding noble cleared his throat. “It appears that Six Kingdoms has divided its forces in its attempts to subjugate the western territories. The report claims that they are running amok through the west, taking forts and towns one after another.”

“What of our forces who were maintaining order in Faerzen?” one man asked. “How could they allow the enemy purchase on our soil? Where is Third Prince Brutahl in all of this?”

“And what about High General Vakish?” another piped up. “Is the western border not his charge?”

The presiding noble’s lips tightened bitterly. “Third Prince Brutahl is trapped in Faerzen, along with the men he leads—representing the bulk of the western nobles’ forces. As for High General Vakish...he fought valiantly in defense of the border, but was struck down on the field.”

The empire’s five high generals symbolized its military might. Each had been personally charged with the defense of one of the five territories by the emperor himself. They were the nation’s last and most formidable line of defense against its neighbors. It was not difficult to imagine the fate of Vakish’s corpse. It would have been put to good use persuading the western nobles to lay down their arms.

So he's dead, then...

Hiro had not known Vakish von Hass particularly well, but the Shield of the West had proved a useful ally during the recent attack on Draal. If not for him, Hiro's plan would not have succeeded, and Liz would still be in the hands of the Faerzen Resistance.

"The border guard numbered fewer than ten thousand," the presiding noble continued. "They would have faced almost impossible odds, and the Knights of the Royal Black were with Third Prince Brutahl. Even a high general could not have seized victory."

"How did they sneak such a large force up to the border?" cried a voice. "Do you mean to tell us that we somehow overlooked a hundred and fifty thousand men? If they can move numbers like that without our knowing, who's to say they aren't already in the central territories? We must start planning our defense!" The man was trying to put on a brave face, but he was clearly nervous.

"They infiltrated the Faerzen Resistance, would be my guess." Sensing that the discussion would stall without his input, Hiro gestured to the map on the table. "They split their forces up into small groups and had them join the guerillas. Then, when the time was right, they withdrew them, reassembled them in some central location, and launched an attack on the border."

Faerzen's repeated conflicts had left the land pockmarked with ruined towns, villages, forts, and castles. There was ample space to hide an army if one wanted.

Still, the nobles weren't satisfied with Hiro's explanation.

"With respect, Your Highness," said one, "a hundred and fifty thousand men is an extraordinary number to conceal in such a manner. It would have taken a dizzying amount of time, and they would have had to remain vigilant all the while so as not to be discovered. Forgive me, but your suggestion does not seem possible."

"Then our enemy must have been determined enough to attempt the impossible." Selene answered in an amused tone before Hiro could respond, resting one elbow on the table. "They have been planning this for years, if not

longer. They spent decades, perhaps, laying the foundations brick by brick, taking care to elude our notice. Is that not so?” He smiled at Hiro in search of agreement.



“Exactly. Although it can’t have helped that the empire was distracted.”

A grand and intricate scheme had been at work to topple the empire, but it had been too swollen with pride to care about anything but invading other nations. Now the time had come to pay the price of its short-sightedness.

“What have we done to earn such hatred?” one of the younger nobles lamented.

“The empire is large, and its history is long. We have earned resentment from many quarters.” Another noble answered—an older man, more experienced at court, who knew why Six Kingdoms was invading. He sighed, not in exasperation at the ignorance of the young, but in sorrow for the empire’s sins. “Six Kingdoms’ grievances are particularly just. To borrow His Highness’s turn of phrase, one might say they have been laying these foundations for a thousand years.”

A chapter of history erased. A desperate flight westwards from persecution. These were the stones upon which the ongoing invasion was laid. Six Kingdom was a nation built by those who had once served the Grantzian Empire with all their being: the descendants and followers of Hiro’s very own Black Hand.

As its name implied, Six Kingdoms was a multipartite state formed from a coalition of six kingdoms unified beneath a single high king. Three of those kingdoms could trace their lineage back to members of the Black Hand. The nation was diverse, with beastfolk, álfar, dwarves, and humans existing side by side, although its citizens were said to have a distinctive character, and it went without saying that none of the kingdoms had forgotten their ancestors’ grudges. Although the Black Hand’s disgrace had eventually been forgiven, the empire still refused to acknowledge their descendants, and their erasure from history gave rise to resentment beyond measure. In a sense, the current invasion had been a long time in coming.

As a hush fell over the antechamber, a figure who had been watching the discussion for a long time broke their silence at last.

“Shouldn’t we be talking about what to do next?”

All eyes turned to Sixth Princess Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz. The silken

strands of her crimson hair shimmered like living flame, and a fierce will blazed in her ruby eyes. Her dignified features still retained some youthfulness, but she carried herself with a compelling serenity, like a sculpture chiseled by a master craftsman.

"I thought we were discussing what to do about Six Kingdoms's invasion." She sounded unimpressed by the deviation from the matter at hand.

"Of course, Your Highness. I shall proceed." The presiding noble cleared his throat and unfurled a scroll of parchment on the surface of the table. "Virtually all of the thirty thousand rebel soldiers have laid down their arms, but considering their unstable mental state, it would be challenging to incorporate them into our defense. Factoring in the punishments facing the nobles who took part in the rebellion, the central territories' fighting strength has been severely depleted. We estimate that fifty thousand men could be ready for battle immediately."

However, that was not the whole story. With despairing rebel deserters causing chaos across the central territories and bandits seeking to take advantage of the turmoil, civil order was rapidly unraveling. The figure of fifty thousand did not account for the men who would be needed to keep the peace.

"Accordingly, at present, the number of men we could realistically field stands at twenty thousand."

"Twenty thousand cannot hold off one hundred and fifty," another noble sighed. "We must wait for reinforcements from the other territories."

"Agreed," said a third. "There's nothing for it but to summon aid from the north, the east, and the south. The west will simply have to hold out in the meantime."

"That may be easier said than done," Graeci said with a sour expression.

"How so?"

Hiro stood, holding a sheet of paper in his hand. "I have received a letter from House Muzuk."

The name set the chamber astir. House Muzuk was the great house that ruled the south.

Hiro gave the letter a theatrical smack with the back of his hand, signaling for silence. “The Republic of Steissen is massing its forces on the border. Their numbers are unknown at present, but House Muzuk claims we are looking at much more than just ten or twenty thousand.”

“Impossible,” a noble retorted. “The Republic is preoccupied with a succession conflict. It is in no position to interfere in the wars of other nations.”

“I thought so too, but there is no denying reality. House Muzuk requests that we send the Fourth Legion with all haste.”

The commander of the Fourth Legion was none other than Sixth Princess Celia Estrella. The eyes of the room converged on Liz.

She pursed her lips and expelled a sigh. “I’m happy to send them. They can be ready at short notice. But that will mean we won’t be able to expect any reinforcements from the south.”

Perhaps peace could be brokered with Steissen, perhaps they would need to be driven back by the sword, but either way, resolving the matter would take time. Moreover, the Fourth Legion could not take orders from anybody but their commander, which was Liz—meaning that she would have to travel south and deal with Steissen in person.

“Lady Celia Estrella wields the empire’s only Spiritblade,” a noble opined. “It would be ill advised to send her away. Six Kingdoms is a far greater threat than those Republic bumpkins. I say that we leave House Muzuk to hold out on their own.”

Heads began to nod in agreement around the table, but Hiro begged to differ.

“No, she has to go. This isn’t the time to offend House Muzuk. If they turned against us, the empire really would be finished.”

The west was already crumbling. If the south collapsed as well, the rest of the nation would follow.

“But then... With respect, Lord Hiro, what is to be done about the west?”

“I’ll go. With those twenty thousand men.”

“Not so fast,” Liz interrupted, surprised. “What do you think you can do with a

force that small?”

Hiro scratched his nose and smiled wryly. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to try anything reckless. I’m just going to slow them down so they don’t flood the central territories.”

“Slow them down?”

Hiro nodded. “A hundred and fifty thousand is an enormous number. It’ll take all the empire’s nobles to turn the tables. We need to gather all our forces in the capital, then launch a decisive strike.”

“So we’ll fight them in the central territories?”

“That’s right. As bad as I feel for the people of the west, they’ll just have to hold out. We need to focus on gathering our strength.”

Still, the more time passed, the worse the casualties in the west would grow. More and more nobles would lose faith in the empire, and some might even start working with the enemy. In order to avoid that, Hiro would head west himself with twenty thousand men.

“The people might be disappointed once they learn the size of our force.” Hiro turned away from Liz and looked around the council attendees. “But some of their concern will disappear once they hear that Mars’s scion is leading them.”

Hiro was one of the most important figures in the empire. His presence would send a clear message that Cladius had not abandoned the west, to nobles and commonfolk alike.

“Meanwhile, Third Prince Brutahl should stay in Faerzen and conserve his strength for the decisive battle. When the time comes, we’ll catch Six Kingdoms between two fronts and destroy them.”

That was only armchair theorizing, and more than a little optimistic, but right now it was more important to be confident than correct. He needed to drive any thoughts of betrayal from the nobles’ heads.

“The acting head of House Kelheit should return to the east and gather as many soldiers as she can muster. Meanwhile, Second Prince Selene should stay

in the capital to help plan our offensive against Six Kingdoms." He glanced at Rosa and Selene, who both nodded. "And we'll have to appease the merchants somehow, or we'll face public unrest and economic disruption. With the western trade routes now unreliable, I propose that we look for alternatives."

"A fine idea," Chancellor Graeci broke in, "but do you have something concrete in mind?"

Hiro nodded. *Of course.* "We can work with the Grand Duchy of Draal to avoid economic stagnation. We could also strengthen our trade links with the Kingdom of Lebering in the north. They have plenty of ore. Let's buy it up at twice the usual price, on the condition that they favor our custom. Obviously that's not a permanent measure, but it should stimulate the markets until the war is over."

Graeci fell silent, stroking his chin. After a short while, he finally nodded. "I see. You mean to send the message that our allegiance is profitable."

The first priority now was to prevent any other nations from joining the attack on the empire. If the empire could project a show of confidence to its neighbors, Six Kingdoms would find itself starved for allies, putting it under pressure.

The nobles began to nod in agreement, but Liz looked unsatisfied.

"Stimulating the markets I get. You're expecting this war to drag on, so you want to ease its long-term effects. Fine. But I don't see how that's enough to turn the tables by itself. The west is under attack as we speak. Six Kingdoms could easily stabilize its position there and attack the central territories while we're still putting together our defense."

Her voice was clear and confident. She spoke without hesitation and stated her opinions without reserve.

"How can you even guarantee that the west will hold out until I've dealt with Steissen? You say you're going to slow them down with twenty thousand men, but they have a hundred and fifty. If they split off a smaller force to keep you occupied, you'll be the ones who end up stuck." She looked him dead in the eyes. "What then?"

Hiro's mouth fell open. For a moment, he forgot where he was. He had never expected Liz to be the one to call him out. He had kept the details of his plan vague in order to distract the nobles from its holes, but apparently there was no getting past her.

Maybe I shouldn't be surprised. She's been making incredible progress.

She had been learning politics from Rosa and strategy from Aura, or so he was told. Nobody had put her up to this. She had simply thought his plans through, found problems, and voiced them of her own accord. He almost smiled and had to hold it back. She really had grown.

Then it's only fair to meet you where you're at.

He recovered his composure and prepared to ease her concerns—and perhaps her doubts.

"That's a fair question, but Six Kingdoms will have to stay in the west for a while, no matter what. Let me explain." He moved a finger slowly across the map. "Firstly, they haven't secured their supply lines yet. However many years they spent planning this, they can't possibly have enough food to feed a hundred and fifty thousand men. But they can't just plunder it from imperial settlements."

"Why not?" Liz cocked her head. "If they hate the empire that much, I don't see what would stop them."

"It's winter. If they start stealing food, people will starve. The commonfolk will resist them and might even revolt. If they want to keep control of the west and use it to stage an invasion of the central territories, they can't be that short-sighted."

Unless the commander was inept, they would never let their soldiers start looting. That might change if they suffered heavy losses, but Six Kingdoms was currently in a dominant position. They would want to avoid taking unnecessary risks.

"I see... I see." Liz nodded as she mulled Hiro's words over.

Hiro continued gently. "And there's one more thing. In order to reach their homeland, they'll have to stretch their supply lines across Faerzen. They have

collaborators there, but we have Third Prince Brutahl. With him tracking down and destroying their supply routes, we can stall them until we're ready to fight."

Wars couldn't be waged without food, food couldn't be grown without people, and people couldn't be born without land. If Six Kingdoms had set their sights beyond short-term conquest, they could not ignore those three principles.

"With all these variables at play, it's highly unlikely that Six Kingdoms will launch an immediate attack on the central territories. They'll wait until they're ready and then come in full force, just like us."

After gathering one hundred and fifty thousand men, defeat was out of the question.

"So there's nothing to worry about. We'll have enough time to gather our forces."

In Hiro's heart of hearts, however, he knew the truth was quite the opposite. Six Kingdoms would attack as soon as they were able.

Everything we're thinking will have occurred to them too. They're sure to have thought of solutions. With an army that size, in winter, they'll want to close out the fighting as quickly as possible.

He glanced at Liz. She was making thoughtful noises as she pondered to herself. She still didn't seem quite convinced.

I shouldn't have any trouble sending her to see House Muzuk.

He smoothed himself down, looked over the other attendees, and asked if anybody had anything more to offer. Nobody spoke. Satisfied that there were no dissenting opinions, he sat back down.

"Well, if we are all in agreement, let us discuss who shall take what role." Chancellor Graeci stood up and proceeded matter-of-factly with the agenda.

That should do for now.

Hiro looked down at his hands, and the letter from House Muzuk that they held.

* * * * *

Once the assembly had concluded, Hiro left the antechamber behind and set out down the hallway in silence. Various nobles hurried past him as he walked, although not all moved with the same impatience. The central nobles with lands near the west seemed close to panic, while those from the far-flung lands of the north walked far more deliberately, as though they saw present events as none of their concern.

Some people care a lot more about this war than others.

Until now, the empire's battles had been fought in limited arenas. Never before had it been embroiled in a war on a truly national scale. To most, the conflict probably still seemed like a distant affair. By nature, human beings did not register danger until it threatened them personally; the nobles wouldn't truly panic until their own lands came under attack, and that was creating a disparity in urgency. The empire's long years without war had left its noble class without any sense of self-preservation.

Peace has gone to their heads.

Now they were too desensitized to recognize a national crisis. Their minds had lost their edge. He spotted a group of them talking merrily, as though nothing was wrong, and his mood soured further. His steps sped up as he decided to make a swift exit.

"Stop right there, Hiro."

He turned toward the voice. There stood Liz with her hands on her hips, cheeks puffed out but eyes kind. The sight of her face eased the anger bubbling in his chest.

"What's wrong?"

"What do you mean, what's wrong? What do you think you can do with twenty thousand men?"

"As I said, I'm just going to buy time to gather our forces."

"Are you *really?*" Liz stepped closer. All of a sudden, her beautiful face was only inches away.

Hiro took an involuntary step back. "Of course. Do you think I'm going to try

and fight a hundred and fifty thousand men head-on? That would be crazy.”

Liz raised an admonishing finger. “Just don’t do anything reckless. I’ll be back the minute I’ve sent Steissen packing, so you just sit tight and wait for me. Got that?”

“All right. I’ll wait.”

He gave her a bright smile, but she only stared back skeptically through half-lidded eyes. She had started questioning him a lot more recently—not that she had stopped trusting him, but she no longer accepted his words uncritically. Now she thought them through for herself and pushed back with her own opinions rather than swallowing them in their entirety. That augured well for the future, but in the present situation, it was becoming a problem.

“Oh, I meant to ask. Could you take Garda and the rest with you on your way south?”

“You mean Huginn and Muninn too?”

“If you could.”

Liz’s brows pulled together suspiciously.

Hiro smiled sheepishly. “The Crow Legion is in Berg Fortress, tending to their wounded. I want you to bring them with you on your way back to the central territories.”

“I can do that myself. Those three would be better off staying with you.”

“The Crow Legion used to be sellswords, and we still haven’t sanded off all their rough edges. They might not listen to you if push came to shove. That’s why you need Garda.” He didn’t truly believe that, but this wasn’t the time for the truth. “And I also want you to introduce the Fourth Legion and the Crow Legion’s officers to one another. Both sides will be more comfortable relying on people they know, and they’ll fight together better as a result.”

“Okay. I’ll try.”

“Thank you. I’ll buy time for you to get back.”

“All right.” Liz nodded, but her expression remained conflicted. She looked at him through upturned eyes, as though she wanted to ask something.

He gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “There’s nothing to worry about. You’re perfectly capable of beating Steissen by yourself. You don’t need me anymore.”

In spite of the praise, Liz pouted. “Do you really think so?”

So he had been correct earlier. Her loss to Stovell was still preying on her mind, preventing her from having full confidence in herself. That would take a heavy-handed intervention to redress.

But don’t worry. I have a plan. I know this won’t stop you.

He stowed his thoughts away deep within his chest and settled for an evasive answer. “I do. Just keep walking straight ahead and you’ll be fine.”

He would pave the road beneath her feet. He would give her the confidence to overcome her doubts. Without that, she would never be able to ascend to the heavens and become the new sun.

Liz still didn’t look fully reassured, but more words wouldn’t be any help. If battle had robbed her of her confidence, only in battle that she could regain it.

“Oh, right. How is Scáthach doing?”

“She’s still unconscious, but the doctors say she should wake up soon. Her wounds are healing well.”

“I want you to take her with you too, once she’s awake. She might want to stay behind, but don’t let her. She needs to focus on recovering.”

Scáthach had been wounded grievously fighting Stovell and his Fallen. Her Spiritblade’s blessing had saved her from death, but even so, her injuries could have left an ordinary person bedridden for the rest of their days. Considering the oath she had sworn with Hiro, she would undoubtedly agree to join Liz.

“With how stubborn she can be, she might take some persuading, but she won’t be able to say no to you.”

“I do want her to get better, but...”

“Good.” With a small smile and a pat on Liz’s shoulder, Hiro brought the conversation to an end. “Now, there’s no time to waste. The people of the west are suffering as we speak. We both need to get to work.”

“All right. I...suppose I’ll tell you when we’re ready to leave?”

As Liz blinked in confusion, Hiro strode past her and away down the corridor. Not once did he look back.

“Hiro?”

Her voice rang out plaintively, but it never reached his ears, vanishing in vain into silence.

* * * * *

Several places in the empire were barred to all but a select few. One of them was the ruins of the inner palace, a stretch of bare land behind the main keep of Venezyne. The building that once stood there had been torn down following the tragedy of fifteen years prior. Nothing had ever been built to replace it, leaving a gaping hole in the palace complex.

Another such place was the graveyard where the remains of past emperors were interred. Rumor held that it lay somewhere beneath Venezyne.

And only the emperor and his heir are permitted to enter...

It was dusk. Hiro's footsteps echoed in the silence—the palace residents still avoided the corridor where so much blood had been spilled. He arrived at his destination, a guest chamber, to find two men standing outside. They turned to him and bowed. One was Chancellor Graeci. The other was the chief gravewarden.

"Your Highness. Thank you for coming."

He had been summoned by Chancellor Graeci.

"I hear there have been intruders on the imperial burial grounds?"

Chancellor Graeci raised his head. "Indeed, Your Highness. It appears that a number of ruffians broke in during the chaos."

The chief gravewarden fell to his knees. "I can only apologize, Your Highness. I will gladly accept any punishment you name."

"Could you show me the place first? You can tell me more on the way."

"O-Of course, Your Highness. This way, if you would." The gravewarden rose and turned, indicating for Hiro to follow.

Graeci turned to Hiro. "Then I must part ways with you here. Only those with royal blood may enter the burial grounds."

"I see. Thank you, chancellor."

Graeci inclined his head. "By your leave." With that, he turned to depart.

Hiro watched him go, eyes fixed on the man's missing shoulder.

What a farce. I should cut his head off right here.

Anger welled up from the deepest recesses of his heart, filling his mind with a murderous impulse. He laid a hand on his chest and breathed deep. Gradually, the hot rage receded and his breathing steadied.

If I kill him now, the rest will get away. He's only the tip of the iceberg.

Stovell, Graeci, and many others were a rot infesting the empire, but even they, the most powerful figures in the greatest nation in Soleil, were only the tail of a larger beast. The body and the head beyond lay hidden in darkness, and Hiro would have dearly liked to know what both were up to.

I'll drag you out into the light, just you wait and see.

His mouth drew into an ominous smile as he stared at the shadows lingering in the corridor.

"If you would come with me, Your Highness?" the gravewarden said.

Hiro snapped back to reality and followed.

The underground catacombs where past emperors slumbered lay in a part of the palace known as the Passage of Emptiness. Riddled with secret doors and trapped rooms to snare intruders, it was no place to enter lightly—not that one could enter at all without imperial permission. Nobody was watching now, however; not now that the emperor was dead and his gale had ceased.

"Please take care not to touch the walls, Your Highness," warned the chief gravewarden as Hiro peered around. "I am being quite serious when I say that it is a matter of life and death."

Hiro had been about to do just that. He withdrew his hand and smiled sheepishly. "They're trapped, then."

He didn't know how potent the traps might be, but it would be best not to test them. The Black Camellia would likely protect him from harm, but he shuddered to imagine what might happen to the man beside him.

"Here, Your Highness."

At last, the chief gravewarden came to a stop before a blank wall and laid his hand on the stone. There was a heavy grating noise. Cool air pricked at Hiro's skin. In short order, a staircase appeared, leading down. Torches lined the walls,

illuminating the dingy passage just enough to make out one's footing.

The gravewarden went down the stairs first. His hunched figure led the way to a long corridor. The far end was shrouded in darkness, but the man forged ahead into the gloom without hesitation. On the way, they passed a corpse lying on the ground, bearing the wounds of a vicious battle.

"One of my subordinates," the chief gravewarden supplied, seeing that Hiro had notice the body. "The intruders cut him down without mercy."

That body was only the first. As they proceeded down the corridor, the number grew to two, five, eight.

Something odd struck Hiro. "Didn't any of the intruders fall?"

"To my great regret, they did not." There was more than a note of bitterness in the man's voice. Hiro hadn't known the gravewardens, but they couldn't have been slouches if they had been charged with protecting the resting place of the rulers of the empire, and yet they had not managed to slay a single one of the intruders. It was not hard to imagine the shame their head might feel.

The corpses' wounds recalled a memory in Hiro's mind: a secretive order of assassins.

Orcus—the assassins who slew an emperor.

Viscount von Wirst, the ruler of the satellite city of Sieg, had been killed in much the same way. Both eyes gouged out and the brain destroyed—a sickeningly ruthless method. A small clay figurine lay beside each of the bodies, headless and eerie.

Made in the image of the figure they call their Father...

He didn't know what that meant, but he could feel the emotions it stirred. Powerful passions: obsession, hatred, rage. But he couldn't find any answers in their midst. It was like groping around in a dark thicket for something he had dropped.

Answers continued to elude him as he and the gravewarden reached the end of the corridor and emerged into a wide space. If there was a ceiling above, it was obscured by darkness. The only light in the place was what the torches

supplied; beyond lay a deep abyss that looked like it could swallow them whole.

The gravewarden began to speak as Hiro looked around. “One thousand years ago, one of the Five Lords of Heaven ruled this place, or so the legends say. The most solitary and most terrible of them all: the Black-Winged Lord. A name to strike the world with fear, Your Highness. All trembled at his coming, and his dreadful might threatened all five peoples with extinction.”

He began to walk, still talking.

“But at last, a hero rose to strike down that most terrible of monarchs. This place fell into human hands and the capital was built atop it. When His Majesty the First Emperor knew his time was nigh, he decreed that he be interred here, and so it became the imperial burial grounds. It is the most holy site in the city.”

It was noticeably warmer down here than the wintry climes above ground. Perhaps some vestige of this Lord’s power still lingered here, or perhaps the curious mounds that lined the earth had some kind of heating effect.

“By the way...” Hiro kept his voice flat as he changed the subject. “May I ask why you’ve called me here?”

“As Mars’s scion, you have a right to know what has transpired.” The gravewarden shook his head. “Or rather, I should say, I could entrust this matter to none other than His Majesty the Second Emperor’s blood.”

Hiro cocked his head. “The right to know what?”

The chief gravewarden stopped and raised an arm. “Do you see the mounds that surround us, Your Highness?”

Hiro scanned his surroundings again. Sure enough, here and there the earth rose up into small hills.

“They are called the Thousand Barrows, if the legends are to be believed—so named in the hope that the empire’s prosperity will endure for one thousand generations. A past emperor slumbers beneath each one. And the one behind me at this moment...” The chief gravewarden turned and bowed his head. “Is the tomb of His Majesty the Second Emperor.”

A grass-covered barrow rose before him. The blades were neatly trimmed,

evidently maintained on a regular basis. A high fence rose around the mound, studded with glittering jewels. A great hole formed the entrance. Something about it seemed wrong, however. While everywhere else seemed to have been kept dutifully clean, the entrance was littered with rubble. It was clear at a glance: the grave had been desecrated by someone or something.

"There ought to be a door there," the chief gravewarden continued, "and a casket within. Yet now, it is as you see."

If the barrow had been intentionally destroyed, there was no mystery as to what Hiro would find if he stepped inside.

"So somebody took advantage of the chaos in the palace to rob the second emperor's grave?"

The gravewarden cocked his head dubiously. "So I believed at first, but oddly, nothing was stolen. Well, only one thing, I should say." He fished something out of his pocket and held it out. "The intruders left the jewels where they lay. They took only the body within...and left this in the casket in its place."

In the man's wrinkled palm lay a headless clay figure.

Hiro took the object and regarded it for a moment with lifeless eyes. "What about the other barrows? Were they broken into?"

"No, Your Highness. Only His Majesty the Second Emperor's barrow was desecrated. The others were left untouched."

The thieves had ignored the jewels and other valuables and gone straight for the second emperor's corpse. Clearly, this had been no normal graverobbing. In the first place, the body they were there to steal was alive and well.

That casket should have been empty.

Well, there might have been a body inside, but that would have been a double, not the real thing. Even more confusing than that, however, was why they had targeted the second emperor's barrow at all.

"They seek the revival of their Father," indeed...

Hiro looked back at the clay figurine in his hand.

All of a sudden, a chill ran up his spine. He spun around, scanning his

surroundings with a piercing gaze. The air began to groan beneath the aura of power he projected. However, while he had intended it to warn away any potential attackers, it was the chief gravewarden who suffered; the man clutched at his chest and dropped to one knee.

“Ah... Sorry about that.”

Once Hiro was satisfied that there was nobody lurking in the shadows, he turned his menace down a notch. Even so, he remained alert. Gently, softly, he breathed in and out. His gaze, sweeping back and forth, came to rest on a particular location.

“Is something amiss, Your Highness?” The chief gravewarden peered at the same spot, but there was only empty air. Sweat trickled down his face.

“No, it’s nothing.”

Even so, Hiro’s black eyes did not move a millimeter. They stayed fixed on exactly the same location. Darkness roiled, black and forbidding, as though refusing all who would approach. He lowered his bloodlust by another shade.

“I-Is there something there, Your Highness?” the chief gravewarden interjected, seeing that Hiro was still on edge.

Hiro shot the man a sidelong glance. “Where is the first emperor’s grave?”

His wrinkled face creased in hesitation. Hiro peered suspiciously into the darkness one last time and looked away.

“Let’s try that again. Where is the first emperor’s grave?” The edge of threat in his voice made clear that he would not entertain any evasive answers.

The chief gravewarden bowed low. “I fear I cannot say, Your Highness,” he replied, his voice wavering. “His Majesty the First Emperor’s barrow is said only to appear before those who are chosen to succeed the throne.”

The man was not lying. Hiro sensed no falsehood from his trembling figure. He was telling the truth, as best he understood it, and if he truly did not know, there was no point in questioning him further. There was nothing else to do but track down the odd presence from before.

“I’m going to check whether the intruders left any other traces behind. I

assume that won't be a problem?"

"Of course not, Your Highness." The chief gravewarden stood and caught his breath before continuing hesitantly, sensing that Hiro wanted to be left alone. "If you would excuse me, I ought to take my leave. Someone must attend to the corpses of my foolish apprentices, and the new security measures we must implement will not install themselves."

"All right. Feel free to head back aboveground ahead of me. I can remember the way back."

"If you require anything else, you need only call. I will hasten to your side at once."

The man bobbed his head several times and departed at a rapid pace. Once his crooked back was out of sight, Hiro set off on his own, intent on tracking down whatever it was that had been watching him. He plunged into the darkness without hesitation, walking toward the presence that he had sensed earlier.

After some time, an enormous rock came into view. It was three times his height and many times broader, to the point that he could not see the far edges.

"That's strange. How did I miss something this big?"

He looked back over his shoulder but found only darkness looming before him. It was the same all around. He hadn't walked quite *that* far from the light; some kind of power must have been at work.

"It wouldn't exactly be out of character for Artheus to have installed something weird in here..." With a wry grin, Hiro extended a hand toward the rock. His fingers touched the stone.

A change came over the wall. A faint light flared across the rock face before flowing down to the ground, where it dispersed. Again and again, the glow appeared and dissipated, as insubstantial as a smattering of raindrops, yet somehow sublime. The world flickered between light and dark, a spectacle that struck the heart with unaccountable grief.

Gradually, the glow began to change color; black to white, white to red, red to

gold. A dazzling light filled Hiro's field of vision, painting the darkness with golden hues.

"Subtlety never was your strong suit, was it?" A fond smile spread across Hiro's face as he closed his eyes against the glare.

In time, he felt the light recede. Darkness fell over the world once more.

He opened his eyes to see a cavern lying before him. The gloom was so heavy that he could not see through it even if he squinted. Even so, it was not fear that stirred in his chest, but a sense of reassurance. Something about this place set his mind at ease.

"Now, let's see who was watching me."

He strode confidently into the hollow. At once, the landscape around him changed—no, not merely changed, but became something else entirely. He might have strayed into a different world altogether, so strange and wondrous was the sight that unfolded before him.

"Well, now. How did you ever make something like this?"

It was a field of flowers. Vivid petals bloomed proudly as far as the eye could see. The sun shone down above his head, bathing the landscape in brilliant light. Yet something else drew his attention far more strongly. Something that lay in the center of the field, half-buried in blossoms, dominating the scene.

A golden casket.

He chuckled. "Now that's just ugly. Although it's certainly your style."

A gentle wind brushed his skin, dancing around him before reluctantly departing. He turned, sensing someone behind him.

"And here you are."

There stood a young man, calm and regal: Leon Welt Artheus von Grantz, the first emperor of the Grantzian Empire and Hiro's blood-brother. Despite the similarity in appearance, however, the faintly glowing apparition was clearly not the man himself. When Hiro looked with Uranos, he could see that it was nothing more than an amalgamation of spirits.

"You have done well to find this place. It does not reveal itself to those of

weak resolve.” Artheus began to speak in a mechanical tone. “Many memories linger here. Strong emotions do not fade with the passing of the years, but endure forevermore. The spirits take them into themselves, preserving the desires and dreams of past emperors for future generations.”

The contrast between his affected speech and blank expression was vaguely comical. Even knowing that he was only a collection of spirits, the result was uncanny to someone like Hiro, who had known the man in the flesh.

Artheus, indifferent to Hiro’s unease, spread his arms theatrically. “You have been chosen to take on a great trial. You have been deemed worthy to inherit the desires of your predecessors, taking on the sins of the Grantzian Empire and the inescapable fate of its emperors.”

He raised an arm and pointed. Hiro turned to see a figure standing before the golden casket, head bowed. There was something of Artheus in the man’s features, a familiarity that made Hiro cock his head, but the sight of the tears trickling down his cheeks stopped any further thoughts in their tracks.

“Forgive me, Father... Forgive me, Lord Schwartz... I... I cannot...”

A short distance away was a red-haired man carrying four weapons that looked very much like the Spiritblade Sovereigns. He stood straight-backed, arms folded, his handsome visage trained on the casket.

“This turbulent age is a mire of lies and schemes. Whispers in the shadows plot to bring me low. But if you say this must be done, I will cleave them all asunder and lead the empire to greater heights.”

A third man appeared beside the second. This one, Hiro recognized. Indeed, he could not have forgotten his face if he had tried. It was Liz’s father, the murdered emperor Greiheit.

“Oh...” Greiheit sobbed. “How can this be? By what cruel fate...”

With his shoulders hunched and tears streaming from his eyes, he looked almost too fragile to be an emperor. A red-haired baby slept cradled in his arms.

“Liz... Oh, Liz... I could not protect your mother... Please, forgive your foolish father...”

The corners of his eyes creased with sorrow as he brushed the child's cheek tenderly. There was more love in that gesture than he had ever seemed capable of in life.

"Lord Artheus, I beg you, choose anyone but her. Let her live a life of peace. Let her never know the fires of war." His anguish spilled straight from his soul, raw emotion dredged up from the depths of his heart. "If a price must be paid, I offer myself in her stead. I ask only that you keep her safe from harm."

Some repented their sins, others proclaimed their strength, yet others knelt and prayed. All manner of lingering sentiments began to gather before the casket. Hiro fell to his knees as pain lanced through his skull. Rage, sorrow, joy, hatred—all manner of feelings mingled, melded, merged. The first emperor's resting place stored a vast amount of data. Emotions flowed into his chest in volumes that even Uranos could not process.

"If you have found this place, you have the right to know the truth."

Hiro looked up at the false Artheus, one hand clapped over his aching eye.

"Glean from it as much or as little as you will...but the Time of Turning is coming, and you must make ready."

The aggregation of spirits might not be the real Artheus, but it had certainly nailed the original's habit of saying his piece and vanishing. Perhaps spirits naturally moved at their own pace, or perhaps it was simply reading from a predetermined script. Either way, its explanation was lacking.

"You must carry on my will. That is all I desire."

With that, the spirits dispersed. A sudden gust blew through the cavern, rushing skyward. Hiro watched it go before loosening his collar and expelling a sigh.

"It looks like I'd better start looking for the rest."

He needed answers, even if he had no choice but to grope for them in the dark. This was less fate and more inevitable. His return to this world a thousand years after bidding it farewell—his very presence here—had twisted its foundations, and he had a responsibility to deal with the consequences.

The ache in his eye had subsided now. He rose to his feet and approached the golden casket. Its ostentatious design was clearly intended to inspire awe, but otherwise, there was nothing special about it.

“Am I supposed to open it? I’m not exactly eager to see Artheus’s shrunken corpse.”

As he wondered what to do, a strange object in the corner of his eye caught his attention.

“What do we have here?”

It was an old book. He picked it up. As he glanced through the contents, he felt the power of the spirits flow into him. It had been imbued within the tome itself, likely to ensure its pages never rotted.

“Now that I think about it, he did say something about learning his letters to leave something behind for future generations...”

Smiling wryly, Hiro traced the flowing script with a finger. It was written in Artheus’s hand. It seemed he might be holding the first emperor’s memoirs.

The beginning of the book was familiar, but as he read on, he found himself becoming more and more suspicious of the timeline of events. Eventually, the discrepancies put him in mind of a certain book. He reached into the Black Camellia and pulled out the White Chronicle.

“Two, yet one. I suppose now they’re whole again. If I’d known this was going to happen, I would have brought the Black Chronicle as well.”

He laid the two books side by side on top of the golden casket and began to read, glancing between them as he gently turned the pages.

* * * * *

Fort Mitte, in Old Duret in the southwest of Faerzen

As Hiro scratched his head far beneath the palace, an overcast sky loomed over Fort Mitte. The clouds were gray and low and filled with unease.

A few months prior, Old Duret had been the site of a vicious battle between Scáthach, princess of Faerzen, and Aura, the famed Warmaiden of the Grantzian Empire. The fiercest of the fighting had occurred at Fort Mitte.

Erected to protect the province's inhabitants from the monsters that prowled the foothills of the Travant Mountains, the fort had lost its original purpose with the fall of Faerzen, but it had still weathered numerous battles and remained a bastion standing guard over the west.

Six Kingdoms' assault had robbed it of even that. Now it was little better than a pile of rubble. Its walls had fallen, its buildings were burning, and its surroundings were littered with charred corpses. The stench of scorched rust filled the air. Piles of bodies grew ever larger as new additions were heaped on. Great pools of blood grew stagnant on the ground, the earth beneath having already drunk its fill.

The battle was not yet done. Pockets of resistance still held out. The girl knew that their efforts would be as brief as they were futile, but even so, she could not help but voice her frustration.

"Such foolishness. What can their defiance possibly win but greater suffering?"

Her lip curled with distaste as she peered through her complement of burly soldiers at the dust clouds rising from the battlefield. She flicked open her fan to fend off the death-stink floating on the breeze.

"'Tis a heinous waste of time and nothing more."

"They are desperate, Your Majesty. They are unwilling to give up control of Fort Mitte so soon after winning it from the Faerzen Resistance...not that much remains for them to guard." The handsome young commander at her side smiled, although in light of the sordid scene before him, the expression was more cruel than reassuring.

"I had such high expectations of this third prince's mettle, yet I find them all sadly dashed. What a bore he has been."

The girl made no attempt to conceal her disdain. She glared down at the man seated before her, gaze laden with scorn.

"Why, he was nothing to speak of at all. A mediocrity to the bone, no Spiritblade to his name. I had hoped that he might possess in strategy what he lacked in strength, yet what did I find but a brutish oaf? How utterly

disappointing. ’Tis a farce that I should have to entertain him at all.” She ran her fingers along the edge of her fan. “Is that not so, Third Prince Brutahl?”

Brutahl—a bald-pated man dressed in gaudy finery—scowled in shame. How stunned the nobles of the capital would have been to see him bound; they would have fainted clean away, either out of loyal outrage or just plain shock. Regardless, he glared fiercely back up at his captors, refusing to surrender his dignity even in captivity. As he did, he caught sight of the serpent banner by the girl’s side.

“I know that flag. You’re from the Kingdom of Anguis.”

“Oh? You know of us. Then tell me, who presently rules Anguis?”

“Why should I care who rules some insignificant border province a thousand sel to the west?”

“Insignificant, are we? How very droll.” The girl laughed, but her eyes were not smiling. All at once, her arm was a blur.

“Gah!”

Brutahl went flying. He bounced across the ground, blood spraying from his mouth. At last he came to rest in a cloud of dust.

The girl rose from her chair and stepped toward him. “Then learn it now. Perhaps the pain will prove a sufficient reminder.” With a thrust of her chin, she motioned for a soldier to haul Brutahl to his feet. “I am Lucia Levia du Anguis, the queen of Anguis of Six Kingdoms—that which you call an insignificant border province.”

She spread her fan and raised it over her mouth. Her dainty eyebrows rose with mirth. A queen, she called herself, and she looked the part, radiating regal dignity.

Brutahl chuckled. “Oh, you rule the place? I do apologize. I thought a prostitute had strayed onto the battlefield.”

“Watch your tongue, imbecile.”

“Agh!”

Again, her arm moved with blinding speed. Brutahl’s jaw snapped upward. A

gout of blood flew from his mouth, coloring the sky with a crimson spray and the white of several teeth.

“Ngah!”

He tried to clench his jaw against the pain, but blood poured through the gaps where his teeth had been. The strength left his legs and he surrendered to gravity, collapsing onto his behind. “Curse you...” he snarled, staring back up at Lucia. His features twisted in agony.

She gave a bark of laughter. “Now that’s more like it. Much more to my liking.”

“I must advise restraint, Your Majesty,” the young commander cautioned. “He has value as a hostage.”

Lucia tapped her fan against the space between her eyebrows. “What a bore, to have to keep such a tedious man alive...”

Brutahl sneered back at his captors. “My life is worth less than you might think. My father has never had any need of me.”

Lucia doubled over with laughter, clutching at her belly. If not for the mud, she might have rolled around on the ground. “You cannot mean... Oh, how can you not know? How blissfully ignorant!” She wiped the tears from her eyes, but her voice still trembled, as though she might break out into hysterics again at any second. “Are you truly unaware that your emperor is dead?”

“What?”

Brutahl stared back dumbly. He did not seem to comprehend. He was not at fault—he had received word of House Krone’s rebellion, but the highest echelons of the court had suppressed news of the emperor’s passing. Not that it would have made much difference in any case; he had been too preoccupied with the battle against Six Kingdoms to receive messengers.



“Shall I tell you how he passed? ’Tis no precious secret—”

“Shut your lying mouth! My father, dead? Nonsense! He would not, could not! He is the leader of the Grantzian Empire, the greatest nation in the world! None could ever get the better of him!”

Brutahl’s earnest love for his father was admirable, but as unwavering as his trust might be, it was tragically misplaced. Greiheit may have been an emperor, but he was still human, the frailest of the five peoples. Their lifespans were short, their best years brief, and they were apt to die from the slightest of injuries.

“He wields a Spiritblade! He is one of the Spirit King’s chosen few!”

His faith in the spirits could only be described as blind zealotry. The Spirit King might have been one of the Five Lords of Heaven, but he was not almighty. Spirits were humanity’s companions, their neighbors, and the safeguarders of their hopes and dreams.

“The Spiritblades grant power in accordance with their wielder’s desires, ’tis true...but as the wielder’s body fails, such a treasure becomes as a pearl before swine.”

In his youth, Greiheit had been a mighty warrior indeed. Lucia had heard tales of his exploits. Yet while his latter years had been marked by a fixation on conquest, no champion could defeat the ravages of age.

“I hear ’twas First Prince Stovell who cut off his head.”

Brutahl paled. “My brother? Surely not...”

“Is Stovell not also... How did you put it? ‘One of the Spirit King’s chosen few?’”

The prince looked down at the ground, visibly shaken. He seemed deaf to Lucia’s words.

“Cat got your tongue? A pity. I thought you might scream a little more.”

Lucia had received word of the emperor’s death at Stovell’s hands, but she was more interested in the appearance of Mars’s scion. That was a development she had not expected. The hero’s bloodline, rediscovered at last

after a thousand long years. Distantly, she felt the gears of the ages grind into motion. If the reports of that vexing creature Nameless could be trusted, he was the genuine article, although that seemed difficult to believe.

“I had believed our alliance long buried, and yet...”

She looked down at her arm, and the veins pulsing beneath her skin. Blood could be a troublesome thing. A bond once sworn could not be undone, no matter how many centuries passed in the interim.

“What to do? There is little so troublesome to handle as a hero’s heir...”

Would he prove a tempest who would cleave open a new era, or a savior who would restore an age long past?

The fluttering of the serpent flag brought Lucia back to reality.

“Do excuse me. My musings got the better of me, I fear. But such things can wait. Now, I shall decide your fate.” With an abashed smile, she spread her fan to cover her mouth, regarding Prince Brutahl with icy eyes.

“Have you decided what to do with him, Your Majesty?” The young commander’s smile never faltered.

Lucia nodded. “We make for the western territories, do we not? He is certain to come in useful there. In the meantime, let us see what information we can squeeze from him.”

“Understood, Your Highness.” The man glanced at the guards, who picked up Brutahl beneath the arms and hoisted him to his feet.

“You’d best be prepared.” Brutahl forced out the words through lips twisted in pain. “The Grantzian Empire is the rightful ruler of all Soleil. If you expect it to roll over and die, you had better think twice.”

His show of determination was admirable, but the baseless confidence of it grated on Lucia’s nerves. “May you prove at least a little entertaining,” she said, resettling herself in her chair as the guards took him away.

“It will be useful, having him on hand,” the young commander commented. “Some of the empire’s western nobles continue to resist us fiercely. Have you considered clapping a collar on him and walking him by your side as we march?

That ought to show them the futility of their efforts."

Lucia peered at him dubiously. "You do have the most twisted mind, Seleucus. Has anybody ever told you that?"

Seleucus shrugged blithely. "A suggestion, nothing more. Many in the empire view the royal family as gods. If they see that we hold one of their princes as a slave, they may be more willing to serve us."

"I shall consider it. So? How fares the battle?"

"Our conquest of Fort Mitte is almost complete. We have taken around thirty thousand prisoners. What would you see done with them, Your Majesty? Shall we take them with us?"

"Why should we do that? 'Twill only slow us down." Lucia pressed her fan to her chin and pretended to think, indulging the jest. "Take those who serve the Grantzian royal family and behead them. If we have Third Prince Brutahl, we have no need of his followers."

"Very good, Your Majesty. What of the rest?"

"Send messengers to our homeland. They will ransom those they can and sell those they cannot as slaves. Anybody else is yours to execute as you wish. Some must serve as a warning, after all." Resolve glittered in Lucia's eyes. She flicked open her fan and raised it toward the distant Grantzian Empire. "And now we march, proclaiming Faerzen's liberation and rallying its people to our cause."

"And we must regroup with the Vulpes siblings too."

Lucia nodded. "One fears what they may do if left to their own devices."

"I only hope they haven't burned all of the western territories to ash. The sister at least has a level head on her shoulders, but the brother takes a little too much joy in slaughter."

"Their strength is beyond reproach, no doubt about that. I would not have brought them with me otherwise. And they will not tug too hard at the leash. They understand well the position they are in."

"Ousted from their throne." Seleucus's voice was a whisper, barely audible above the clamor of battle.

“Indeed. The Vulpes siblings are prodigies, ’tis true, but only as mundane men are prodigies. *She,* on the other hand, is a genius in the truest sense.” One figure loomed large in Lucia’s mind, peerless in battle and unmatched in wisdom—the closest in all of Six Kingdoms to the position of High King. “So much so that she puts all other claims of genius to shame. A mind so transcendent as to render the exceptional mundane—why, her very existence is an affront to good sense.”

Seleucus smiled ruefully and sighed. Evidently, he had been thinking of the same person. She had already secured the support of four royal houses. If nothing was done, she would be the next High Queen.

“The entire nation believed that I was next in line to the throne, but she showed me the error of my ways. My own fault, perhaps, for sitting on my hands, but that I should be reduced to glory-seeking... ’Tis poor comedy, don’t you think?”

Lucia rose to her feet and gazed at the eastern sky.

“Shall we depart at once, Your Majesty?” Seleucus asked.

She snapped her fan shut. “We shall. Leave the Vulpes siblings for too long, and they shall begin to poach glories that are rightfully mine.”

Seleucus grinned wryly. “I see you aren’t so different after all.”

Lucia brought her fan to her shoulder with a sharp *clack.* “Our work here is done, Seleucus. Let us pay a visit to this Lord of Eld.”

Chapter 2: Dark Deceptions

The sixth day of the first month of Imperial Year 1024

Outwardly, the imperial palace of Venezyne was regaining its usual hustle and bustle. Officials passed through the gates, nobles traded tidings, and sentries kept a vigilant watch. Normality was reasserting itself in the wake of the rebellion.

Inside, however, the walls were still damaged, and the long passage that led to the throne room hadn't yet been scrubbed of bloodstains. The palace residents had taken to avoiding the place, unwilling to revisit their memories of the horrors that had occurred there.

Hiro strode along the passage, heading for the entrance. Raised voices echoed faintly from the far end, but they were easily drowned out by the clattering armor of the guards on patrol. A faint smell still hung in the air, and the walls were still crusted with the blood of the nobles Stovell had massacred.

Maybe they'll close the place off sometime and change the wallpaper, or maybe they'll leave it as a warning. I suppose that's the next emperor's decision to make.

His fingers traced the bloodstains on the walls as he turned his plans over in his mind.

I have any number of ideas I could use against Six Kingdoms, but the real problem is what comes after that. The real masterminds still haven't stepped out onto the stage. I need something to lure them out of the shadows.

Which futures did they strive to avoid, and which did they seek to bring about? As of now, he knew too little to be certain. That was all the more reason he needed bait—to find out what was what.

But as for what they'd want...

He stopped. He had reached the entranceway, now more heavily guarded than ever. Beyond the doors, he spotted a familiar face. Liz was looking around, searching for someone.

Her crimson eyes found him, and a smile blossomed on her face as she ran up to him. “Where have you been?” she cried, her annoyance on full display. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere!”

Hiro gave a rueful smile and scratched the back of his head. He could not exactly tell her that he had paid another visit to the imperial burial grounds; he did not want her to know about that place just yet. Things could get troublesome if she started grilling him, so he decided it would be easier to lie.

“Some nobles wanted to speak to me.”

“Oh, did they? You’ve really been in high demand lately.”

She bought it instantly. To be fair to her, she had no reason to doubt him, and that was more of a half-truth than a lie. In the eyes of the nobles, Hiro was the closest to the throne, and they had taken to finding endless excuses to forge connections or suggest his marriage to their daughters. At least in the latter case, they tended to relent and apologize when he asked them to put their requests through House Kelheit.

“More importantly, are you ready to leave?” he asked.

“I’ve let Aura take care of the preparations.”

So you’ve left your job up to her again? Hiro thought, although he took care not to let it show.

Liz must have picked up on his dismay, because she grew flustered and waved her hands in front of her face. “Wait, I don’t mean it like that! We decided on it together! She volunteered! That’s the truth, I promise!”

“That’s fine, then.” Hiro laid a relieved hand on his chest. If they had come to the decision together, he had no complaints.

“I *have* grown, you know. You could try to have a little faith in me.” Liz pouted and kicked at the ground. *I’ll sulk. I’ll really do it. I swear.*

“Sorry. I’ll make sure to hear you out in future before I jump to any conclusions.”

“Good. And you can start right now by listening to what I have to say!” She thrust out a hand, one finger pointed firmly at the top of his nose.

Hiro smiled amiably. “All right. What were you and Aura talking about?”

“We might want to sit down first.” She looked around and spied a sofa by the wall. “It’s not like it matters if we’re overheard... How about there?”

She took hold of his arm and frogmarched him over. Seeing that she was as energetic as ever, it was hard not to smile.

She half-flung him onto the sofa and sat down beside him, staring up at the ceiling with one finger touching her chin. It was a pose she struck when she was trying to remember something.

“Let’s see... With how fast everything is happening, we’ll want to travel quickly, so we decided on an escort of three hundred. If Steissen is really about to attack, we’ll need to get south as fast as we can.” She lowered one finger, keeping count of her points. “And we discussed numbers too. We’ve got the Fourth Legion in Berg Fortress. That’s twenty thousand. If we manage to get the southern nobles to help us, we could end up coming back to the capital with fifty thousand in total, maybe more...although that obviously depends on how Steissen responds.”

She was clearly trying to demonstrate that she could make herself useful. Her voice grew more and more enthusiastic as she spoke.

Hiro nodded along, a small smile on his lips.

The timing of her return from the south is going to be tight, though. Maybe too tight.

Even if everything went the way he had predicted, the round trip would still take her about two months.

And even assuming she does follow the plan, how long can I hold Six Kingdoms off for?

As he stared at the ground, brooding, something swished past his eyes.

“Hm?”

He broke off his train of thought. Liz’s pale hand was hovering in front of his face.

“You aren’t listening, are you?”

Her voice had turned oddly deep in pitch. A faint chill ran up Hiro's spine. That didn't mean anything good. He hastily tried to gloss things over.

"No, of course I'm listening. I agree with everything you said."

He threw in a reassuring shrug. Her eyes were chilly, as though she was regarding a fraud.

"Do you now? It almost sounds like you didn't take any of it in."

"It's not like that! I just didn't have anything to add."

"Well, fine. Don't listen if you don't want to. See if I care." She turned up her nose at him.

He was in trouble now, but it was too late for regrets. He sat, shoulders slumped, thinking about how to apologize.

Suddenly, a large shadow fell over him. He looked up to see a knight standing over him, clad from head to toe in black plate.

"There you are, One-Eyed Dragon."

"Oh, it's you, Garda." This wasn't the time to be speaking to the zlosta. If Liz's anger emanating from beside him was anything to go by, his life was in imminent danger.

"You don't sound pleased to—" Garda cut himself off, glanced between Liz and Hiro, and nodded. The helm hid his face, but it seemed that he had grasped what was happening. "Some manner of quarrel, I assume?"

"It's not a *quarrel.* Hiro just won't listen to people when they talk."

"So that's it. Well, she has you dead to rights, One-Eyed Dragon."

Apparently, Garda had processed the entire situation in five seconds flat. Hiro inwardly cursed the zlosta's perceptiveness, but he nonetheless had no choice but to look to him for help.

Garda sighed. "You might start by apologizing. That ought to be enough to placate her."

"That's right. Take a trip with me into town once we're back in the south and we'll call it even."

What a remarkably mundane and yet wholly unrealistic request. Would they even have time for a day out in the foreseeable future? Still, turning Liz down now would be like throwing water on a grease fire.

“All right. Once you’re back, we’ll go into town together. I’ll even buy you something.”

“Really? Do you promise?”

“Of course. I promise, once we’re back together again, we’ll go shopping in the city markets.”

“Fine. I suppose I could let you off with that.” Liz’s tone was still pouty, but a pleased smile was spreading across her face. Her good mood had been salvaged. No matter how much she had otherwise matured, at times like these, she acted every bit her age.

“If that’s the end of your spat, might I say my piece?”

“Of course.” Hiro turned to Garda, letting the gibe slide. “What is it?”

Liz leaned in too, intrigued.

“I have come to ask what you hope to gain by shipping us off south.”

“As I’m sure Liz has already told you, I want you to bring the Crow Legion back with you. With most of the wounded recovered plus the troops we left training at Berg Fortress, they should number three thousand, maybe four.”

“Huginn and Muninn will more than suffice. I would rather follow the One-Eyed Dragon.”

“I can’t let you do that. If things come to blows with Steissen, your knowledge and expertise will be invaluable. And besides, the Crow Legion needs you in command.”

“So you say, but do you not ride against Six Kingdoms? Surely that is where my strength will be needed most.” In spite of Hiro’s flat rejection, Garda dug in his heels.

“I’m only buying time. The real fighting won’t start until the empire organizes its forces.” Hiro strengthened his tone; refusal was not an option. “That’s why you need to go south.”

“And you are certain you have everything in hand?”

The zlosta was still unwilling to back down. The corners of Hiro’s mouth tightened imperceptibly. First Liz, now Garda. Nobody trusted him, it seemed.

“I... I am. Don’t worry. You just focus on getting ready to travel. I’ll take care of the rest.” He turned to Liz. “Now, where are Aura and Rosa?”

Further discussion would be a waste of time, and he had no intention of ceding any ground, so he changed the topic. With Hiro’s attention now elsewhere, Garda was forced to drop the matter.

Liz blinked, unexpectedly put on the spot. “Aura’s visiting the spirit temple in the city. She said she wanted to say her goodbyes to the children. Rosa is meeting with her aides.” She clapped her hands as she remembered something. “Oh, that’s right! And Scáthach has woken up. She said she wanted to see you.”

“What kind of shape is she in?”

“Hmm... She’s still getting her strength back, and she says her leg feels strange.”

“If that’s all, then she should be fine to travel.”

“Maybe, but are you sure that’s for the best? I think she’d recover quicker if we let her rest.” Liz folded her arms and cocked her head. Concern for Scáthach’s wellbeing lay in her every word.

“I agree, but it’s hard to guarantee her safety in the palace. There’s no one to protect her here.”

Odds were high that the imperial palace was about to become the scene of an ugly political struggle. Hiro could defend himself well enough, but there was no guarantee that Scáthach would not be caught in the crossfire. There was nothing so bitter as a succession dispute. The candidates themselves—whether Hiro, Liz, or Selene—may have no time to concern themselves with such things, but there was no guarantee that their lower-level supporters wouldn’t try to take matters into their own hands.

“It’s no time for anyone to be squabbling about who the next emperor’s going to be,” Hiro mused. “But when you aren’t going to war, politics *is* the war.”

That said, there was no need for Liz to waste her time on such petty squabbles. She needed to focus her energy on gathering experience and winning battles. In Hiro's eyes, this period of turmoil was a golden opportunity. It would speed her on her way, of that there was no doubt.

Liz nodded. "You're right. For now, the imperial heirs need to stand together."

At that moment, a voice rang out across the hall. "Lady Celia Estrella!"

Hiro, Liz and Garda turned as one toward the source of the noise. A soldier was standing nearby. He visibly wilted under the trio's gazes, his mouth opening and closing helplessly as he froze in place.

"What is it?" Liz asked in a kindly voice. "Is there something you need?"

The soldier snapped into a hurried bow. "Lady von Bunadala requests your presence, Your Highness! She desires your permission to bring cargo into the city!"

"Lady von Bunadala" was none other than Aura. House Bunadala, which held land in the west, was one of the five strategic houses, a collection of noble houses renowned for producing a profusion of remarkable strategists. They had broken ties with the rest of the western nobles, which was why Liz had taken Aura under her wing.

Six Kingdoms hasn't reached House Bundala's territories quite yet...

It was probably only a matter of time. Still, they shouldn't overstretch themselves. They would have an important part to play in the future of the west.

I should probably stress that point. I'll send them a letter later.

As Hiro mused, Liz sprang to her feet. "Tell her to wait for me. I'll be there right away."

"At once, Your Highness! She awaits at House Kelheit's residence!" His message delivered, the soldier bowed to the present parties in turn and departed.

"I should get going. We can speak again at dinner." Liz set off, turning back to Hiro and waving as she went.

“Sure. See you then.”

Liz turned back around and walked away.

“I should make ready myself,” Garda said.

“Of course. Give my best to Huginn and Muninn.”

As the zlosta vanished into the crowd milling in the entrance hall, a small smile crept across Hiro’s face. The calm demeanor he had worn in conversation was nowhere to be seen, replaced by an air of swirling madness. His eyes grew cold.

“My ally should have started making moves around now...which means I should do the same.”

A figure flitted across his mind: the blackhearted queen cultivating her strength in the frozen north.

“From now on, I can’t afford any mistakes.”

It was time to spin the greatest lie of the age. His life was balanced on a tightrope, and if he put one foot wrong, he would plummet straight down to the bowels of hell.

“As to whether I’ll devour or be devoured...only the gods know.”

His lips twisted into an amused smirk.

* * * * *

A frigid wind whistled through the streets. The blizzard raged so viciously that none would be so foolish as to venture outdoors.

Lebering’s greatest fortress-city, Tiane, was surrounded by a deep moat to keep its enemies at bay. A double-layered wall secured its confines. The drawbridge—the only way in or out—was raised, rendering its defenses impenetrable. Tiare, the Amethyst Hall, lay atop a hill within the walls. The position afforded the keep a commanding view of the city, a violet watcher turned to alabaster by its ever-present dusting of snow.

A throng of nobles stoof in the throne room. None spoke a word. The queen’s forbidding presence prohibited all chatter; to defy her authority was

unthinkable. They looked up at the ornate splendor of the throne in silence, their gazes pregnant with anticipation.

Upon the seat reclined the newly crowned Queen Claudia. She was fair of feature, but beneath her beauty lurked the face of a cunning strategist. After she had taken the crown, many among Lebering's aristocracy had underestimated her. They had quickly paid for their mistake. Countless nobles had been stripped of their lands and seen their houses toppled. Most of them had been corrupt, colluding with merchants, or squeezing their subjects with draconian taxes, so their downfall had been a long time coming, but while the people rejoiced, the nobility bristled. Fear bred opposition.

For a time, Claudia had been subject to criticism from many quarters, including the most powerful nobles in the land. Her answer had been to go to war. Her tactical proficiency rapidly consolidated her power with a string of victories, and within a scant three months, she had made her claim to the throne unassailable as she ruled from on high.

A lascivious giggle echoed through the throne room. The nobles shuddered, their gazes fixed on her face as they gauged her mood. Claudia's amusement always set them ill at ease; she was more than capable of laughing as she declared a death sentence. The nobles she had condemned had cursed her "reaper's smile" as they went to the gallows.

One nobleman mustered his courage. "If I may, Your Majesty..." he ventured, "what does it say?"

His eyes were on the letter in her hand—a message from the fourth prince of the Grantzian Empire.

Another giggle. "Do excuse me. It seems the moment we have waited for is finally upon us." Claudia brought a hand to her mouth, stifling a heartfelt chuckle. "At long last, the Kingdom of Lebering will join those vying for conquest. How could that not bring a smile to my lips? How could my heart not dance?"

The nobles frowned, uncertain what to make of her reaction. She ignored them as her laughter echoed around the throne room.

"Your Highness!"

A soldier strolled into the hall. The nobles knew him well. He was the captain of the queensguard that Claudia had assembled upon ascending the throne, and a noted master of arms. She had come to him personally to appoint him to his role.

He approached the throne, fell to one knee, and bowed his head. “Our forces are ready, Your Highness. They march on your command. Moreover, a message has arrived from our collaborator. We may proceed to our destination without fear of hindrance.”

“Excellent. I would expect nothing less from Lord Hiro. His work is always exquisite.”

Most of the nobles cocked their heads at the exchange. A few stirred with excitement. Amusement flitted across Claudia’s face as she drank in their responses. She rose to her feet.

“The time has come for Lebering to break its long silence,” she declared. “For the zlosta to tower once more over Soleil!”

With polished movements, she stepped forth from the throne and descended the stairs. She glided along the red carpet, her proud figure capturing the hearts of all who looked upon her.

The handful of elated nobles fell in behind her. The rest bowed their heads and watched her pass, their faces the picture of confusion.

“Our work begins. We march now into darkness. If you trust me to lead you true, then follow me.”

She slid Lox’s sword from its sheath and marched from the throne room, her head held high.

* * * * *

The seventh day of the first month of Imperial Year 1024

Hiro was in a reception chamber in the palace. Opposite him sat Second Prince Selene. Nobody else was present, but the air in the room hung heavy, as though it were hosting a great throng of people.

Selene spoke first, eyeing the map in front of him. “I must say, I didn’t expect

you to approach me with threats."

Hiro stared back coolly. "I just want to know whether you'll cooperate."

Selene raised both hands in a gesture of surrender and flashed a genial smile. "Anything for my dear brother. Our interests align—and besides, if I didn't, that dreadful friend of yours would cause chaos in the north."

"There's no need to worry about that. Assuming you're willing to work with me."

"There wasn't any need for this show of intimidation, you know. I would have helped you with no strings attached."

"I'm glad to hear it. I appreciate you making the prudent choice." Hiro's brow furrowed as he gazed at Selene—or, more precisely, at the twin swords on the prince's hips. "Are they the reason you're so disinterested in the throne?"

"Do I *have* to answer that?"

"No. I just wanted to see if my suspicions were correct." Hiro flashed a frigid smile and rose to his feet. "I won't appreciate you going back on your word. I'm trying to eliminate uncertainty." He stepped closer to Selene and looked down at him coldly.

"What a marvelously cruel expression. You wear it well...although, one of these days, I'd love to see that smile you save for Liz."

"You'll see it on the day you join Liz's camp. Assuming you prove you can be trusted."

"So suspicious. You could stand to relax a little. For the time being, I have no reason to make an enemy of you."

"I'm glad to hear it." With a callous smile, Hiro picked up the package on the table, tucked it under his arm, and walked toward the door. "I should get going. Liz will be leaving soon."

As his hand touched the handle—

"You make for a rather tragic sight, you know," Selene said.

Hiro stopped.

“You really should have noticed by now. Your enemies are all around you. Look hard enough and you’ll realize you’re surrounded. Be careful you don’t end up strangled in your sleep. They’re quite the nuisance.”

“I know,” Hiro said. He twisted the handle and stepped out into the corridor.

Today was the day of Liz’s departure. He had to see her, Aura, Scáthach and the rest on their way. Most likely, they were already waiting near the front doors. As he set off at a brisk walk down the corridor, he saw Chancellor Graeci approaching from the opposite direction.

“Your Highness,” Graeci said. “Lady Celia Estrella is awaiting you in the entrance hall.”

“I thought she might be.”

“Very good. If you will excuse me...”

With a polite nod, Graeci passed Hiro. In that instant, a chill rocketed up Hiro’s spine. He spun around in alarm, but there was nothing there, only the old man’s figure receding down the corridor.

He stared in silence for a while. That had not been his imagination. He touched a hand to the back of his neck. That sensation, like an electric current pulsing up his spinal cord, was something he had only felt before on the battlefield. Just now, for the briefest of moments, Graeci had fostered murderous intent.

“Quite the nuisance, indeed,” he whispered, his voice filled with undisguised displeasure.

He resumed walking, rounded a corner, and passed into a long, straight corridor—the same place where so many officials had lost their lives to Stovell. A large gathering had congregated at the far end.

“The weather’s chilly this time of year, so be careful not to catch a cold. Double up your blankets when you make camp. Triple them, even.”

He reached the entrance hall to find Rosa fussing over Liz in motherly tones. Liz looked thoroughly fed up with the advice—this was clearly not the first time she had heard it—but a smile spread across her face as she spotted Hiro.

“There you are! Look who finally showed up!” She bounced up and down, waving. Behind her stood Aura, eyes lowered, nose firmly buried in the Black Chronicle.

Hiro drew closer. “Be careful on the road.”

Wanting to maximize their speed, Liz and her companions were taking an escort of fewer than three hundred. It was hard to believe that any unscrupulous ruffian would try to attack her at this stage, but there was never any such thing as too cautious.

“Do you remember back when we crossed Mount Himmel?” she said. “We had a force just about the same size.”

That had been one of their first memories together, only a day or so after they had met.

“We did, didn’t we? I remember that. I really was nothing more than a burden to you back then.”

Even so, both she and her allies had brought him with them on their journey rather than turning him out on his own. Had he managed to repay that debt since? How time flew.

Seeing him sink into thought, Liz’s face turned serious. “Make sure not to take on anything you can’t handle, okay? We’ll be back as quickly as we can, so don’t do anything reckless.”

“I’ll be waiting.” Hiro gave a reassuring nod, taking care to keep his true thoughts hidden. “More to the point, watch out for the head of House Muzuk. He’s a clever man, and there’s no telling what he’s planning. If you end up forced to make a decision, you’ll have to use your own judgment.”

“I’ll be fine. I told you, have some faith in me.”

Liz pulled an exasperated smile, but Hiro couldn’t help worrying.

“Oh, right. One last thing. If there’s one thing I want you to remember, it’s this: Don’t try to please other people. Follow your own heart. Got that?” His voice grew a little more forceful as he pressed the point.

Liz nodded meekly, sensing that this was no time for jokes. “All right. I won’t

let anyone else do my thinking for me. I'll follow my own heart."

Hiro smiled. "I know you can do it. I trust you." He laid a hand on her head.

"Make sure you eat properly, all right?" she said. "Don't just read all the time. If I come back and find you thin as a rake, I'm putting you on an all-meat diet for a month."

"Wouldn't that be worse for my health— Oomph!"

Hiro's protest ended in a strangled noise as Liz threw her arms around him. A pleasant aroma wafted into his nostrils, carrying with it her tender concern. The warmth of her presence set his heart at ease.

"Don't do anything reckless. I mean it." Her voice was vanishingly quiet.

He wanted to comfort her, but words deserted him. In the first place, he hardly had a right to say anything when he was the cause of her unease. With regret weighing in his heart, he stepped back from her embrace and wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes.

"When we meet again, let's both be smiling."

"...All right." She gave a little nod.

Hiro looked behind her to Aura. She, too, seemed dissatisfied with the idea of leaving him alone.

"Liz will need your support. I'm counting on you."

Aura's fingers tightened on the Black Chronicle. "She's safe with me."

Hiro gave her a smile, then turned toward a familiar figure a short distance away. There, sitting on the sofa by the entrance, was Scáthach. Her face was pale and drawn; evidently, she hadn't fully recovered yet.

She saw him approach and looked up. "I can only apologize. I fear I have made a poor account of myself." She lowered her eyes again, biting her lower lip in shame at her own powerlessness.

"You've got nothing to apologize for. Heal up and come back stronger."

"I am glad of your kindness."

"The carriage ride might be a little hard on your wounds. I hope you won't

hold that against me.”

“Gáe Bolg’s blessing will more than suffice. Besides, after how I have weighed you down, it would be a just punishment.” Scáthach gave a dismissive shrug. She had a definite self-flagellating streak; for better or worse, she could be unnecessarily harsh on herself. She had flung herself into battle in pursuit of vengeance for her murdered family, refusing to rely on others and holding herself to rigid standards, but if she kept pushing herself, sooner or later, she would break.

“It might not be clear now,” he said, laying a hand on her shoulder, “but you’ll find it someday. A reason to live.”

Would that someday she could work towards a goal she had chosen for herself, rather than one that had been forced upon her.

Hiro turned back to his subordinates. “I’ll say a prayer for your safe travels, Garda.”

The zlosta nodded. “And I yours, One-Eyed Dragon.”

“Waaah...” Huginn whimpered. “I wanna stay with His Lordship...”

Muninn scratched the back of his head awkwardly. “Sorry ’bout the state of her, chief. She’s been like this ever since she found out.”

Hiro gave a helpless smile and laid a hand on Huginn’s head. “Try to get along with your brother, all right? You’ll only make trouble for Garda if you fight.”

“All right...”

Hiro unslung the parcel from beneath his arm, untied its strings, and unwrapped the cloth. The wrappings fell away to reveal two spirit weapons. They were two of a pair and particularly special even among their kind.

“These are for you.” He held them out to Huginn and Muninn.

The siblings’ jaws fell open with astonishment.

“Spirit weapons? For us? Y-Your Lordship, I couldn’t possibly!” Huginn shook her head furiously, but even as she protested, her fingers closed around the hilt and a smile spread across her face.

“Now this is a blade and a half,” Muninn whistled. “I could sell this and live like a king for the rest of my days.”

“Just you try it, you great big oaf! I’ll chop your brainless head from your shoulders before you get ten paces!”

Hiro gave a slightly strained chuckle. “These are a little bit more special than most spirit weapons. They have names. Huginn, yours is called Kogarasumaru, and Muninn, yours is Nukemaru. Their designs might be a little different to the swords you’re used to, but I’m sure you’ll learn to wield them well enough.”

One thousand years ago, when he was known as Schwartz, he had commissioned these very blades from a dwarven acquaintance. They were modeled after weapons from Hiro’s time—Japanese-style katanas.

“My Kogarasumaru...the first blade His Lordship ever gave me!” Huginn looked happy enough to start dancing on the spot, like a child who had been given her very first toy. Muninn, for his part, whistled appreciatively as he examined his weapon’s marbled blade.

Hiro left them to their astonishment and turned to Garda, who was looking on curiously. “Is something the matter?”

“Nothing for me, One-Eyed Dragon?”

“You’re a zlosta.” Hiro lowered his voice a shade. “If I handed you a spirit weapon, burns would be the least of your worries.”

“True.” Garda heaved a resigned sigh and indicated the greatsword on his back. “This will serve me well enough for now.”

“I think you’d do fine with just about any weapon.”

Only a handful of humans on the continent could best a pureblood zlosta in open combat. A mundane blade would suffice against almost any foe. Eventually, the time would come when he would need a weapon of his own, but it had not arrived yet. In the meantime, he would simply have to wait.

“All right. It’s about time for us to be going.”

Hiro turned to see Liz standing behind him. “Okay. I’ll see you soon.”

“Oh, and don’t forget, mister!” She raised an indignant finger to point

squarely at his nose. “Once I get back, you owe me a present!”

With one final grin, she dashed out of the doors. His gifts to Huginn and Muninn must have roused her jealous streak.

Aura was the next in line. “Me too. I look forward to seeing what you get.” Her impassive expression seemed to forbid any objection as she turned and trotted after Liz.

“A present, hm? What should I ask for, I wonder?” Scáthach departed too, her face still drawn.

Before Hiro regained the ability to speak, Garda, Huginn, and Muninn followed suit. In short order, silence returned to the entrance hall.

A hand fell on his shoulder. “Your expenses are growing, I see.”

Hiro turned to the figure beside him. Rosa peered back with an impish smile. He headed her off before she could say anything further, producing two envelopes from his pocket.

“This is for Liz, and this is for Garda. Could you deliver them when they get back?”

“Very well, but is this really the time for this plan of yours?”

“This is the time for whatever works. I’ve had to make significant adjustments, but I’m confident it’ll go as intended.”

Rosa said nothing. She only lowered her gaze, her shoulders trembling. Silence fell between them, growing louder and louder, until it was eventually too much to bear.

“Don’t get yourself killed,” she said finally.

“I won’t. Like I told Liz, I’ll be fine.” With a reassuring smile, he produced another spirit weapon from within the Black Camellia. “This is Lionheart. See the lion crest on the base of the hilt?”

The blade had been Artheus’s weapon of choice before receiving the Spiritblade Sovereigns. Rosa’s eyes widened, and her mouth fell half-open. Clearly, she realized that she held a rare artifact.

“You’ll have to take care of yourself from now on.”

Her lips tightened, uncomfortable about being handed a weapon of such caliber for self-defense. “I cannot accept this,” she said hesitantly. “House Kelheit has several spirit weapons. I can choose from our stock. Would this not be better saved for you?”

“If your weapons are named, then feel free.”

In all lands and all times, giving a name to any object, weapon or not, could miraculously bestow upon it a will of its own—a process people called “granting it a soul.” Spirit weapons were no exception, and named weapons grew alongside their wielders. There was a world of difference between having a name and being nothing at all; or at least, so it seemed to Hiro.

“Become worthy of wielding Lionheart and it’ll answer to you.” He held out the sword again. “If you’re up to the task, that is.”

Rosa looked hesitantly between Hiro and Lionheart. Eventually, her shoulders slumped in resignation. “Who do you take me for? I am the head of House Kelheit, acting or no.”

She took the sword with a dismissive snort and cradled it lovingly. The tip vanished entirely between her equally lethal breasts.

Hiro found himself looking away. “I need to get ready too,” he said, scratching his nose awkwardly. “I should get going.” He turned around and began to walk away, the better to hide his embarrassment.

“Hold on just a— What’s gotten into you?!” Rosa’s voice chased him, but he wasn’t strong enough to look back.

“I’m in a hurry! I’ll speak with you later!”

He left at a half-jog. He hadn’t been lying; he really did have business to attend to.

Time to really get started. Now that I’ve gotten Liz and Garda out of the capital, there’s only one man left.

His steps slowed to a leisurely pace, and his demeanor began to change.

Humans are such strange creatures. They’re capable of saying goodbye with a

smile even when there's no guarantee that they'll ever meet again. I mean, we were laughing together not minutes ago...

He stopped and looked back over his shoulder. The corridor was deserted. There was not a sound to be heard.

Ah, I see now. This reminds me of another day, a long time ago...

His void-black eyes reflected no light. They drank in everything they saw, an all-consuming abyss. He set off again, his gentle demeanor giving way to a hostile, practically murderous air.

Soon enough, he arrived at his destination: a guest chamber meant for receiving visitors from foreign lands. The head of House Maruk stood in front of the door. His thin-featured face seemed vaguely dishonest.

"All has been made ready, Lord Hiro. I await your orders."

"Excellent. Let's start the strategy meeting right away."

"At once, Your Highness. The central nobles who expressed a desire to attend await within." The head of House Maruk opened the door and bowed his head.

"Let's get started," Hiro announced.

Now that Liz and the rest of his allies had departed, it was time for him to make his way west—not to waylay Six Kingdoms's forces, but to defeat them. He meant to fight a hundred and fifty thousand men with only twenty thousand, and win.

I'm sorry, Liz, but I'm going to have to break that promise.

With one last prayer for her safety, he set to work on his own goals in earnest.

* * * * *

Beyrouth, in the northwest of the western territories

Six Kingdoms's primary force had made camp on the border between the western territories and Faerzen. Scores upon scores of tents crowded the ground. When fifty thousand men set up camp for the night, it looked like a modestly sized town. Soldiers raced to and fro, hastily making some manner of preparations. Above their heads, an orange-scarlet flush crept across the sky.

At the center of the encampment was the command tent, the beating heart of the Punitive Army. The interior was packed with people. The collective heat of so many bodies more than compensated for the chill of winter. Every officer of note was gathered there, from the generals who led entire legions to the brigade commanders who led units of one thousand men.

The willowy woman in the commander's seat raised a hand for silence. She was Luka Mammon du Vulpes, acting commander of the Punitive Army. Born to the line of Vulpes, one of the six royal families of Six Kingdoms, her prodigious talent had once made her the heir apparent to her kingdom's throne.

The man at Luka's side stepped forward in response to her gesture. He was her younger brother, Igel du Vulpes. Long-limbed and fair of feature, his handsome looks were the mirror image of his sister's, but his demeanor was somehow savage, reminiscent of a wild beast.

"Thank you all for coming. I know you must be busy. Let's get to the reports, shall we?" Igel struck the desk with his commander's baton, knocking several pawns over. "General Macrill, tell us how our forces are doing."

"With pleasure, my lord." The aged general rose to his feet and set about righting the pawns. "Presently, the First and Second Punitive Legions are pressing deeper into imperial lands, demanding surrender from the western nobles as they go. Their efforts have been quite effective, as you can see here."

He gestured to a subordinate. The man laid a stack of letters on the table, all penned by the empire's western nobles.

"The Third and Fourth Punitive Legions, meanwhile, have been focusing their attention on the nearby forts. Their efforts, too, are proceeding apace. The empire's defenses have proved sorely lacking. We suspect that the bulk of their military strength has been committed to Faerzen." Macrill paused before he laid down the final pawn. "The Fifth Punitive Legion has been laying waste to the lands of the nobles who refused to surrender, plundering their supplies and generally causing chaos."

The general turned and cast his gaze around the tent. The other officers were nodding in satisfaction. Luka and Igel, too, looked pleased.

"How about our losses?"

“The Fifth Punitive Legion has fared the worst, as one might expect. All told, we have lost around seven thousand men—a deficit we will hardly even notice once Lady Lucia rejoins us.”

Once Lucia and her fifty thousand troops rejoined the main force, their ranks would swell to the unprecedented figure of two hundred thousand. Seven thousand was a rounding error. Their homeland would not chide them for a loss that insignificant.

There was another problem, however. A logistical problem.

“What about our supplies?”

Two hundred thousand men could not be fed on a half-stocked granary, and importing the required supplies from Six Kingdoms would incur horrendous expenses. That made securing provisions on-site an immediate priority, but as winter had firmly set in, the effort was going unexpectedly poorly.

“Our existing stores will last for two more months. We have been plundering nearby settlements with an eye to procuring food, but taking enough to feed two hundred thousand mouths will leave the western territories strewn with starved corpses.”

The locals would not willingly part with their winter stores for any amount of coin. That left plunder as the only option, but overdoing it would undermine the invaders’ future attempts at governance. As a compromise, they were currently limiting their targets to the lands of the nobles who were resisting the occupation, leaving those who surrendered untouched.

“That will not be a concern. Continue as planned. Lady Lucia will bring supplies when she rejoins with us. The rest can be left until later.” Luka tapped her armrest as she stared at the map. “More importantly, General, what of the people? Are they responding as we hoped?”

“You need not worry on that score, my lady.” General Macrill placed a series of pebbles along the western arterial road. “The main road is flooded with refugees fleeing to the central territories.”

Roads were the lifeblood of a nation. They underpinned smooth trade, defense against invasion, economic development, and national security. When

attacked by foreign forces, a nation would try to hasten to the scene of the breach, and a blocked road could cause a fatal delay in their response. From the perspective of the aggressors, simply destroying the roads would be the easiest tactic, but that would make the land difficult to govern once the war was over, and they did not have time to block them with boulders. People, however, made an excellent substitute. Both those running toward and fleeing from the invasion would use the same roads. The more of the latter there were, the greater the shock to the nation's system. In short, the refugees would delay any reinforcements from the central territories, as well as prevent the western nobles from escaping.

"Just as planned." Igel grinned, casting a sidelong glance at Luka.

She nodded, pleased. "All is proceeding as our homeland directed."

"Killing one of their high generals helped things on their way, I'll bet."

The western nobles had resisted fiercely at first, but at the sight of a high general's corpse, they had quickly begun to fold. More than a few had surrendered without a fight.

"How the Grantzian Empire has fallen from its glory days." Luka sounded disappointed. "Where is the lion whose roar resounded across the world?"

"Aren't you glad to find it old and feeble? The less they resist, the fewer our losses. Now we're free to tear the west to shreds."

"As much as I would love to, excessive violence will work against us in the long run."

Igel cocked his head. "Why's that?"

Luka snorted with displeasure. "The western territories will fall to Six Kingdoms sooner or later, but if the people still resent us when we come to rule, they will not obey us."

"That's why we're doing this whole carrot-and-stick thing, isn't it? Didn't General Macrill just say it was working?" Igel stared down at the map as he spoke. "We spare the ones who fall in line and come down hard on the ones who don't. The plundering sends a message. Seems simple enough. Why not go further? If we burned down *all* their towns and scared 'em *all* shitless, they'd

soon stop thinking about fighting back."

Luka shook her head. "Overt bloodshed will only breed hatred. Its poison will linger to the next generation, and in time it will kill the lion from the inside out."

People only had value when they were alive, and they were necessary to produce clothes, food, and housing. Even weapons, money, and land could not be gotten without people.

"And besides, as things stand, we require fame and glory, not infamy." Luka's voice took on a hard edge, stressing the importance of the point.

"I know, I know. That's why we're taking orders from the folks back home in the first place." Igel leaned back in his chair, folded his arms behind his head, and glowered up at the ceiling.

"With respect," General Macrill said, "if it is glory you seek, I have my reservations about our current plans. Lady Lucia is marching to meet us as we speak. Once her forces join ours, the Punitive Army will number two hundred thousand."

He didn't spell it out, but his implication was clear: once Lucia joined them, it would become far more difficult to distinguish themselves. Even now, while they were technically leading a hundred and fifty thousand men, their forces were split into six, with the main force remaining stationary. Winning glory in a situation like that was next to impossible.

"Shall we continue to wait? Or shall we push on, into the heart of the empire?"

"We go straight for the heart, is what we do. There's no man with any spine left in the west. I say we let someone else take care of this shithole and march right in, even if we have to go alone." Igel's voice dripped with hunger for a battle with a worthy foe.

Lucia, however, was more composed. "Sprint ahead and we shall only trip over our own feet. First, we must carve up the western territories and quash any possibility of rebellion. Then we shall regroup with Lady Lucia and strike at the central territories as one."

"What are you scared of, sis? We've done everything the bigwigs back home

asked us to. Now we get to do what we like."

"Taking matters into our own hands would be dangerous. A single misstep would be the end of us. Surely you need no reminding that we hang by a thread."

"I know, I know. But that just means we gotta win, right? If we beat the shit outta the empire so bad that everyone can see it, what's the problem?"

"We are not familiar with these lands. If we were to charge recklessly into the central territories, the terrain would be against us. And most importantly, it is winter. We would forfeit the favor of the heavens *and* the fealty of the earth." Luka dismissed her brother's warmongering out of hand. "Before we do anything else, we must dispatch scouts to gather information on the central territories. We shall proceed cautiously, keeping a weather eye on our enemy's movements. Once we reach our goal, glories shall abound."

"Alright, alright. Whatever you say." Igel pulled a face, but he wasn't willing to contest Luka's opinion.

"Now is the time for prudence." Luka turned to her brother with a tender gaze. "Should we make a single misstep, that witch will not hesitate to steal our every prize for herself. We must be patient. Is that understood?"

"I know, I know." Igel nodded meekly, his former brashness subdued.

Chapter 3: Lingering Hatred

The tenth day of the first month of Imperial year 1024

Within a reception chamber in the Grantzian imperial palace of Venezyne

“The invasion is progressing faster than projected.” Hiro’s words fell like lead in the air of the daily strategy meeting.

“Indeed. Two thirds of the western territories have already fallen to the enemy.” Chancellor Graeci regarded the map with a sour expression. The loose end of his left sleeve shook a little, betraying the anger setting his shoulders trembling.

He was not the only one outraged. Virtually everyone in the room wore a disappointed frown, and more than a few cursed the western nobles’ incompetence.

Graeci took a series of deep breaths and placed a pawn on the map. “The influx of refugees into the central territories has choked the roads. An intentional ploy on Six Kingdoms’s part, I expect. I have also received word that Third Prince Brutahl has been captured, although information on this point is confused and I have not been able to confirm what has transpired.”

“Brutahl, captured?” Selene rose from his chair, unable to contain his surprise.

“If nothing else, he is a cautious man.” Rosa joined her brother in his astonishment, covering her mouth with a hand and lowering her gaze. “I would have thought he would have an escape route secured.”

All this, just from Aura’s absence... Not that I’m surprised. He was never a strategist.

Even so, no matter how incompetent Brutahl might be, he was still a prince of the empire. His value was beyond measure. That was most likely one of the reasons the enemy had begun to press the attack. With the death of General Vakish, Shield of the West, Brutahl had become the western territories’ only hope. If he had been taken prisoner, it meant their entire chain of command

had collapsed. He would have been better off taking his own life than enduring the shame of capture, Hiro thought; at least that would have inflamed the western nobles to seek vengeance and slowed the enemy's advance.

Faerzen has effectively fallen into Six Kingdoms's hands.

The people of Faerzen regarded the Grantzian Empire as little better than hostile occupiers. If Six Kingdoms marched through proclaiming liberation, they would quickly earn their new subjects' adoration. Even the Faerzen Resistance would likely see defectors. From their perspective, Scáthach, the last living member of their royal line, had effectively been taken hostage by the empire; if Six Kingdoms promised her safe return, they would flock to them in droves.

This doesn't bode well...

The odds of the empire's past deeds coming back to bite it had grown incredibly high, and the forecast was becoming increasingly grim. Ultimate responsibility lay with the repeated failures of the imperial elite. In a sense, this was fair punishment for growing drunk with power, but many of the parties responsible had perished in Stovell's rebellion. If it had happened to any other nation, Hiro would have laughed, but the Grantzian Empire was the legacy of his departed comrades.

For as long as I'm here, I will *see the empire survive. I must.*

No matter who was scheming what, he wouldn't let anyone manipulate it as they pleased. This nation was all that he had left of his old friends. He would stop at nothing to preserve it.

"First, we must discuss our response," Graeci declared. "The tack we take in saving the west is of paramount importance."

The announcement pulled Hiro back to reality.

"Not to belittle the seriousness of Third Prince Brutahl's situation," the chancellor continued, "but considering his station, I do not believe he is in mortal peril. Six Kingdoms may ransom him, or they may demand territory in exchange for his safe return, but either way, all we can do is wait for them to act." Seeing that there were no objections, he adjusted his collar with a throat-clearing cough. "Now, I would hear your reports on our progress."

Rosa raised a hand. “I would like to start. If I may have permission to speak?”

Graeci nodded, and Rosa stood, her report in hand. The nobles’ eyes converged on her.

“I have commanded my subordinates to amass our forces in the east, but it will take around a month for them to reach the central territories. I have insisted that troops be dispatched as soon as they are ready to travel, but even so...” She made a dissatisfied noise and shrugged. “Armies cannot function piecemeal. They will not amount to much in thousand-strong chunks. If we sent them to battle prematurely, they could easily be wiped out.”

“Such things cannot be helped. Better to wait until all is ready. Gather all of the forces that you realistically can and depart once you are able.”

“As you wish.” With a nod of thanks to Graeci, Rosa turned to whisper in one of her aides’ ears. She spoke two sentences, three, then the aide bowed politely and exited the guest chamber in silence.

With Rosa’s report concluded, Graeci’s gaze moved on to Selene. “How fares the north?”

“As you are all doubtless well aware, we have Friedhof to attend to. The yaldabaoth have been silent in recent years, but that is no reason to let our guard down. We must assume that they are aware of the turmoil in the empire.”

Five hundred years ago, queer creatures that would later be categorized as one of the three so-called wild races had been discovered to the north of the empire. Feasters on corpses, they had been dubbed “archons”—flesheaters—and subjected to an attempted extermination. However, they quickly proved stronger than humans, and the soldiers sent to purge them were wiped out instead.

Born from the massacred troops were a humanoid race called the yaldabaoth, or “branded,” who possessed unparalleled physical strength and far surpassed the archons in wits. In time, the yaldabaoth made subjects of the archons and attempted to conquer the north. Helpless in the face of their inhuman might, the people died in droves. Only the combined might of the emperor—who would later be deified as the Divines’ God of Valor—and the spirits managed to

drive them back into the untamed lands of the Sanctuarium in the western reaches of the north. Even this alliance, however, could not destroy them completely, and so the emperor erected the Spirit Wall to seal them inside their new home. Even now, five hundred years later, they remained beyond the wall, watching and waiting for their chance to resume their march on the north.

"The flesheaters, their advance troops, have been sighted close to the wall. I expect they are waiting for us to lower our guard. Under such circumstances, we cannot spare many men. Twenty-six thousand—thirty, including the four thousand I brought to the capital. That is all I can offer. They may lack experience, but they are well trained—the best of the best, I promise you. I hope that will compensate for my half-hearted commitment."

"Quite. We all understand the precariousness of the situation in the north. May I ask when we can expect these twenty-six thousand men in the capital?"

"Like Rosa, I expect they will be here in around a month."

"I see." Chancellor Graeci made no effort to hide his disappointment. "And what of House Maruk?"

In response, the soon-to-be leader of the newest great house stood up: Orlean Longwill von Maruk. His grandfather, a merchant, had invested a vast amount of wealth in seating the third most recent emperor on the throne and been awarded a peerage for his trouble. As a result, House Maruk had little history or prestige to its name; and yet, by slowly but surely amassing renown, it had become one of the five great houses in only three generations. Orlean had leveraged his grandfather's negotiation skills, his father's imperial education, and his own natural guile to become head of the house at an early age. His competence was iron-cast and his ability beyond dispute.

"The lingering effects of the rebellion have kept us from exceeding our estimates, but a large number of nobles have offered their support."

That was only to be expected. With Six Kingdoms carving deep into the western territories, the central nobles with lands near the border would have no choice but to cooperate.

"We can field approximately twenty thousand men at short notice. All told, we have gathered forty thousand, but a large portion of them would be put to

better use safeguarding the central territories and keeping the peace." Orlean picked up a sheaf of paper. "The influx of western citizens into the central territories is leading to a decline in public order. Bandits are preying on the refugees—as are monsters on the hunt for food to last the winter, if this report is to be believed."

If Six Kingdoms truly had planned that far ahead, they had a capable strategist at the helm. They were taking the western territories in such a way as to stymie the imperial response.

Stovell's rebellion, the death of the emperor, the invasion of the west, the march through Faerzen, and now these refugees—all from the death of the head of House Krone. Our enemies found one opening and forced it wide. And we've lost two high generals. That's going to be a blow to our military strength.

And that was unlikely to be the last of the enemy's schemes. The empire needed a way to counter their ploys, but it had been forced onto the back foot and was still struggling to find solid ground. Everybody in the room knew it, too. He could tell by the gloom hanging in the air.

"We can but pray that Lady Celia Estrella returns promptly from the south," a nobleman remarked.

More than anything, the empire needed time—time to assemble the forces required to meet Six Kingdoms on the field—but leaving the matter to luck simply would not be enough.

"We have to do more than pray." Hiro stood up from his chair. "As I have said, someone has to buy time. We need to take all the troops we can muster at short notice and ride west, even if that means only bringing twenty thousand men."

"So you have said, Your Highness, but that would be far too great a risk. Third Prince Brutahl has already been captured. If you were to follow, our neighbors would make us a laughing stock, and people would begin to whisper that the empire's age is truly over."

The man wasn't wrong, but this was no time to be concerned with the empire's image. Besides, his perspective was a little overly pessimistic. For a moment, Hiro considered making an example of him to bring the direction of

the discussion back into line, but he quickly thought better of it. For the moment, it was better to avoid unnecessary conflict.

"I sympathize with your concerns, but if we keep sitting on our hands, we *will* lose the west. If Six Kingdoms gains a foothold in the central territories, it will be extremely hard to reverse their gains."

"Indeed, Your Highness, but I cannot countenance you throwing yourself into the enemy's maw simply to buy time. Once the empire gathers its strength, surely retaking the west will not be a difficult matter."

"It won't...if things stay the way they are. But politics changes by the second. The more time passes, the greater the risk that traitors will emerge. That's why it's important to take clear and decisive action. It will help to deter anybody thinking about changing allegiances."

"Certainly, some may begin to reconsider their loyalties, but such men exist in every nation. The Grantzian Empire is neither so weak nor so green as to be threatened by their schemes."

The lion of Soleil had endured several periods of turmoil in its thousand years of existence. If one were to pore over the history books, they would quickly find that Stovell's had been far from the first rebellion. There was even precedent for succession conflict splitting the nation in two. It had known oppression, slaughter, despotism, invasion, and assassination in volumes too great to count. But through it all, the power of the Lord had always remained.

But I don't sense the Spirit King's power any more.

Spirits still lingered in the world, watching over humanity, but Hiro had not felt their source, the Spirit King, even once since returning to Aletia. It was possible that his senses were just duller than he realized, but that was the kind of wishful thinking that could doom a nation. More to the point, the Spirit King's absence would go a long way to explaining the various crises and conflicts that had erupted across the continent. If the deity truly had vanished, he would have to find his own path and carve open a new age with his own strength.

All the more reason to put some kind of insurance in place. Something to guarantee that the empire will live on.

But his plans for that were laid. All that remained was to put them into practice. He would not let anyone stand in his way.

He expelled a short breath and donned a confident grin. “It’s not a matter of weakness or naivete. The empire’s repeated conflicts have put pressure on its resources from many quarters. Procuring arms, soldiers’ wages, constructing and maintaining forts: all these things have to be paid for. And gathering men from the other territories, like we’re doing now, will strain the treasury even further.”

War consumed vast amounts of resources. More than a few nations had ruined themselves starting conflicts they couldn’t afford. Whether waged against internal or external threats, at its core, it was a political pursuit that had to be weighed by how much it profited the nation.

Which means that Six Kingdoms must think it stands to gain from this invasion.

Nobody started wars they knew would leave them out of pocket.

“I struggle to see your point, Your Highness. Are you saying we should cede the west to the enemy? That we should hand them our lands without a fight in the name of preserving our resources? Does that not contradict what you just said?”

“If you would let me finish...”

Hiro fixed the nobleman with a glare, making no effort to hide his annoyance at being interrupted. The man fell silent. Hiro stayed glowering at him as continued.

“To reiterate: the empire’s repeated conflicts have led to inflation, economic stagnation, a reduction in quality of life, and widespread uncertainty. Discontent is growing among the people. Ignoring Six Kingdoms’s aggression could trigger an eruption of public outrage. In other words, abandoning the west would be a foolish move, tantamount to throwing away the people’s support.”

Standing by and watching the west burn while their forces assembled was not an option. The people would think their nation had abandoned them, and the

western nobles would become more likely to defect to the enemy. The effects would reverberate through the entire empire.

“That is why I say we need to take the fight to Six Kingdoms, even if we only have twenty thousand men.”

As the beleaguered empire navigated its way through this conflict, it, too, would have to weigh its profits against its losses. Whether it chose to sue for peace or commit to a counterattack, it would need to thoroughly evaluate its decision.

But a counterattack is the way to go, even if our numbers are lacking. We have to show we’re willing to defend our land, our people, and our authority.

An uprising had to be avoided at all costs. It would not be difficult to put one down by force of arms, but that would only fan the flames, not quench them. Violence might buy the empire a little time, but it was not a permanent solution. Tyranny would be its downfall.

“I see what you are saying, but with respect, Your Highness, what can twenty thousand men accomplish?”

“I have a plan.” Hiro’s voice was clear and confident. “Let me take charge and I promise not to disappoint you.”

“You have a plan to pit a hundred and fifty thousand against twenty? Is that what you are saying?”

All around the room, eyes began to gleam with expectation. There were not just one or two; almost every noble in the chamber had the same glint in their eyes.

Hiro smiled internally, satisfied that he had captured their attention. “If all goes well, I will do more than buy time. I will reduce their numbers.”

His words were met with astonished stares. Now that he commanded the room, all he had to do was guide the discussion where he wanted. He began placing pawns on the map, glancing at the report as he went.

“Six Kingdoms has split up its forces to attack the west. If they were all concentrated in one place, they would be much more difficult to deal with, but

this way, we can meet them on even terms."

If he sensed danger, he would retreat immediately. If he caught the scent of victory, he would strike hard and fast.

"The skill of an army's commanders is certainly an important factor in battle, but it is just as vital to understand the state and nature of the field. As long as we can anticipate danger before it arrives, it will not be difficult to win."

Taking on a larger army would require a strategy to bridge the gap, but against smaller, scattered forces, a commander's superior intuition or experience could win the day.

"If we can rout an enemy legion or two, I believe we will find the opportunity we seek."

He punctuated his language with grandiose gestures, moving the argument swiftly on before his audience could dwell on the particulars.

"Now is the time to forget about factions and interests and join hands as one. I ask you: will you stand with me?"

Cooperation was vital. If the empire was unwilling to unite in the face of the ongoing crisis, it would not be able to strike effectively against Six Kingdoms. If the peace-addled nobles without a care for what happened beyond the borders of their own lands did not open their eyes, the empire would be finished.

Naturally, when the question was put to them like that, there was not a man in the room who could deny their aid. Several of them did regard Hiro with suspicion, however. While the most dubious stare belonged to Chancellor Graeci, more interesting was Orlean von Maruk. Hiro made a note of the man's odd reaction but otherwise spared him only a glance as he continued.

"We only need to buy time. If I can lead the enemy around by the nose and keep them confined in the west until our forces are in order, we'll win. With the gathered strength of our reinforcements from the other territories, we will be able to challenge them to a battle and force them back to Faerzen."

Once the empire recaptured the west, it could keep going, reasserting its authority. After watching it drive back a foe as large as Six Kingdoms, its other neighbors could do little but watch in silence.

Hiro looked over the nobles, gauging their reactions. “First, I would ask for your support in a strike against Six Kingdoms with a small force. Can I have a show of hands?”

One by one, the nobles raised their hands.

“There appear to be no objections,” Graeci commented in a dry monotone.

“I believe we have witnessed history made this day, Your Highness,” Orlean von Maruk added. “Your devotion to this nation will be spoken of for generations to come. House Maruk and the rest of the central nobles offer our unreserved support.”

Something about the man, nodding in approval amid the applause, struck Hiro as odd, but seeing no point in wasting time on baseless suspicions, he banished the notion to a corner of his mind.

He might well be plotting something, but I can cross that bridge when I come to it. Burn it, if necessary.

What mattered right now was that he had succeeded in advancing his own plans. That deserved a moment of celebration.

“Now, let’s start the strategy meeting. Six Kingdoms won’t defeat itself.”

With a sly smile, Hiro placed another pawn on the map.

* * * * *

An enormous force ground into motion near Faerzen’s eastern border. They numbered fifty thousand, enough for the tread of their boots to shake the earth. Their armor shone with rainbow hues as it caught the sunlight, and their spears glinted threateningly. The perfect uniformity of their march filled all who saw them with awe.

Standard bearers trailed clouds of dust as they rode between the columns of soldiers. They held banners emblazoned with a serpent on a red-and-black field: the livery of the Kingdom of Anguis. Anguis had produced many high kings over Six Kingdoms’s centuries-long history, and for a long time its current queen had been expected to become the next one, but a certain incident had put an end to her glory days. Now she lived in shadow, the furthest from the throne. That

same queen rode in the center of the column, swaying with the juddering of her carriage.

"We are expected to rejoin the Vulpes siblings in four days, Your Majesty," Seleucus said.

Lucia yawned as she nodded in acknowledgement. "Welcome news. This journey has been a long one."

A large box lay in her arms. She carried it carefully, as though concerned that the contents might break.

The strange object did not escape Seleucus's notice. "What is that?" he asked.

"A souvenir for the Vulpes siblings. I happened across some delectable cuisine in Faerzen. They are sure to be delighted."

"It's not like you to be so thoughtful."

Seleucus's remark was far more blunt than should have been wise in the presence of a queen, but Lucia's smile only widened.

"I encountered no commanders in Faerzen who might win me renown. Do you suppose the western territories might offer better?" Her eyes shone with anticipation, and her tongue snaked out to moisten her lips, but the lascivious gesture had no visible effect on Seleucus. She frowned, her queen's dignity affronted. "Not many could resist my charms. Is there truth to the rumors, then? Are you truly impotent?"

So it was whispered in Anguis's capital. Countless noble ladies had conspired to seduce Seleucus at balls and banquets, but none had successfully taken him back to their bedchamber. Eventually, one of them had snapped and forced her way into his quarters, but not only had she been chased out, her parents had received a letter of complaint several days later. In the end, the unfortunate maiden had become a laughing stock and still had not wed, while rumors began to spread that Seleucus preferred the company of men. He had a way of attracting unfavorable rumors. Indeed, it was precisely because he was such a black sheep that he now served as Lucia's aide.

"Think what you are saying, Your Majesty. If I were to lay my hands on you, unwed as you are, I would be eaten alive."

“I *am* of the house of the snake, ’tis true... But jests aside, all men are blind fools. None have so much as tried to court me.”

“I distinctly recall you being approached by plenty of suitors, all of whom you turned down. I believe you destroyed one of their houses.”

“He should have known better than to lay his hand on me.” Lucia puffed out her cheeks in a childish pout. “I am no cheap harlot.”

Seleucus sighed. “That, Your Majesty, is the reason nobody tries to court you. Because you will ruin a man’s house for placing a hand on your shoulder. At this stage, you have no recourse but to seek a husband among the other royal houses.”

“This conversation is over. I refuse to be treated as though I am to blame.” Lucia turned her gaze pointedly out of the window.

Seleucus scratched his cheek in exasperation, but his diplomatic smile soon reasserted itself. “You mentioned commanders of renown, Your Majesty?”

“Oh? Know you one?”

“You have already slain the high general of the west, but there is another of whom the western nobles speak highly: a woman named Aura. They call her Aphrodite, the Warmaiden.”

The gleam returned to Lucia’s eyes as she turned back to Seleucus. “I have heard of her. They say that she is quite the talent.”

“Sadly, she has been banished from the western and currently serves in the imperial capital, so our odds of encountering her are next to nil. It seems your desires are destined to go unfulfilled, Your Majesty.”

Raising a queen’s hopes only to dash them was blatant insolence. Seleucus was talented enough to get away with it, but if he had been any less exceptional, Lucia would have lopped off his head on the spot.

“Truly, your impudence knows no bounds.”

To Lucia’s profound regret, there was no more capable retainer in all of Anguis. As such, she let him enjoy his jests. He might be aggravating, but so long as he could do his duty, she had no complaints.

“How frightfully dull. Shall I never find a worthy opponent? Perhaps we ought to forget about the western territories after all and storm the imperial heartlands.”

There was no anger in her voice, only disappointment. In a sense, that demonstrated her restraint. Many rulers throughout history would have been willing to execute a talented retainer for a slight, but between Lucia and Seleucus, there was a glimmer of a firm bond. Queen and advisor—where went one, so went the other.

“Unlike you, Your Majesty, I hope we do not encounter any worthy opponents.”

“Is that fear I hear? From my own retainer?” Lucia smiled with mock disdain.

Seleucus did not rise to the bait. He only nodded. “I am not afraid to admit that I am terrified. The empire is commencing its counterattack, and our neighbors have not joined our cause. If our advance is rebuffed, we will be the ones they turn on.”

There was no more volatile nation on the continent than Six Kingdoms. As a union of individual nation-states, it was never truly stable. From the outside, the six appeared to have long joined hands as friends, but their other hands held daggers. At any moment, any of them might slit another’s throat. The high king was meant to maintain order, but the power of the throne had been waning in recent years.

“There is no cause for worry. The Grantzian Empire has overstretched itself. It cannot gather its forces so easily, and even if it could, who’s to say whether they could fight together?”

The empire’s forces were scattered across its vast territories and divided into factions by the five great houses.

“One might say the same of us.” Seleucus loosened his collar. “Our Punitive Army comprises the forces of four kingdoms, each with their own favored tactics and weaponry. They have been trained to different degrees and on different subjects. We cannot expect them to fight in concert.”

“Is that not why we have split them into the Punitive Legions? And when my

own dear troops of Anguis join the fray, we shall simply become the first and second cohorts. We shall not be required to fight side by side."

Once all their forces were assembled, they would number two hundred thousand, far too many for a lesser force to push back. Any opponents would be crushed by sheer force of numbers; they might as well try to halt the tide.

"Although that assumes the enemy has no plan, of course."

The empire might have seen better days, but it was still the Grantzian Empire, and its vast lands yielded a bounty of talent.

The western territories might not have been blessed with fine minds, but they possessed fertile soil and a market monopoly on the production of cotton and sesame. They would make a profitable addition to Anguis's domain. That was not Lucia's goal, however. She wouldn't object if they fell into her hands, but the other kingdoms would be fiercely opposed, and she had no intention of being drawn into a bothersome political squabble—one from which a certain loathsome woman was guaranteed to emerge the victor.

"My goals lie elsewhere. While the other kingdoms quarrel over who shall rule the western territories, I shall see about erasing my disgrace."

"That may be easier said than done. This rumored scion of the War God has yet to take the field...although I cannot imagine that he will, as things stand."

"Then you too expect the empire to abandon the west?"

"Gathering their forces at short notice will be difficult, and striking back with a small number ill-advised. There is nothing to gain from such a course but humiliation. Why would they commit the War God's only living heir to a doomed enterprise?" Seleucus paused, then nodded, as though he had remembered something. "Although, I did forget about Draal. Our agents' reports were fragmented, but they paint a picture of Mars's scion invading with only a few thousand men."

"I, too, have read them. I did not know whether to be impressed by his accomplishment or appalled by how easily Draal buckled before a simple name. They can blame their loss on having no men with the steel to stand up to Mars's scion."

Draal was a nation of fools that had surrendered without a fight despite an overwhelming advantage. Lucia's smile widened as she spread her fan wide. Perhaps sacking the grand duchy would prove an amusing diversion after she had conquered the western territories.

"I shalln't go to the trouble of dragging him out, but if he rode out west of his own accord... Well, 'twould be a fine thing for the greatest honor of this war to fall to me."

"Judging by his record, he does seem to have a liking for battle. Perhaps he may very well ride forth. I would be delighted if he were strong enough to meet Your Majesty's expectations."

"As would I. And if he does not take the bait, we can just as easily surge into the central territories. If we destroy the empire in the process, all the better."

"I only hope that it all proves so easy. Personally, I fear we will discover that the lion is not quite so decrepit as we might like."

Lucia snapped her fan shut. "It will prove perfectly easy. That is why I am here."

* * * * *

The twelfth day of the first month of Imperial Year 1024

Winter's chill had firmly set in, and the morning sun did little to ease the dryness in the air. Nonetheless, the people declined to stay in their houses, spilling cloaked in warm excitement out into the streets. Roaring crowds lined the central boulevard, and confetti fluttered through the air between the sky's blue-and-white patchwork. Unbroken applause and resounding whoops shook the morning air.

Burly men marched down the center of the boulevard as the people cheered from either side. The War God's heir rode at their head, leading the procession atop his swiftdrake. He smiled and raised a hand to the people.

"Glory to the empire!"

"Divines be with you!"

Their voices formed a chorus to the orchestra's stately melody as they shouted their blessings, producing a grandiose marching song that filled the soldiers' hearts with pride. A gentle breeze blew down the road, granting them its blessing for the battles to come.

A black dragon banner fluttered gracefully against the blue—the War God's sacred standard, which only he was permitted to bear. The onlookers breathed sighs of astonishment, and their gazes held only the purest admiration. There was no high or low there; the Hero King of Twinned Black had laid the empire's most foundational stones, and soldiers of all ranks afforded him the highest respect.

Hiro's troops numbered twenty thousand men, gathered from the private forces of the central nobles. The soldiers of earlier belonged to the east and were not part of his sortie. Hiro had insisted on taking only central noble troops in view of the need for coordination on the field.

He turned his gaze from the crowd to the battlements above the main gate.

It's all up to you now.

Down from the ramparts stared the woman who had protested his plan to the last: Rosa. She gave a small wave and a stiff smile, an unusual display of open

sorrow for someone who maintained such a formidable front. Hiro smiled back, half-closing his eyes affectionately, but she did not return his warmth. He knew why. It had driven them to a rare argument the previous night, and he had still not managed to convince her by the time dawn came.

Don't worry. I'll be back...once all this is over.

He tried to face forward despite his heavy heart, but found that he couldn't. Something in the corner of his eye caught his attention.

"I know her..." His lips parted unbidden.

In the midst of the cheering figures stood a young girl. Hiro remembered her well—in fact, he couldn't have forgotten their meeting if he had tried. She was the girl who had offered him an anat flower during his first victory parade through the capital.

She held the same red blossom in her hands now, but she showed no sign of stepping closer. Perhaps she was intimidated by the roar of the crowd, he wondered, but she looked different today. There was grief in her eyes as she stared at him, or perhaps reproach—whatever it was, it felt uncanny coming from a child, and set every hair on his body on end. After a short time, she vanished into the darkness of the alleyway.

Hiro cast his eyes skyward. "Am I doing the right thing?" he wondered aloud to some unseen ear, but no reply came, and he himself could not discern the answer. He smiled sheepishly to himself as his swiftdrake passed through the city gates.

With his army now departing the capital, the greatest cheer yet went up from behind him. He unsheathed Excalibur from his hip, radiating quiet fervor.

"Glory to the empire!" he cried. "May fortune shine on the path we walk!"

The greenery danced joyfully as Heavenly Sovereign showered the land with its brilliance.

Be well...until we meet again.

Bidding one last farewell to Liz in his mind, Hiro faced forward once more. What was now in motion could not be halted. His heart longed for the

battlefield, craved the heated dance of flesh and blood.

“It’s an honor to fight beside the War God’s own heir,” said a voice from beside him.

He turned to see Orlean von Maruk seated on horseback, clad in silver armor. Straight-backed and with reins in hand, the man looked every bit a soldier.

“I will try my utmost not to hamper you as your vice-commander.”

Hiro shot him a look tinged with suspicion. “No need to be so uptight. We’re only buying time.”

“Please, Your Highness. Surely that is not all you are planning. The nobles are already whispering that you are preparing to carve out a legend worthy of your forefather’s name.”

The man’s mouth moved as if greased, and Hiro found his forwardness distasteful. How much of what he was saying was sincere and how much was flattery? There was no way to know. If he was trying to curry favor with Hiro in hopes of winning fame or renown, that would be one thing, but it was difficult to imagine that somebody so small-minded could have steered House Maruk to its present station. No, he was plotting something else, no doubt about it.

“Even if I did have some revolutionary plan to defeat a hundred and fifty thousand men with twenty thousand, the odds of failure would still be high. I’m surprised you’d want to join such a risky mission.” Hiro decided to feel the man out, although his words were more of a warning than a probe.

“Even were the chance of success only one in ten, I would still have insisted on joining you.”

“We’re going to be fighting on a tightrope. Put one foot wrong and we’ll plummet to our doom.”

“But if we prevail, our names shall go down in history. And the central nobles who think of me as an upstart will fall in line.”

“So that’s your goal? You want to use this war to cement your position?”

That might have been the truth, but it was not the whole truth. Von Maruk was hiding something. How best to coax the rest from his scheming mind?

“But of course. Nobody would follow you unless they believed they stood to gain. Why else do men go to war but for the promise of great profits?”

“Some of our soldiers are loyal to their nation. Not everybody is like you.”

“Oh, I am certain of it. But they will be outnumbered by those hoping to advance their station.”

Those words led Hiro to an unpleasant conclusion: he and Orlean were fundamentally incompatible. An insurmountable difference lay between them. This man cared nothing for his nation—it was simply one more agent by which he could profit.

He’s a merchant to his core. In times of peace, that would be a dependable trait, but now...

“Are you not the same, Your Highness?” Orlean asked.

“Forty percent of me, perhaps.”

Hiro was no saint himself, and his loyalty to the empire was not entirely unconditional. At the very least, he left room for his own desires. But he was a far cry from a man like Orlean, who scorned the very notion of country.

“Then how is it that you see this war?”

“I wonder. Perhaps you’ll find out in the course of battle.” Hiro’s rebuff had an edge of derision.

Orlean smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Am I to take it that I have not yet earned your trust, Your Highness?”

“I suppose we’ll find that out on the field as well.”

For a long moment, the two stared at one another, exchanging icy smiles as they felt each other out.

“Surely that is quite enough, my lords.”

A voice interrupted them. They turned as one to see Drix riding alongside them, his expression faintly appalled. He clearly had no intention of hiding that he was Graeci’s agent anymore—or perhaps he was purposefully standing out to give cover to other spies.

“I must ask that you refrain from interrogating one another in front of the troops,” Drix continued. “If rumors of discord between our commander and his vice-commander begin to spread, it will affect morale.”

He was right, and the last person Hiro had expected to be reproached by.

Orlean rubbed the back of his head. “My apologies,” he said deliberately. “I shall take more care in the future.”

Hiro brought his swiftdrake to Drix’s side. “Don’t worry. This is all according to plan.”

Drix’s eyebrows knitted in confusion.

“How are the roads?” Hiro continued. “Are they usable?”

“Not with an army, Your Highness. I fear they remain crowded with refugees.”

“I suppose that was too much to hope for.”

Still, that was within Hiro’s expectations. The straight road might be out, but he could still take the long way around and catch the enemy by surprise.

“We’ll keep off the main roads as we make our way west. Could you dispatch scouts to find our enemy’s positions?”

Six Kingdoms was bound to be cautious. It would be vital to find the cracks in their armor. With the empire already on the back foot, the ideal approach would be to obfuscate its advance and circle around behind Six Kingdoms. An advantageous position would help make up for lost time.

“At once, Your Highness.” Drix bowed and rode away.

Hiro watched the man go with obsidian-black eyes before turning to look up at the sky. A smile spread across his face as he gazed into the blue.

All the pieces are in place. I see the path to victory. All that’s left is to see what the enemy will do.

He would have to fight dauntlessly and act prudently, lest they catch on.

“By your leave, Your Highness, I will ride ahead to lead the vanguard.”

“By all means.”

Orlean gave a polite nod and rode away, his bodyguards in tow. All that remained were the few aides assigned to keep an eye on Hiro.

“Aha... Ha ha ha...”

He couldn’t help but laugh. He truly was surrounded by enemies on all sides. It was simply too funny.

Now, if I’ve read the situation correctly...

Six Kingdoms would either retreat without a fight at all, or after two or three noncommittal engagements. They would want to lure him deep into their territory to prevent his escape.

Well, I’ll use that for my own purposes. All this is just a stepping stone to my own goals.

His hands tightened on the reins with determination. Now, after a thousand years, it was time to make his grand scheme a reality once again.

* * * * *

The fourteenth day of the first month of Imperial Year 1024

Beyrouth, in the northwest of the Grantzian Empire’s western territories

The core of Six Kingdoms’s Punitive Army was yet to make a move. More than a few of its soldiers were freely day-drinking, engaged in heated gambling matches over tables set up in the cold. With the surrounding lands surrendered and no further orders, it was pointless to ask them to remain vigilant. Here and there, women’s screams rose from the camp—prizes claimed from the burning ruins of towns and villages that had resisted, or else offered as gifts by western nobles as a show of surrender.

One place remained untouched by the maelstrom of vice hanging over the camp: the command tent where the officers gathered. It went without saying that nobody here was drinking. A stern weight hung in the air.

“That you would surrender without so much as drawing steel... A poor showing, Lord von Kirschia, I must say.”

Acting Commander Luka Mammon du Vulpes’s voice was laced with scorn. A dozen western nobles knelt before her with their heads bowed.

“Proud rulers of the continent...how does it feel to be the ones on your knees?”

The Grantzian Empire’s strength was great, and it had exerted great power over its neighbors, but its days of perpetual victory were a thing of the past. Now its western nobles bent their heads as one. It was a sight to signify the end of an era.

“Naturally, however, I cannot accept your unconditional surrender. In light of your deeds, due punishment is in order. A price must be paid.”

The nobles’ shoulders began to tremble as they sensed the bloodlust in Luka’s voice.

“If it’s food you desire, we will gladly supply it,” one said. “We have accepted all of your demands.”

“That will not suffice. A great number of civilians perished in the recent fighting—future citizens of Six Kingdoms who would have pledged their loyalty to our High King.” Luka heaved an affected sigh. “Instead, because of their untimely deaths, their families now bear grudges against our nation.”

Lord von Kirschia’s lips tightened bitterly at that. Luka’s eyes filled with glee to see his consternation.

“Considering that our nations will soon be one, I wish to pluck any seeds of discontent before they take root. Their wrath must be appeased.”

“What would you have us do?”

“Offer one of your own blood—a son or daughter, perhaps—to the people and watch them be torn apart. Do this and our Lord, the Faerie King, will cleanse your minds of their villainous notions.”

“I-I could never!” Von Kirschia rose to his feet, spluttering with anger.

Luka fixed the man with a frigid glare. “Did you perhaps expect others to lose their loved ones while you remained unscathed?”

“I surrendered so that we would not be harmed! Now you tell me to kill my own kin?!”

“Very well. You have made your case quite plain.”

Luka cast a meaningful glance at one of her subordinates. The soldier seized von Kirschia and pinned him to the ground.

“Unhand me! Is this how Six Kingdoms treats those who lay down their arms?!”

“Shut up and die.” With a scowl, Igel swung his sword down at von Kirschia’s neck. A fierce jet of blood sprayed forth, rapidly forming a crimson pool. Several western nobles retched as the tangy stench of iron filled the tent. The Six Kingdoms officers lined up by the walls turned a little pale too, but they continued watching the proceedings in silence.

Igel planted a foot on von Kirschia’s head as it rolled across the floor. “Can’t we wrap this up already, sis? Seems like a waste of time to me.”

“And I had very much hoped to play a little longer. You’re always so impatient.” Luka shook her head in exasperation and sighed. “Very well. If the good von Kirschia has any daughters, give them to the soldiers. If he has sons, torture them, cut off their heads and place them on spikes. His wife and other kin, we shall entrust to his people. Strip them naked and set them loose in the center of town. If they were truly benevolent rulers, the townsfolk will see that they remain unharmed.”

“What if they don’t?”

“Then it would seem the people took the law into their own hands in their lord’s absence...in which case we will put the town to the torch and pillage what we can.”

A pall of regret fell over the remaining nobles’ faces as Luka’s cruelty unfolded. The extreme stress brought on by cold and terror caused several to pass out.

“Now, what of the rest of you? You would make this far easier if you simply accepted my terms. Frankly, I do not see why you are so hesitant. For the price of just one life apiece, you could protect your stations.”

Refusal was not an option. Despite their reluctance, the nobles had no choice but to agree. Humans will fight to the bitter end if cornered, but they will rarely choose to die so long as escape remains possible, and making an example of

von Kirschia had been quite effective at breaking the nobles' wills. With their minds numbed, they took whatever honeyed morsel was handed to them.

"Then it seems this diversion is done with. Soon our commander will rejoin us. I suggest you take care not to earn her ire, or you will lose your head on the spot. She is not as forgiving as I am."

Luka relaxed back into her chair with a yawn and a little wave of her hand, as though shooing away a dog. *I'm finished with you. Get out.*

It was Igel who interrupted. He took a step forward, glowering down at the nobles with contempt.

"Where's your noble pride, huh? Your people slaughtered, your friends cut down in front of you, your own families sent out to die, and still you won't risk getting your hands dirty?"

His words stung. They were harsh enough to shatter any man's self-respect. But the western nobles only kept their heads bowed, saying nothing. Blood trickled from several of their mouths as they bit their lips in shame.

Igel grinned at the reaction and launched into another series of taunts. "Must be some damn fine titles if you'll sit through all this humiliation to keep 'em. You don't get it, do you? You can throw your weight around all you want once you walk out of here, you can preen and swagger across the border at your neighbors, but you're still gonna be losers for the rest of your days."

He planted his foot on the nobles' heads, launched vicious kicks at their cheeks, and laughed loudly all the while.

"Don't forget that there's a collar around every one of your miserable necks. You're Six Kingdoms's slaves now. If you expected to be treated like human beings, you've got another thing coming."

"That will do." Luka shot Igel a glare of reproach.

"Really, sis? But they're so—"

"Stand down for a moment." Something dangerous flashes in Luka's eyes as she called her brother off. She rose to her feet and looked down at the nobles. "You have neglected your pride, let your fangs rot away, shown yourselves to

be more kittens than lions. Your sins are great indeed. Yet beneath Six Kingdoms's banner, you will at least have the chance to serve as house cats. Be grateful for the Faerie King's mercy."

Luka dangled the carrot while Igel brandished the stick, but neither was particularly effective when both siblings were so villainous. Their audience sensed the true intent behind every word. The aides looked at them, perplexed.

At that moment, a drumbeat of hurried footsteps sounded from outside the tent, accompanied by a gale of laughter.

"Kah ha ha ha ha ha! Truly, you siblings never fail to amuse."

All eyes swiveled to the entrance. There stood a beautiful woman silhouetted against the outside glare, the rays of sunlight seeming to grant her a false aureole. Her unusual dress—for which "bizarre" was really the only adequate word—struck the entire tent dumb. She greeted the leers with an amused smile rather than anger.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Lucia Levia du Anguis."

She had always liked to make an impression. She was eccentric in action, audacious in dress, and often improper in demeanor, but she still radiated a regal composure that stunned those who saw her.

"Staring, hm? Has my beauty entranced you so?"

She had ascended the throne at a young age following the untimely death of her father, but her compelling personality commanded fierce loyalty from her retainers and popularity with her soldiers, while her singular martial skills had earned the fanatical respect of the people of Anguis.

"My apologies, my lady. I was not expecting you so soon."

Luka offered Lucia a small smile as she dropped to one knee. Seeing Igel and the rest of the aides follow suit, the western nobles shuffled around so that they were bowing toward the new arrival.

Lucia cast a satisfied glance around the tent and strode forward. "Well and good," she murmured. Taking her place in the chair at the head of the room, she tossed the box she carried to the ground. "A souvenir for you."

Luka cocked her head. “With all due respect, my lady, is that not for us?”

Her question would have sounded presumptuous in any other context, but here, it was justified. Lucia had thrown the box before the western nobles. Why she would offer a gift to people who had not only surrendered but never even put up a fight was a mystery, but she only smiled; she clearly had no intention of explaining herself.

“They must be the ones to open it. You shall understand once you see what it contains.” Her fan flicked toward Seleucus, who was waiting on her shoulder. “Let him do it,” she said, pointing out a nobleman who was watching the exchange apprehensively.

“At once, Your Majesty.” With a word in one of the guards’ ears, Seleucus had the box set down in front of the man.

The nobleman looked back fearfully. “Wh-What am I to do with this?”

Lucia’s lips pulled into a chilling smile. “Take off the lid.”

A gulp filled the air, loud in the tension.

“Well, don’t just sit there! Hurry and open it!”

Hearing Lucia’s voice take on an edge of irritation, the nobleman scrambled for the box. He grasped the lid with trembling arms and hesitantly pulled it open.

“What? But... What?”

His face filled with confusion. His eyes contracted to points as he looked around, as though searching for somebody to explain. The sight was almost comical.

Lucia clutched at her stomach in laughter. “Gah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Splendid, splendid! A more magnificent expression I’ve never seen!” She struck her fan against her armrest as tears beaded in the corners of her long-lashed eyes.

Luka succumbed to curiosity and peered inside the box herself. She, too, began to chuckle. “So that’s what this was about. You truly are incorrigible.” She sighed in exasperation, but her shoulders shook with suppressed mirth.

“An inspired idea, if I do say so myself. Come, Igel, show the rest.”

“Huh? Me? Why’ve I gotta...?”

“You shall understand soon enough.” Lucia’s eyes sparkled with mischief.

Igel scowled and approached the box. Once he saw what lay within, he began grinning like the two women. “You’re one sick puppy, huh?” He gave the box a mighty kick, sending the object inside rolling across the ground.

The entire tent blanched. Some covered their mouths and looked away, while others retched up their guts without shame or forewarning. Yet others began to shed tears of grief.

“Ohhh... Prince Brutahl! Prince Brutahl!”

One man, lacking the strength to stand, crawled across the ground. Ahead of him, a misshapen object rolled across the floor: the severed head of Prince Brutahl, its face still twisted in agony.

“Oh, how cruel... Your Highness, what has become of you?”

He picked up the head and cradled it in his arms, glaring hatefully up at the Six Kingdoms officers. The rest of the nobles simply stared, mouths agape, stunned into disbelieving silence.

“Our homeland sent the order to kill all associated with the Grantzian royal family. No mercy for women and children. ’Tis no less than Six Kingdoms once received at the empire’s hands—just punishment, one could say?” Lucia’s expression turned serious as she laid her arms on the armrests. “Fear not. You will join your dear Third Prince Brutahl soon enough.”

She snapped her fingers. Armed soldiers surged in through the entrance.

“Wha—?! You knaves! This was not what we agreed!”

As the foremost of the western nobles bridled, screams rose from the back of the group.

“You curs! You would cut down unarmed— Gyaaah!”

A pitiless swing from a battle axe sprayed the speaker’s brains across the ground. Some of the nobles tried desperately to resist, scrambling away from

the blows as they came, but with no weapons of their own, they were at a fatal mismatch—not that steel would have done any more than prolong their suffering.

“Do try to think for a moment. What, other than betrayal, would I gain from inviting self-interested nobles into my camp?”

In spite of Lucia’s words, the nobles were given no time to collect themselves. Sharpened blades speared mercilessly through their backs to pierce their hearts.

“Fear not; your honor shall be preserved. I shall grant you the courtesy of reporting that you died in battle. Perhaps you ought to thank me. You may have lived as pests, but now you may die as patriots.”

Beneath her disaffected narration, noble after noble slumped to the ground, carved open by wicked blades. Others spewed curses as they crumpled. The man cradling Brutahl’s head died in his despair, his throat torn open.

In moments, the command tent was awash with blood and a foul stench filled the air. The soldiers responsible for the massacre were bathed in red to a man, but they showed no sign of hesitation, and their expressions did not falter for a moment. They simply looked on with empty eyes, impassively turning the tent into a slaughterhouse. Gore coated their armor and blood sprayed with every arc of their swords.

“Graaaaaghhh!”

Even after they ran out of nobles to slay, their strange madness did not end. With a sudden scream, they began driving their blades into the corpses. Their victims might have been dead, but their blows were no less vicious. With faces twisted in vengeful ire, they set about brutalizing the bodies. Some even sank their teeth into the cooling flesh and savaged them, weeping tears of blood.

Even Lucia frowned at that. “Enough! There is no need for such barbarity!”

A sharp *crack* accompanied her command. Her fan had shattered her armrest. Unseeing gazes converged on her as the soldiers spun around at the noise, but she stared back, unintimidated.

“Your prey is dead. ’Tis no use tormenting them further.” She placed a fist to

her forehead, as though suffering from a particularly vicious headache. “You have done well. Bring in the nobles waiting outside.”

A wave of her fan toward the entrance pointed the soldiers in the right direction. They set out with a clatter of armor.

Luka surveyed the sordid scene for a moment before approaching Lucia, eyes cold with disapproval. “May I ask you to explain what just occurred, Your Majesty?”

“Hm? Oh, very well. Clearly you aren’t well pleased.” With a sheepish smile, Lucia set her fan to her mouth and took a deep breath. “Do you recognize those soldiers, perchance?”

“I do not. Were they your royal guard? If you’ll forgive me, they seemed a little lacking in discipline... Not that that’s any of my business. I am not a citizen of Anguis. I cannot be expected to know the comings and goings of its military.”

To provide a serviceable answer laden with biting sarcasm was typical of the royal house of Vulpes. They affected a facade of straightforwardness to lull their enemies into complacency, but beneath the mask lay a house of cunning schemers who loved nothing more than bringing others low. As though to prove it, their banner was a fox, and Vulpes was known as the nation of avarice.

“They are a new venture of mine. I call them ‘Vendetta,’ my Revenant Brigade.”

“Revenants? Their eyes did look dead, I admit, but was there no other name you could choose?”

“They may as well *be* dead.”

Every one of them had lost their loved ones to war with the Grantzian Empire and endured indescribable treatment at the hands of its soldiers. Unable to bear the reality before their eyes, they had plunged into the depths of despair. Now they wandered the world with body and soul wounded beyond repair, living only to exact revenge.

“Hence, Revenant Brigade...” Luka nodded at the explanation. “Still, I cannot say that using their grief for your own ends strikes me as being in the best of taste.”

“Using? Not in the slightest. I gave them a reason to live, nothing more. Am I to take it that you believe you would be a better mistress?”

“I would have given them despair and then set them free.” Luka’s smile seemed to come straight from her heart. Her eyes gleamed. “In faces twisted with agony and eyes smoldering with hatred, there is a beauty one can find nowhere else—although I admit, there is a certain appeal to buying their loyalty with red meat.”

Lucia furrowed her brows distastefully, uncertain which of them was the more twisted.

Igel watched the exchange in disbelief. “Sorry to interrupt your argument, but I’ve brought those nobles you wanted.”

He dragged one of the western nobles in question by the hair as he approached, forcing the man to step over the bodies of his peers—a show of villainy no less wicked than his sister. Half a dozen more followed, their arms bound.

Igel forced the group to their knees in front of the forlorn shape that was Brutahl’s head. “There’s your beloved third prince.”

One of the nobles squealed and looked away.

“Hey, now. Get a nice, long look. Make certain it’s the real thing.” Igel seized the man’s cheek and forced his head back. “That’s what’s gonna happen to you if you get any bright ideas—and not you, but your families too.”

“That will do, Igel. Unlike the poor fools from before, Six Kingdoms has need of these men. ’Twould not do to scare them out of their wits.” Lucia rose to her feet, smacking her fan against her palm, and approached the nobles. Her voice turned sweet and low. “I mean to take the heads of the Grantzian royalty you so venerate. If you have no stomach for that, I will gladly relieve you of your lives here and now. Otherwise, pray pledge yourselves to Six Kingdoms. The corpses around you were imbeciles of little worth, but you have far greater value. You shall not be mistreated.”

Her gentle smile radiated the kindness of a mother scolding a beloved child, but in a world stained with blood and gore, it seemed more demonic than

angelic. The western nobles' teeth chattered—half due to cold, but certainly accentuated by terror. At last, faces taut, they bent their heads in a show of loyalty.

"Splendid. If you recognize what is best for you, I have naught more to say. You may return to your camps."

The prisoners were escorted out, still reeling from the whirlwind judgment. Lucia quietly watched them leave. No sooner had they left than a messenger entered the tent in their place.

"I have a report, Your Majesty."

"Oh?" Lucia cocked her head.

The messenger stepped closer and whispered into her ear for a second or two before handing her a letter and taking his leave. Luka cast him a dubious glance as he left.

"Has something happened?"

"I suppose there is no harm in telling you...but the rest must take their leave."

"You mean me too?"

"No, Igel, you may stay."

The aides obediently filed out. In short order, the tent's only occupants were Lucia, Luka, Igel, and a mountain of corpses.

Lucia scanned the letter. "'Twould seem that Mars's scion has taken the field. His force numbers only twenty thousand, so 'tis doubtful that he means to engage us directly...if our informant is to be believed, and I cannot be certain that they are." The Vulpes siblings' faces filled with surprise, but she only chuckled. "Whatever the truth of the matter, 'twould seem my prize is wandering into my arms of his own free will."

Igel stepped closer. "Give me thirty thousand and I'll bring you his head."

"No." Lucia did not even hesitate for a moment.

"Huh? Why not?"

Igel glared back, his face twisted in anger, but a rebuttal arrived from an

unexpected quarter: Luka.

“You are not strong enough,” she said.

“Wha—?!” Igel swung around, caught off guard by receiving such a blunt putdown from his own sister.

Lucia nodded along with Luka’s assessment. “To defeat him shall take uncommon prowess. Even should we best him on the field, pursuing him will be impossible so long as the western territories are not fully in our grasp. We must lure him deep into our lands—” She cut herself off as Brutahl’s head, still lying on the floor, caught her eye. A masterful plan took shape in the back of her mind. In a world painted with blood and gore, a devilish smile spread across her face.

“Am I to take it that you have thought of some sort of scheme?” Luka asked.

Lucia nodded and flicked open her fan. “Oh, yes. A most splendid scheme indeed.”

Chapter 4: Things Fall Apart

The twenty-fourth day of the first month of Imperial Year 1024

Winter was warm in the south of the empire. The vastness of its lands meant that different territories experienced the seasons very differently. The temperature could vary greatly between regions, and those unused to travel could quickly fall ill. It was this market that books such as *Travel for Beginners* existed to serve.

“Hmm...there are monsters in the south, so beware, it says...and apparently bandits are more common than elsewhere too.” The crimson-haired girl nodded to herself as she perused her copy. “I wonder if they’re just irritable because of the heat? I know it makes me cranky.”

“Are there not monsters in every territory?” The turquoise-haired girl opposite offered a wry smile. Her face was drawn, as though she was feeling out of sorts.

The silver-haired girl by her side nodded in agreement, although her attention remained fixed on the book in her lap. “Scáthach is right. They’re everywhere.”

“You know, now that you mention it...” The expression slid from Liz’s face. She closed the book and laid it on the seat.

The trio were in a carriage. A landscape formed of green and brown rolled past outside the window.

“We can’t be far from Sunspear.”

Sunspear was the seat of House Muzuk of the south. Of the five territories, the south was the hottest, consisting mostly of prairie and desert on account of its arid climate. The northern regions, however, boasted fertile soil ideal for human habitation, and it was in these lands that the city lay.

“Sunspear...” Scáthach repeated the name to herself. “A city of trade, or so I’ve heard, although I also know it for gold.”

“That’s right! It’s a wonderful place. You can find goods there from all over

the world. It's just as varied as the capital and maybe twice as shiny. Do you know, the entire palace is made out of gold. You won't believe your eyes!"

With the imperial capital to the north, Lichtein and Steissen to the south, the Third Imperial City to the west, and Baldickgarten to the east, Sunspear was well positioned as a hub of commerce. Natural gold reserves also made it attractive to the empire's upper class and merchants, as well as enterprising individuals hoping to strike it rich.

"Most likely, Steissen is hoping to gain control of those interests," Scáthach remarked.

Liz cocked her head. "You know, it's strange. Don't you think it's a little too quiet?"

The party had headed directly for Sunspear after entering the southern territories, prioritizing a meeting with House Muzuk over a detour to Berg Fortress. They were traveling as fast as they could, trailing an escort of only thirty riders; the remaining soldiers had gone to Berg Fortress with Garda. As they made their way south, however, Liz had begun to sense something amiss, and the feeling had only grown stronger the closer they came to the city.

Scáthach frowned. "Now that you mention it, you're right. Something does feel wrong."

"What do you think, Aura?"

"Mm."

"Well, we'll find out soon enough if there's anything to it." Scáthach gestured toward the window. "Here we are."

A great gate loomed over the road ahead, with merchants passing through in both directions. Guards stood before it, conducting goods inspections. They stopped and bowed as they caught sight of the carriage's livery. One stepped closer and exchanged a few words with the coachman before peering in through the window.

"Greetings, Lady Celia Estrella. It's an honor to welcome you to Sunspear."

"The pleasure is mine, I'm sure." Liz smiled back, albeit just a little stiffly.

Something was definitely amiss; the guards should not have been so lax. As they passed through the gate, her suspicion hardened to certainty.

“Aura...do you think Steissen is really attacking?”

Aura made a noncommittal noise, but otherwise she didn’t reply. Scáthach, too, only crossed her arms and cocked her head pensively.

Liz looked back over the letters she had received from the head of House Muzuk. He had sent a series of increasingly urgent missives over the course of their journey. Even now, reading them again, there seemed to be a clear note of panic in his writing.

“What’s going on? Shouldn’t Steissen’s forces be marching on the city?”

The final letter described an army of around sixty thousand attempting to encircle Sunspear, but the people outside did not look like a populace under siege. The streets were just as packed as Liz remembered from years gone by. More than a few passersby were dressed in vibrant fabrics, their spirits buoyed by the turn of the year, and there seemed to be a smile on every face. The air was jubilant, a far cry from a city beset by war.

At last, a gaudy building constructed entirely from gold came into view. The sight was intended to impress onlookers with House Muzuk’s status, although it also offered a glimpse of their vanity.

The carriage stopped and the doors opened, flooding the interior with dazzling sunlight. As Liz’s feet touched the ground, a man stepped forward and bowed his head.

“Welcome to my humble hall.”

Beto Lueger von Muzuk, House Muzuk’s young head, had become the patriarch of the family at the age of twenty-seven after his father passed away from sickness. In the four years since, he had disposed of corrupt nobles and courted foreign merchants to establish trade routes, developing Sunspear as a center of commerce. Although young in years, he had shown himself to be an astonishingly capable ruler, as well as an egalitarian who surrounded himself with the best and brightest, regardless of upbringing.

“I had scarcely dreamed the day would come when we would welcome Lady

Celia Estrella to our home.”

The woman at his side mirrored his gesture. She was dressed in striking fashion. Her outfit was so sheer that her underwear was visible beneath, perhaps to help her weather the heat. For some reason—the arid climate, perhaps—the overall impression was not indecent. The clear outlining of her body’s curves highlighted her artistic beauty.

“I am Selvia Sephone von Muzuk.” She held out a hand in greeting. “I believe we have already met, Your Highness. Do you recall?”

Liz accepted Selvia’s handshake with a smile. “Of course I remember. How have you been?”

Selvia had been the first to offer Liz congratulations at the latter’s coming-of-age ceremony. She was also good friends with Rosa, with whom she maintained regular correspondence.

“Far better now, thank you. The weather has grown much cooler in recent days. Is Lady Rosa in good spirits? She’s so busy nowadays, she hardly ever finds the time to write.”

“Maybe a little *too* good. I wish she could have seen her way to joining us...”

“Oh, I can hardly blame her. She’s the acting head of House Kelheit now. She doesn’t have the time for diversions that she used to. I must pay her a visit once things settle down a little.”

Liz beamed. “You should! I’m sure she’d be delighted.”

“Dinner is ready, if you’ll forgive the early hour,” Beto interrupted. “Shall we head inside? The evening chill will soon set in.”

By his side stood Aura and a now-hooded Scáthach. They appeared to have just finished their introductions.

“Oh, that’s right!” Selvia said. “We can’t very well stay talking out here in the cold. You must come in.” In spite of herself, however, she soon began introducing herself to Aura and Scáthach.

Beto turned to Liz with a weary smile as he watched his wife out of the corner of his eye. “Perhaps we ought to go on ahead. Our food will be getting cold.”

“Before that, I wanted to ask about Steissen—”

Beto ushered Liz toward the palace, cutting her off. “That would be better discussed over dinner, don’t you think? There’s no telling who might be listening out here.”

“I suppose so... All right, lead the way.”

“With pleasure.” Beto turned with an elegant flourish and strode toward the palace doors. To Liz’s surprise, they were made of wood. Still, it was plain that they had been built with the finest lumber. They were no less magnificent than the doors of the imperial palace itself.

Beto stopped. “Wondering why they aren’t made of gold?”

“Just a little...” Liz raised a hand to her cheek. She hadn’t realized that her curiosity had been so obvious.

“Gold is heavy. Doors made from the stuff take more men and time to open than you might think. My wife dismissed the idea as a waste of time and money.”

“Huh...” The answer was far more prosaic than Liz had expected. It was hard to know how to respond. In the end, she opted for a diplomatic smile.

As they spoke, the doors creaked open and the interior air spilled out. Liz stepped inside—or at least, she tried. A great crowd filled the chamber within, all on one knee with their heads bowed toward her—the nobles of the south.

Beto smiles wryly. “They heard that you were coming and insisted on paying their respects.”

The extravagant welcome earned a frown from Liz, but Beto moved ahead before she could ask any questions.

“I must apologize for all the fuss, Lady Celia Estrella,” Selvia said. “I did try to dissuade my husband, but this was one point on which he would not back down.”

It was a display of power for Liz’s benefit, she realized. Beto was emphasizing his own importance, showing that House Muzuk was the lynchpin around which the entire south turned. If Hiro had been here, he probably would have made

some quip about wasted effort. Liz, however, couldn't bring herself to be so dismissive. The nobles had gathered here for her; the least she could do was thank them. As she passed before them, she offered each and every one a few words of appreciation.

When at last she was done, she looked back, exhausted. "I think I could do with dinner now."

"I'm certain you could." Selvia laid a hand to her cheek and gave an affectionate smile. "Come, this way."

Liz found herself steered into a dining hall. A line of servers waited against the wall. Beto stood beside a long table laden with food, wearing a small smile. "This seat is yours, Your Highness," he said, indicating the head of the table.

Liz took her place with a slight nod. The rest of the attendees followed suit. Beto raised a silver goblet and shot her a glance, prompting her to lead the toast.

I've never been good at this...not that fancy banquets are something I should *get used to.*

Sighing to herself, she raised her goblet and scanned the room, ensuring that everybody had their own cups in hand. "I would like to thank Lord von Muzuk... Wait, no, we give thanks to the Divines first, don't we? Or was it the Spirit King?"

An awkward silence fell. Liz's crimson eyes searched for help, but none came. Aura's expression was as blank as ever, rendering it impossible to tell what she was thinking. Scáthach smiled like a proud mother. Liz wanted to hide her head in her hands, but she forced herself to keep going and lift her goblet high.

"To... To our health!"

In what might have been an attempt to lift her spirits, the rest of the table repeated her word with gusto. This was no time to wallow in regret or should-haves, however. Putting her embarrassment behind her, she laid her goblet down and turned to Beto.

"There's something I need to ask you." Her youthful uncertainty vanished, replaced by stony-faced seriousness.

Sensing the change that had come over her, Beto drained his goblet in a single gulp and fixed her with a level gaze. Something gleamed in his eyes. “You did seem to have something on your mind.”

“That’s right. Tell me...what in the world is going on?”

“Was something amiss with your welcome? I thought it was an appropriate reception for a princess of the empire.”

In a flash of irritation, Liz thumped a stack of papers onto the table. “You told me several times in these very letters that an attack from Steissen was imminent—oh, don’t give me the ‘what letters’ routine.” She stood up from her chair, brows furrowed. “No more playing dumb. Tell me right now what this is all about.”

Seeing that obfuscating was unlikely to get him very far, Beto heaved a sigh. “I have deceived you in effect, Your Highness, but I assure you, not in spirit.”

“And what exactly is that supposed to mean?” The suspicious glint in Liz’s eyes heightened to fury.

Beto took a moment to think, planting his elbows on the table and covering his mouth with his hands. All of a sudden, a sharp clatter rang through the dining hall. Liz spun around toward the source of the noise.

“Aura?”

Aura stood stock-still. Her chair lay toppled on the floor behind her.



“What’s wrong?”

Aura gave no reply, but she was trembling, and her face had gone white as a sheet. Scáthach, too, seemed to have realized something. Her shoulders shuddered as she ground her teeth in chagrin.

“Lady Celia Estrella, I fear those letters were lies.”

Liz turned slowly back to see Beto wearing a crafty smile. “Excuse me?”

“They were mistruths. Fabrications. We have already come to an agreement with Steissen.”

For a moment, she was stunned. Her eyes flew wide in disbelief, and her hands shook as she held back a burning anger. She had to consciously tell herself to calm down.

“But then...why did you ask for reinforcements? You wrote so many letters...” The terrible notion surfaced in her mind that he might be collaborating with Six Kingdoms. She called Lævateinn to her hand and assumed a combat stance, ready to fight at the slightest notice. “You have to know that Six Kingdoms is invading as we speak. This isn’t the time to be playing games. If this is a joke, you’ve gone too far.”

“No joke, Your Highness. A request. From a certain party.”

“‘A certain party?’ You wouldn’t happen to mean Six Kingdoms, would you?”

That was the end of her tether. Fury surged from her, striking Bero like a wave of blades. An ordinary man would have passed out on the spot, but Beto was no stranger to peril.

“I mean Lord Hiro Schwartz.”

“What?” Liz’s anger dissipated instantly, replaced by incredulity. “What are you saying? This was on Hiro’s orders? Why would he do that?”

The corners of her eyes creased with sadness. She looked ready to scream into Beto’s face that he was lying. Questions swirled inside her head, adding to her confusion as she struggled for words.

“I can empathize with your astonishment. I, too, was shocked when Lord Hiro

asked me to pen falsehoods.” Beto’s voice held genuine sympathy, but his words did not seem to reach Liz’s ears.

“Why?” she murmured. “I don’t understand...”

Her words were not for him, but for the black-haired boy in her mind. Nonetheless, he took it as an answer and opened his mouth to respond.

The one who got there first, however, was Selvia.

“What if he was trying to keep you out of danger?”

“What? Me?”

“With the central territories fallen into disorder, it would not be prudent to have you stay. It only makes sense to send you south in search of allies. But Six Kingdoms will not be content to lay waste only to the west, don’t you agree? I expect his intention was to relocate you somewhere safe in case the worst came to pass.”

“But sending me away won’t stop Six Kingdoms,” Liz protested. “If the central territories fall, they’ll march right on through to the south. If we fought them together...”

“Don’t you see? He is offering himself as bait to buy you time to mount a defense.” Selvia’s long eyelashes fluttered sorrowfully as she spoke. “He hid the truth because he knew that you would try to stop him from going to his death.”

“That can’t be. Rosa would never allow it. She’d stop him even if I wasn’t there.”

“I fear she would not.” Beto looked at Liz regretfully. “The only one not already aware of the truth is you.”

The table shook violently, plates and all. Liz had struck it with her fist—not out of anger, but out of sorrow. “Then Rosa was in on this too?!” she cried. With tears beading in the corners of her eyes, she made for a pitiful sight.

“By necessity. But she would not have made such a choice lightly—” Beto cut himself off as Liz stood up from her chair. “Are you leaving, Your Highness?”

“Of course. Why would I stay?”

“You have no hope of making it in time. A messenger came before you even arrived. Lord Hiro will soon make contact with Six Kingdoms.”

“Then I’d better meet up with the Fourth Legion and head west as soon as I can.” Liz began to walk away. Scáthach and Aura fell in behind her. Neither seemed inclined to lend Beto their ear.

“If you refuse to listen to reason, you leave me no choice.” With an exasperated sigh, Beto snapped his fingers. The dining hall doors flew open and armed soldiers poured in.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Liz narrowed her eyes, unsheathing Lævateinn from her hip. Aura also readied her spirit weapon. Scáthach alone remained unarmed, for fear of revealing her identity. The soldiers hesitated when they saw that Liz and her companions had no intention of backing down. Their weapons trembled as they sensed their mortal peril.

“I have no intention of seeing blood spilled, Your Highness,” Beto continued. “I ask only that you hear what I have to say.”

“Then tell your soldiers to back off.”

“I fear I cannot. For my sins, I will not break a promise made. My word is worth more than my life. For both our sakes, will you not stand down?”

“If you won’t let us leave, we’ll just have to force our way out.”

Liz and Beto glared at one another, neither willing to give an inch. The air between them stretched taut.

It was Selvia who broke the silence. “And what will come of leading the Fourth Legion to battle?” she asked. “The enemy’s ranks have swollen to two hundred thousand. The Fourth Legion may be well trained, but adding only twenty thousand to the balance will not tip the scales. Would you have Lord Hiro’s sacrifice be for nothing?”

“But with his strategies, maybe we could turn the tables.”

“There is a chance, to be certain, but surely a slim one. Deep down, you already know the truth, Your Highness. Riding to his aid would accomplish

nothing.”

Selvia’s words struck home. Liz’s lips pursed bitterly. Flames sprouted from Lævateinn in reflection of her frustration.

She cast her eyes about, looking for some straw to hold onto. “That’s right! Brutahl’s in Faerzen! If we can get word to him—”

“Third Prince Brutahl has been captured.” Selvia did not miss a beat.

“What?”

The exclamation came not from Liz, but from Aura. She stared at Selvia, eyes wide with rare surprise.

“His forces were routed by the queen of Anguis, one of the nations that make up Six Kingdoms. Following his defeat, many of the western nobles surrendered to the enemy.”

“We have to tell Hiro!” Liz cried.

Beto stepped in front of her to block her path. “He already knows.”

“Out of my way!”

“Lord Hiro already knows, Your Highness. He is the one who told us of Third Prince Brutahl’s capture.”

“No... He can’t...”

“He leads twenty thousand, as do you. That would only leave you with forty thousand in total, and even if that were enough, you would never make it to the battlefield in time. Now is the time to build your strength. Or do you have some master plan to conjure victory with the forces you have?”

“I... No, I don’t. But I have to go, or... Or...”

Or she would lose sight of him forever. Cold fear crawled between her toes and up her legs—fear that she had finally come close enough to reach out to him, only for him to slip forever beyond her grasp. Chills washed over her, as though she were sinking into icy water. She had no idea what was going on in his mind, and that unsettled her more than anything.

“I see...” Beto looked down, his thoughts inscrutable. “I now understand why

Lord Hiro did not tell you the truth." When he looked up again, whatever emotion had flashed in his eyes was gone.

Liz narrowed her eyes. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

Beto raised a lazy hand. "*That* is what it means. Lord Hiro was correct when he wrote that you are too quick to let your emotions get the better of you. Passion is laudable, but once it becomes impulsiveness, it can turn quite disastrous." He flatly enumerated Liz's flaws. "He is prepared to sacrifice anything, even himself, so that you might grow stronger—because he wishes you to place the security of your nation first, and your personal feelings only second."

He stopped and cupped his chin, thinking. A strange light glinted in his eyes. "But if that's the case, one wonders how far he saw... Could it truly be...?"

Liz's eyes hardened as she looked on, but Beto didn't seem to notice. He seemed entirely contained in his own world. In a moment, the odd silence passed, and he abruptly looked back up, his expression alight with amusement.

"I do believe I have an idea, Your Highness. One that will allow you to ride to Lord Hiro's aid *and* successfully repel Six Kingdoms."

For an instant, Liz's face came alive with hope, but a chill shot up her spine at the greed in Beto's eyes. It seemed as though, for the first time, she had caught a glimpse of his true nature.

"However, there is a condition," he continued. His presence turned unsettling, seeming to close like a hand around Liz's throat. "If you pledge my son your hand in marriage, I will lend you my aid against Six Kingdoms. I can field thirty thousand men at short notice. More if you give me time."

"And if I agree to that, you'll help me?"

"Why, I would do anything for my son's bride. There would be no shame in the arrangement. Political marriages are common in this day and age."

"Wai— Mmph!"

Aura tried to step forward, only to find herself dragged back. Scáthach spun to free her, but her captor—Selvia—only laid a finger to her lips. Scáthach's

eyes widened with sudden understanding. She backed down and looked back at Liz with something like pleading in her gaze.

“Thank you for the offer.” Liz’s heart was set. There was no hesitation in her eyes. She flicked a strand of hair from her shoulder, planted her hands on her hips, and stared Beto down with naked displeasure. “I decline. What a ridiculous idea.”

Beto’s pupils shrank to points. He tilted his head in confusion. “I thought I warned you against letting your heart rule your head.”

Liz drew herself up. “An aspiring empress doesn’t bow to threats from her own subjects.”

Beto pressed his hands to his temples as though suppressing a headache. “If your would-be empire falls, there is no meaning in ruling at all.”

“Maybe so, but still, as a member of the Grantzian royal family, I cannot accept your offer.”

“And you are certain you have thought this through? Don’t you wish to aid Lord Hiro?”

“If I showed up to help him on the back of a deal like that, he’d be furious.”

Before Liz’s departure, Hiro had told her to walk the path she saw fit. She could not accede to forcible demands.

“Furious, hm? And for that reason, you would turn me down?” Beto scowled. “I confess, I see no sense in it.”

“I think it’s time to drop the pretense, dear,” his wife interrupted from behind him. “You have teased Her Highness quite enough. Any more might be politically unwise.”

“Perhaps you’re right.” With a crooked grin, Beto gestured for the soldiers to sheathe their weapons.

Selvia walked silently up to Liz and bowed her head. “Please forgive our rudeness, Lady Celia Estrella.”

“What do you mean?”

“We have no son, and our daughter is only two years old. My husband made his suggestion in jest, nothing more.”

“Did he? He seemed so much like he meant it...”

“You are decisive, Your Highness, and that is admirable, but it also leaves you vulnerable. I suggest you think matters over more thoroughly before drawing conclusions.” Selvia smiled even as she chided her. “But on this occasion, the greater fault is ours, so we will accept your wishes.”

Beto spun to look at his wife. “Dear! We did not discuss—”

“Is there a problem?”

A glare stopped him dead in his tracks. Silence fell between them for a long moment.

“Oh, very well.” Beto broke first. He lowered himself to one knee before Liz, a little hesitantly at first, but his expression quickly hardened with resolve. “All is ready. The southern nobles will ride to the empire’s aid in this time of crisis. To stand idly by as these western barbarians run amok would shame us in the eyes of our ancestors.”

“Pardon?” A shocked noise slipped from Liz’s mouth as she struggled to follow.

Again, it was Selvia who came to her rescue. “We had always intended to aid you, Your Highness. Such was our promise to Lord Hiro. A simple arrangement —or at least, it would have been, if my husband had not let his ambitions run away with him.”

Unbeknownst to Liz, Hiro had quietly struck a deal with the leaders of House Muzuk. Seeing that it was to their mutual profit, Beto had happily agreed. Their assistance had been promised from the start.

“I-I see...” Still confused, a flat reply was the best that Liz could muster.

“Consider our fifty thousand soldiers added to your train, Your Highness. Fear not, they will not take long to gather. They will be ready to ride in a week at most.”

“I thought you said thirty thousand?”

“As I mentioned, we have been making preparations ever since we came to our agreement with Lord Hiro. With the addition of the Fourth Legion, we shall have seventy thousand men—a ponderous force, to be certain, but more than enough to serve as reinforcements.”

For a moment, Liz was lost for words, but a smile spread across her face as understanding dawned. “Thank you for your generosity,” she said finally.

“We await your order, Your Highness.” Selvia sank to one knee, mirroring her husband. The soldiers and servants followed suit.

Liz collected herself with a throat-clearing cough, straightened her back, and raised a hand with her palm toward her audience. “Once we join forces with the Fourth Legion, we will take the fight to Six Kingdoms and drive them from the empire! Our numbers might be fewer, but any one of our soldiers is worth five of theirs. We are the lion of Soleil! I expect nothing less than victory!”

“Yes, Your Highness!” they replied with a resounding cry.

“I will ride ahead to Berg Fortress and see to our preparations. I will rejoin you later.”

“Understood, Your Highness.”

By the time Beto raised his head, Liz was already walking away. He cracked a smile. The lioness was still a cub, but she was growing.

“Inspiring, isn’t she? What a shame that fate will not smile upon her efforts. Lord Hiro will be dead by the time she reaches him.” He rose to his feet, eyes still following Liz although she had vanished from view. “Too late by the narrowest of margins. Lord Hiro truly did account for everything. His loss will come as a heavy blow to the empire...although, as a rival, I admit my relief. Far better Lady Celia Estrella than him.”

“She will not be so easily controlled,” Selvia said.

Beto frowned. “What makes you say that?”

“There is strength in her. I have not met Lord Hiro, but I suspect she will grow to become an even greater thorn in our sides than he could ever be.”

“Sometimes I wonder whose side you’re on.” With an irritable wave, Beto

summoned his aides. “Well, it matters not. For now, we will do as she bids.”

Selvia set a finger to her chin as she watched her husband depart. After a moment, she called a servant over.

The servant sank into a bow. “Yes, my lady?”

Selvia looked down with emotionless eyes. The corners of her mouth drew into a sly grin. Suddenly, her demeanor seemed very different.

“Some insurance wouldn’t go amiss. Send word to Countess von Kelheit,” she said, casting one final glance at her departing husband. “We women shall do as we please. The men may sit and watch.”

Finally, her expression became a beguiling smile worthy of her attire.

* * * * *

Maruk, on the western edge of the central territories

Hiro’s twenty thousand made camp on the border between the central and western territories. From this vantage point, they could gather information on events in the west and scout out Six Kingdoms’ movements. They had no shortage of willing contributors: refugees from burned villages, nobles chased from their towns, soldiers routed in battle. Hiro had ordered his men to apprise him of every report, no matter how outlandish it seemed. Even now, another harried messenger rode toward the tent in the center of the camp. A black dragon banner fluttered above it with stately grace, filled with unbreakable conviction.

“Enemy scouts have been sighted three sel hence. Their banners confirm that they belong to the Second Punitive Legion. It matches the townsfolk’s reports.”

“The Fifth Punitive Legion has strayed a little from the rest. They have taken up position in the town of Selus while they plunder the nearby villages. That puts them twenty sel from here.”

“The Fourth Punitive Legion seems to know we’re here. They have deployed their forces on the Laryx Plains. Our scouts did not manage to ascertain their commander, but whoever they are, they have a love for battle.”

The interior of the tent bustled with figures coming and going. Sweat poured

from the foreheads of the civil tribunes as they sorted through and organized the incoming data. Keeping up with the reports was an unimaginable task. Stacks of parchment piled ever higher on the central desk, higher even than the outgoing piles, leaving the central nobles attending to them clutching their heads in despair at the sheer scale of the undertaking.

At the head of the table, Hiro surveyed the mountain of parchment with an apprehensive gaze. He sighed and turned to the man at his side: Orlean von Maruk.

“The scale of the damage is greater than we thought,” he said.

“So it seems, Your Highness. It is hard to know where to begin.” With a solemn nod, von Maruk picked up a sheet of parchment. “The enemy has divided their troops into six parts. The central force stays behind, while the other five detachments carve a swathe though the west, offering mercy to those who accept them, the sword to those who resist, and terror to those in between.”

“Have we ascertained those rumors about Third Prince Brutahl’s execution?”

“They appear to be true. The western nobles are surrendering, one after another. It seems that his passing was all it took to break their spirits.” Unable to contain his contempt, Von Maruk struck the table with his fist. A loud *thump* rang through the tent. Silence fell for a moment. All eyes swiveled to stare at him, but a sharp glare quickly sent them back to their work.

Hiro gave the man a moment to collect himself as the clamor resumed. “Are there any who have not surrendered? Are some still choosing to fight?”

“Lord von Kirschia’s son has sent us a request for reinforcements. His position in the town of Savert is under siege by the Second Punitive Legion, and their losses are severe. As things stand, his defeat is only a matter of time.”

“His son sent the request?”

“It appears that Lord von Kirschia himself fell in battle with Six Kingdoms.”

“And where is this town?”

“One moment, Your Highness. I believe the report only just came in.” Von

Maruk rifled through the pile of assessed reports and picked out the item in question. “Here. It is a little light on details, but not enough to pose a concern.”

“Could you lay out the Second Punitive Legion’s position on the map for me? The rest of their forces too. A general estimate will do.”

“At once, Your Highness.”

With the central table covered in reports, the map had been relegated to a second one behind Hiro. Von Maruk set about placing pawns. Hiro stood, turned, and stepped closer.

“The Second Punitive Legion is two days from our position,” von Maruk explained. “Closest from there is the Third. The Fourth has deployed its forces a little farther away.”

“And the nobles in the area have all surrendered?”

“I cannot speak to their hearts, but their actions are those of turncoats.”

“They’re not certainly acting like they expect to face consequences.”

“Nobody wants their lands ravaged, Your Highness. They have no choice but to prioritize their own safety. After the death of Third Prince Brutahl, I cannot blame them...but nor can I forgive them even so.”

“Is the Third Imperial City safe?”

“Its garrison is small, but its walls are thick. Six Kingdoms will struggle to take it with their forces scattered, and they have the most to lose from getting bogged down in a prolonged siege. For the time being, I cannot imagine they consider it a target.”

If Six Kingdoms intended to sweep into the central territories, the city would be better overlooked. Going out of their way to attack it would only cost them soldiers. It was possible that, in the long run, they meant to take it with minimal losses by starving it of nearby allies and force it to raise the white flag, but regardless...

“If it’s not in immediate danger, it’s not our concern.”

“Where now, Your Highness? Shall we make for the Third Imperial City and take refuge behind their walls?”

Hiro shook his head. “If Six Kingdoms will just ignore us, what’s the point? And if they do lay siege to us, we’ll be trapped in there. Besides, we’re trying to chase them from the western territories. We can’t accomplish that by hiding in one place. We should head for Severt and crush the Second Punitive Legion. Seeing as the enemy has been kind enough to split up, we can get by fighting them piecemeal.”

His plan involved trapping the Second Punitive Legion between two fronts, which would require sending word to Lord von Kirschia’s son inside the town.

“We will charge the enemy from behind. Could you instruct him to time a sortie with our offensive?”

“I cannot say how tight the enemy’s perimeter may be, but I shall send one of our finest agents.”

“It’s all right if they fail. If it can’t be done, I’ll think of something else. But let's go with that for the time being.” Hiro returned to his chair and cast his gaze over the central nobles, who were still struggling valiantly with their stacks of reports. “Now, let’s decide who will do what.”

* * * * *

Fort Hadria, on the northern border of the central territories

To a fort on the border between the central and northern territories came a curious host of five thousand. Goliaths to a man and clad in armor that concealed their faces, they made for an unsettling sight, marching without a word of chatter. Their banner only accentuated suspicions—two pointed horns on a lilac field, the same livery beneath which the zlosta had once plunged the world into chaos.

The garrison's families peered out of their lodgings with unease as the force passed. The guards themselves, however, were surprisingly at ease. The reason was the host's second flag, a white, one-horned horse on a lilac field. Once, it had belonged to Lox van Lebering of the Black Hand. Soldiers of the Grantzian Empire held nothing but reverence for the banner of the man who had served Mars.

"I see... Signed and sealed by Fourth Prince Hiro and Second Prince Selene."

The captain of the guard accepted the letter and examined it for irregularities. Seeing that it was sealed by the royal family—and by two separate princes, no less—his stern expression broke into a smile. He bowed. "You may pass, Your Majesty. Welcome to the Grantzian Empire."

"I apologize for taking up your time," Claudia said. "Please forgive the impropriety. I am in something of a hurry."

"Not at all, Your Majesty. To have laid eyes upon Lord Lox's descendant is itself a blessing. One for which I must thank the Spirit King."

Claudia flashed the captain a reassuring smile. With a nod of acknowledgment, she drove her heels into her horse's flanks.

Rather improperly, he shouted after her as she rode away. "If you've want of lodgings, my mansion's doors are open to you!"

"I fear I have no time to waste, but thank you for your generosity!"

She brought her horse around with a skilful hand and waved. Struck by the full force of her smile, the captain's legs gave out and he collapsed onto his rear. She giggled before spurring her horse away to rejoin the head of her train.

“Your Majesty!” An aide rode up to her as she returned.

“What is it?”

“The messenger you dispatched to Lord Hiro has returned. It seems we were correct. The war is progressing poorly.”

“Is it, indeed...” Claudia set a finger to the point of her chin and lowered her eyes a shade.

The aide produced a letter from his pocket. “He returned with word from Lord Hiro.”

Claudia all but snatched the letter from the man’s hands. She began to chuckle under her breath as she read through the contents. “This may just be your boldest scheme yet,” she murmured, looking up at the sky. A smile spread across her face, like that of a lovestruck maiden. “So, you plot to fool the world and would sacrifice yourself to do it? My, you are a fearsome man indeed.”



The aide frowned, bemused, as his queen descended into a world of her own. “Are you certain it would be wise to continue cooperating with him? Would we not be better off breaking free from the empire and readying our forces for war?”

The suggestion met with a frosty glare. If looks could kill, the aide would doubtless be dead. He quickly realized that he had spoken out of line.

“Apologies, Your Highness!” he stammered between frantic bows.

Claudia looked away and raised a hand to the sky. Violet crystal caught the sun’s light, refracting it into dazzling hues.

“Such short-sighted thinking would profit us little. Look at the larger picture—not at the tempting morsel before our noses, but at the hand that holds it out.” She closed her own hand into a fist and brought it down toward the imperial capital. “That is the only way we zlosta will survive, with no Lord to call our own.”

If they wished the sun to be theirs again, they would have to seize it with their own hands.

The aide’s brow remained furrowed.

“You seem unconvinced,” Claudia said.

He hesitated to reply, fearful of offending her mood.

“If you think me a despot who does not heed the advice of her subjects, leave this instant and do not return. If not, do your duty as my retainer and tell me where I am mistaken.”

“I-If you insist, Your Majesty... We do not have the numbers to contest Six Kingdoms. As the situation stands, would they not make better allies than the empire?”

Claudia had expected a more substantial argument. She gave an exasperated sigh. “They would turn us into their puppets. Better an ally that owes us much than an ally that owes us little. If Lebering is to grow, it only stands to lose from a union with Six Kingdoms.”

“But if Lord Hiro is defeated, will they not conquer us anyway?”

“To put it bluntly, we would not be worth their time. A frozen, far-flung wasteland, poor in resources and far to the east—such a place has no value to them.” Denigrating her own nation stung fiercely, but it would convince her aide, as well as rousing his indignation into the bargain. “But if we were to ally with them, they would use us for their own purposes and annex us. We would be no better off than under the empire. Would you have our people be slaves again?”

“Of course not, Your Majesty.”

Claudia smiled to see the aide fall silent. “And so I choose to ally with Lord Hiro. Through Six Kingdoms, the world shall know that the zlosta have once more risen in Soleil.”

Moreover, Hiro had offered very favorable terms. If she sided with the empire, he would give her what she sought—something that Six Kingdoms could never offer.

“Understood, Your Highness. I will do as you bid. Forgive me for wasting your time with my foolishness.”

“Think nothing of it. If any more doubts strike you, I will always be willing to assuage them.”

Claudia craned her head back and narrowed her eyes. A seductive smile spread across her face. Now that the throne was hers, she would not suffer the zlosta to be chased back into the shadows. They would live in the sun, even if that meant letting history call her a fool.

“Although, one does wonder...”

The final, cryptic line of Hiro’s letter flashed through her mind. *All will be one.* Knowing him, it doubtless held some profound significance, but she could not begin to guess what.

“I suppose I shall find out once I see him.”

At that point, he would already have the gift he had promised her. Such had been the terms of their agreement. She would not be leading her army south otherwise.

“It seems there will be a great deal of excitement in the near future. Who can say what delights the coming age might hold?”

It took all of her willpower to hold back a smile at the thought of the turmoil to come.

* * * * *

The sixth day of the second month of Imperial Year 1024

The news came not long past daybreak. Hardly an hour had passed since the sun had risen. Only a handful of soldiers had begun their morning training, and Six Kingdoms’ encampment was quiet enough that one could hear their own footsteps.

A woman strode through the camp in her smallclothes. Her steps were sure and unashamed, as though she had absolute confidence in her own body. The soldiers averted their eyes as she passed, intimidated into silence. If asked to name the most extravagant woman in Six Kingdoms, none would hesitate to give her name: Lucia Levia du Anguis, queen of Anguis and commander of the Punitive Army.

Her footsteps rang loud with irritation as she stormed into the command tent. The camp aides were already present, as were the Vulpes siblings. They rose and bowed as one as they registered her entrance. Several faces reddened at her manner of dress, but her nigh-spellbinding allure kept their eyes trained on her whether they wanted to look away or not. Lustful gazes held no more significance to her than pebbles by the roadside. They could harbor whatever passions they wished; she was so far above them, they could not even hope to address her outside of the strict confines of strategy meetings.

“At ease,” she commanded, surveying the room with a glower. She had been sleeping deeply, and had not taken well to having been woken. The seated aides lowered their gazes fearfully. Only the Vulpes siblings and Seleucus seemed unruffled.

Igel clasped his hands behind his head and leered. “Nice getup. Lookin’ for some attention, huh?”

Lucia glared back, not with embarrassment but with cold contempt. “Would

you prefer your death to be quick or slow?”

Igel hurriedly straightened. Every hair on his body stood on end. Great beads of sweat trickled from his forehead as the gravity in the tent seemed to multiply. One of the nobles let slip a groan.

Luka got to her feet. “Please forgive my fool brother’s insolence. He only sought to bring some levity to proceedings.”

“Oh, very well. I care little. Make with your reports.” Lucia waved a dismissive hand, no longer interested. The air of palpable threat finally dispersed.

Seleucus stood up from his seat. “Allow me to summarize the situation.”

He placed a pawn on the map, marking the location of the Second Punitive Legion. Lucia regarded him inquisitively, her forehead creasing.

“The War God’s scion has struck in earnest,” he announced.

Lucia’s eyes gleamed with fascination. The rest of the table looked dumbfounded. In no time at all, the command tent was in an uproar.

“Is this true, Lord Seleucus?”

“Surely not. His reinforcements could not have arrived so quickly. It’s impossible!”

“It is true,” Seleucus said. “I have received word that the Second Punitive Legion has been routed.”

“Routed?!” one of the aides cried. “How?!”

The exclamation sent a ripple of shock through the tent.

“Why is their defeat the first we’re hearing of this?”

“What have our scouts been doing? Touring the Travant Mountains?!”

“Hush with all this weeping and wailing.” Lucia thumped the table, bringing the clamor to order. She cast a glare around the tent. “Seleucus, explain.”

“As you are all surely aware, the Second Punitive Legion was laying siege to the town of Severt. It appears the empire caught them unawares. Imperial forces attacked under cover of night and seemingly had little difficulty striking from behind. At the same time, the lord of Severt issued a sortie, catching them

in a pincer. The officers perished, confusion spread, and the legion was wiped out."

"How could they possibly have been caught in so obvious a trap?"

"It appears that the nearby settlements offered them tributes, Your Majesty. They had gorged themselves on drink."

Lucia sighed. "I hardly know what to say."

"It also seems the lord of Severt sent the commander several letters praising his character. One might surmise that they went to his head."

Lucia laughed coldly. "And where is this commander now?" She looked angry enough to kill the man with her own two hands.

Seleucus continued reading, unperturbed. "We don't know, Your Majesty. Perhaps he has been captured, or perhaps he perished on the field."

"If he does happen to make his way back to our camp, bring him before me. I should very much like to choke the life from him myself." Lucia's fan slapped her palm rhythmically as she breathed deep, collecting her thoughts. "Those tributes were the Lord of Eld's work, I don't doubt. What fool would fall for such a ruse in wartime? From which kingdom did he hail?"

"Vulpes, Your Majesty. Do you recall General Leukigmov?"

"Oh, him. He is one of ours. So, he fell face-first into a trap, did he?" Igel covered his face with a hand, his broad shoulders shuddering with indignation. "We'll never live this one down..."

Beside him, Luka raised a hand. "We shall restore our homeland's honor by slaying this scion of Mars ourselves. What are the enemy's numbers, Lord Seleucus?"

"Now that they have absorbed the forces of the local nobility, they exceed thirty thousand."

"Then fifty thousand ought to suffice. May we have permission to ride, Your Majesty?"

"You may not. I do not begrudge you your revenge, but if this is another of the Lord of Eld's schemes, you will be riding to your deaths."

“We cannot let this shame go unanswered.”

“’Tis for the best that you do. Overconfidence in numbers breeds the same complacency that undid the Second Punitive Legion. A single oversight can turn the tables. Such is the way of war.”

“We don’t make oversights!” Igel smashed his chair against the ground. Pieces of wood flew off and struck several of the aides. They slumped over, knocked clean unconscious. He stepped forward, crushing the wreckage beneath his feet. “Your Majesty, I’m beggin’ you here. Leave this one to us.”

A vein throbbed in his forehead. He forced his mouth into a semblance of a smile, marshaling all of his good sense not to swing at her there and then.

“You would do well to learn some patience. Unless you truly wish to pit yourself against me?” Lucia motioned for the fallen aides to be taken to the medical tent before returning her attention to Igel. A venomous smile spread across her face. “If that would cool your head, all the better.”

Igel hesitated. “That’s not what I...”

“Then hush with this mewling. Satisfy yourself that twenty thousand was the extent of our losses. One hundred and eighty thousand remain hale. If we lash out blindly, we will only lose more.” Lucia stood and gestured to the map with her fan. “Besides, my plans are already laid.” She crushed the Second Punitive Legion’s pawn and picked up another nearby. “The Third Punitive Legion is now the closest to the Lord of Eld, correct?”

Seleucus nodded.

“Have them clash twice or thrice with his men before falling back. Instruct the other three legions to retreat and rejoin our ranks with all haste.”

“You mean to bait the enemy?”

“Indeed. Tell the Third that they are not to stand their ground. Their role is to goad the enemy’s advance. Should they be defeated, the surrendered nobles of the western territories may begin to rediscover their courage. I repeat, they must *not* stand their ground, only bait our foe deeper.”

“Then what of us?” Luka asked, caressing her scowling brother’s head.

“Rest. Conserve your strength. Think only of striking down the Lord of Eld.” Lucia proceeded to instruct the army to redirect its supply lines and temporarily disband its core.

“Now, Your Majesty?” Seleucus seemed one step short of calling her demand foolish. “A change of officers we could manage, but dissolving and reforming every unit will disrupt our chain of command.”

Lucia’s nose wrinkled. “That is the point. ’Tis a ploy, Seleucus. I would have the enemy believe our forces are confused. Spread word far and wide that our ranks are in disarray, that there is bad blood between the Vulpes siblings and me—whatever rumors you can think of.”

She would lure the Lord of Eld far to the west, where he could not escape. The bait might be obvious, but if she withdrew her forces, he would have no choice but to pursue. Freed from the threat of Six Kingdoms’ rule, many of the western nobles would join forces with him—and that would be his final undoing, the detonation of a time bomb long since laid.

“If there are no more questions, pray attend to your duties.”

In a flurry of footsteps, her aides and subordinates surged out of the tent. In the midst of the chaos, she held one man back.

“Let us speak a moment, Igel.”

“Huh? Why? My sister’s gonna be mad if I take too long.”

“You care for her ever so much, don’t you? Fear not. This will take but a moment.” Lucia turned her attention to the glittering blue crystal embedded in Igel’s left hand. Her eyes gleamed like those of a predator catching sight of its prey. “Tell me—would you be willing to die for your sister?”

* * * * *

Severt, in the center of the western territories

After relocating his camp, Hiro once again set about gathering reports on Six Kingdoms. The command tent was busy with aides and nobles. In the aftermath of the Second Punitive Army’s defeat, prisoners needed to be sent away, arms and armor checked for damage, and a revised supply budget drawn up to

account for the new additions to the army. Messengers came and went in a ceaseless current; the scouts' reports on the enemy troops' movements, camp security, and supply line locations were prioritized. Accounts of the status of the roads or the discovery of bandit camps or monster lairs were passed on to western nobles with few soldiers of their own, who had been relegated to backline support. Anything they could not deal with themselves was to be reported back to the central territories.

"There's movement from the Fourth Punitive Legion on the Laryx Plains." Von Maruk approached Hiro with a sheaf of paper in his hand. "They must have gotten word of the Second's defeat."

"I see. Increase the guard and tell them to stay vigilant. It's likely we'll come under attack. More importantly, what are our losses?"

"In detail, Your Highness?"

"In brief will do."

"In that case, light. Three hundred cavalry and a thousand infantry. With the western nobles and their soldiers joining our ranks, we now number thirty thousand."

"Just as we had hoped."

"Indeed, Your Highness. I do have one concern, however."

Orlean held out his report. Hiro took it and read through. It listed the names of the nobles who had died in combat.

"It seems several central nobles perished in battle—if indeed that is the appropriate expression."

"It says they were all killed by stray arrows."

"*Our* arrows, no less. Two or three I could believe were a coincidence, but seven? That is the work of enemy assassins in our ranks."

"Increase camp security. I'd prefer to let the men have all the sleep they can get, but needs must."

"At once, Your Highness."

“Morale isn’t suffering, I hope?”

Von Maruk patted his chest reassuringly. “Fear not, Your Highness. Our victory over the Second Punitive Army has the soldiers in high spirits, as does our rescue of Severt.”

“Then we can move forward with the next stage of our plans.”

The enemy’s scattered forces were contracting again. All was going as anticipated. Still, for some reason, von Maruk’s forehead was slick with nervous sweat.

“With respect, Your Highness, will it truly benefit us to have the foe gather in one place?”

“It’s true they’ll be more resilient grouped up than split apart, but having too many men on the battlefield comes with its own disadvantages. Without a clear chain of command, they’ll be no better than an angry mob. If we can take advantage of that, numbers won’t matter.”

“I see. Certainly, we have received reports to that effect.”

Apparently, there had been some sort of disagreement between the army’s commander and acting commander. Moreover, the former, perhaps suspicious of the force they had taken over, had dissolved the entirety of the core force and reformed it to their liking. Considering that they were also retracting their punitive legions, the chain of command would undoubtedly be in chaos.

They’re responding more or less how I expected.

Hiro’s smile grew wider. Time to eliminate one of the last ambiguities. He strode over to the map behind him. “Let’s talk about what we do next.”

He picked up a pawn and cast a sidelong glance at von Maruk. The man silently nodded, indicating to him to continue.

“We will leave the western nobles who have joined us in charge of the central cohort. They have already bent the knee to Six Kingdoms once. Placing them the vanguard would risk them causing chaos in the ranks.”

The stain of defeat was not one that came out. Terror, once taught, only grew in reflection. If such men went to battle, it was not difficult to guess what would

ensue.

Commanders with such low morale should *be sent to the back lines.*

If the battle ahead had been a trivial one, there would be no harm in stationing them at the front and letting them claim an easy victory. That would rebuild both their morale and their confidence. This time, however, the fight was hopeless from the start, to the point that many of the soldiers were quietly questioning their officers' judgment.

At least annihilating the Second Punitive Legion remedied that a little.

Thanks to that victory, there were no longer any issues with Hiro's own soldiers. Still, the same could not be said of the western nobles' battered troops. They had already been broken utterly. A few might burn with vengeance, but not enough to set the whole force alight. That raised a question: why incorporate them into the army at all?

Now, Orlean, how will you respond?

Anything clear enough to confirm his suspicions would be welcome.

"I think that's a fine idea." Von Maruk seemed enthused by the prospect. "Another stroke of genius, Your Highness."

Hiro's heart fell cold. A violent impulse surged through him. He managed to maintain his calm, but abyssal dark swirled in his eyes.

"Then that's what we'll do. The same will apply to any western nobles who join us between now and the battle."

The war with Six Kingdoms had put him ill at ease since its beginning. Now, he had finally managed to pin down a portion of why. At last, he had confirmation. For a while, he had not been quite certain, but now he could put his plans in place without issue.

"We will position the central nobles in the vanguard and leave the rearguard to the lesser nobles. I will lead from the front."

Von Maruk broke into a grin. "I should be honored to fight alongside you."

Hiro's smile was bone-chilling. "I couldn't have asked for a more reliable vice-commander." He turned and made his way toward the entrance. "We depart in

two days. I trust you can take care of the rest."

"Where are you going, Your Highness?"

"I'm going to get some rest tonight."

"Very well. I will ensure that all is ready when you wake."

Hiro waved over his shoulder, sensing von Maruk bow behind him, and passed through the tent flap. Winter held the outside world in its grip, its breath cold enough to freeze the skin. With the Black Camellia's protection, however, the chill felt no worse than a balmy spring breeze.

As he walked in silence through the night, his feet came to a stop, and he looked up.

"Some things never change, even after a thousand years."

A starry sky spread out above him. The full moon and its court of stars held sway over the night, showering the land with light.

"Who was it who told me that the stars are the souls of the departed?"

When people die, they become spirits, and when they become spirits, their souls turn into stars. From up in the sky, they watch over the world forever at the Spirit King's side. So whenever we're feeling sad, or scared, or lonely, we only need to look up at the stars, and we'll know we're not alone.

"Ah, that's right. It was Liz."

When had that been? On the night they camped on Mount Himmel? Everything had been such a whirlwind, it was all he could do to keep track. Now his memories were growing confused.

"I remember how happy I felt, though. It was like I could really hear your voice."

But the warmth of her embrace and the gentle touch of her compassion were gone now. He raised a hand to the sky, as if yearning for bygone days.

"I've made my choice. I was scared of this path a thousand years ago. I wound up running away like a coward in the end."

He lowered his eyes sadly. The fingers of his right hand brushed his eyepatch.

With Liz and the rest of his allies far away, there was no more need to hide what lay beneath.

“I still don’t know if it’s the right one. But I’ll walk it now.”

The eyepatch lifted away to reveal an eye dark with grief.

“This is my road. I will surpass everyone in arrogance, in strength and, at last, in royalty.”

And to do it, I will devour the world.

“It’s a shame I’ll never get to see the person Liz becomes...”

He allowed himself a small smile, tinged with regret, gone in an instant. A ghastly visage appeared in its place, as though emerging from the depths of the abyss.

“I will bring this age to an end. This world needs a new legend.”

The words sounded like a prayer on his lips.

He resumed his stride—silent, strong, radiating undiluted bloodlust. The insects fell silent, the wind’s howl grew ragged. All sound vanished from the world.

“And if I have to sacrifice myself to do it, I will.”

He ducked through the entrance to his tent and looked around, scanning the interior. His gaze halted on a man, kneeling with head bowed.

“I have awaited your coming, Lord Hiro.”

Behind the man’s back, a bound figure was seated on a chair. His mouth was stuffed with rags to prevent him from screaming. Hiro stepped closer and looked down at the bowing man.

“Fine work. I appreciate you dispatching the central nobles as well.”

“I fear there was one we failed to slay, my lord. My apologies.”

“None necessary. I see you brought them to me anyway.”

Hiro’s eyes flicked to the seated figure deeper in. He was screaming with all his might, but the rags binding his mouth turned it into an unintelligible series

of bestial grunts.

“How many of you are there?”

“A dozen, my lord. Myself included.”

Before commencing his plans, Hiro had negotiated with Claudia for her assistance. She had cheerfully accepted, seeing that their interests aligned, and been more than happy to supply him with the resources he requested. One of them was the assassin kneeling before him now. The man’s skills were quite satisfactory. He projected the air of a seasoned killer.

“I bring a letter from Her Majesty.”

Hiro took the envelope and drew a nearby chair closer to read it. The corners of his mouth pulled into a grin as he skimmed the contents.

“Good. It seems like everything’s going smoothly.”

He stood, giving the letter a flick, and headed to the writing desk in the corner of the tent. He picked up a pen and began to write something down, glancing at the map as he wrote.

“Could you dispose of him?” He directed the pen at the bound noble without looking up. “Sorry to ask after you went to the trouble of bringing him here, but I’ve already got what I needed. There’s nothing to gain from torturing him.”

The exchange in the command tent had been proof enough. Orlean von Maruk was allied with Six Kingdoms, or possibly Orcus. Either way, he was a traitor.

“I wonder how he’ll react when yet another aide goes missing. Will he start to worry for his safety, or will he only see an opportunity?”

It would be nice if he suspected the assassins’ presence in the camp. At least that would fill him with some modicum of terror.

Hiro sighed, deep and regretful. His pen stopped on the page and he took a new sheaf.

You will *sit the throne, Liz. Of that I’m sure.*

He hadn’t managed to clear away every obstacle in her path, but the support

of Rosa and her other allies would take care of the rest. The political struggle would harden her heart, until at last she obtained an iron will worthy of an empress.

And then you'll need to gather your strength for the fight to come.

At times, she would falter. At times, she would be driven to tears. Still, she would persevere and overcome, he knew. Sadness made people grow. Anger filled them with strength. Joy brought them fulfillment.

May your hopes bloom in full splendor.

Hiro laid the pen on the desk and cast a glance back at Claudia's assassin. "There's something I'd like you to help me with."

"I am yours to command, my lord." The assassin nodded meekly, although there was no disguising the way his voice trembled at Hiro's dreadful presence.

Chapter 5: The Sun Also Rises

The tenth day of the second month of Imperial Year 1024

The imperial capital of Cladius

A host of riders galloped through sun-drenched streets beneath a clear, blue sky. On their banners fluttered a lily on a crimson field—the livery of the sixth princess. Liz and her small group of bodyguards had returned to the imperial capital.

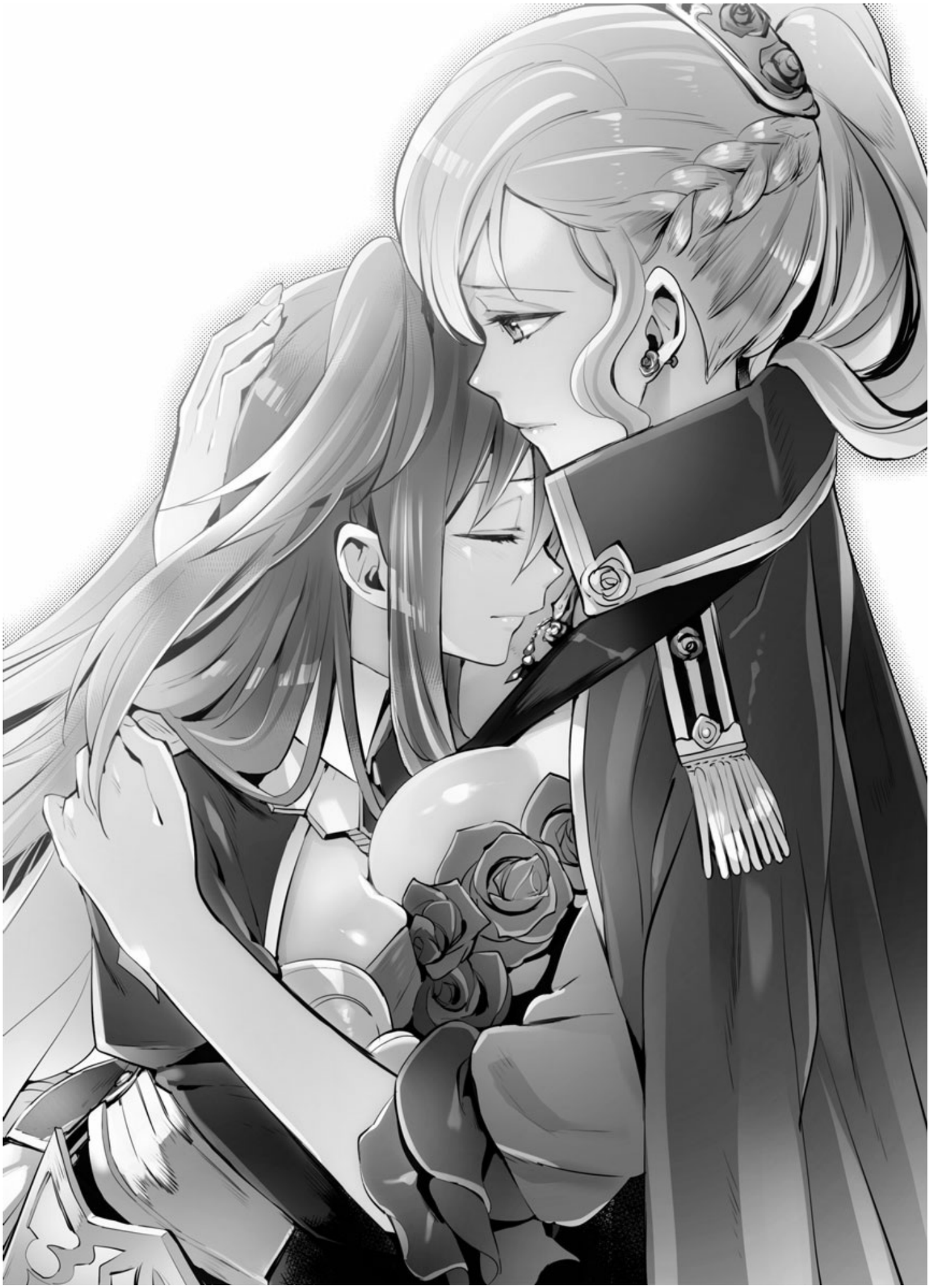
Citizens by the roadside spun around as she passed, but she was already gone by the time they turned to look. The thunder of horseshoes echoed through the streets behind her, although even that faded once she reached the palace.

She leaped down from her saddle and approached the entrance on foot. The doors swung open as she approached, and a familiar figure emerged.

“Rosa!” she cried.

“My dear little sister. How glad I am to see you safe and sound.” Rosa spread her arms wide.

Liz plunged into her embrace without hesitation. “I thought you’d gone back to the east!” she said, gazing up at her sister.



“Well...things happened.” Rosa averted her gaze, scratching her cheek awkwardly.

Liz drew back, narrowing her eyes. “The head of House Muzuk told me what Hiro’s been up to.”

“Did he? Then I suppose there’s no more need to hide it.” Rosa looked skyward, heaving an exhausted sigh. When she spoke again, her voice was flat and businesslike. “Everything you heard was true. Please believe me when I say I’m sorry I lied. You must understand, it was all to seat you on the throne.”

“But why—” Liz rounded on her sister, but stopped as she saw Rosa holding out a letter. She frowned. “What’s this?”

“It’s for you. My darling left it in my keeping.”

With a choked gasp, Liz snatched the envelope.

Rosa flashed a wry grin and looked around. “Is Garda not with you?” she asked, but Liz was too engrossed in the letter to hear. She smiled again, this time a little more strained than the last.

Tris approached, overhearing the conversation. “The Crow Legion will arrive with the Fourth, my lady. House Muzuk’s men too.”

“Oh?” Rosa’s eyebrow rose. “You persuaded them to lend us their troops?”

“Aye, well enough. They’ll be in the capital inside of a week.”

“Soldiers have been filtering in from the other territories too. Soon, we’ll be ready to strike back.”

Rosa gave Liz a congratulatory pat on the head, but Liz was too absorbed in the letter to notice. Rosa withdrew her hand and pulled out a second letter.

“I had hoped to give this to Garda sooner rather than later...” She trailed off with a shake of her head. No point in rushing things. “Oh, of course! You must be starvi— Hey!”

Her lovely eyes flew wide as her words caught in her throat. Liz had vanished. She looked around frantically to see her sister about to climb back into the saddle.

“Stop right there! Where do you think you’re going?!”

For Rosa to raise her voice was rare enough, but that didn’t stop Liz from turning her horse about and setting off back down the street.

“Sir Tarmier! Stop her!”

“Aye, my lady! Hold, Your Highness!”

The pair took off after Liz, but their legs were no match for a horse’s. The gap between them widened by the second. Rosa shouted after her sister as she ran, but Liz stubbornly ignored her.

“Does she mean to ride west all by herself?! Curses... We have to stop her, by force if need be!”

Rosa slowed to a halt with an irritated click of her tongue. Realizing that she wasn’t going to catch up, she mentally began making arrangements to send a unit of soldiers after her sister. Fortunately, that soon proved unnecessary.

“Is that...Selene?”

The second prince strode leisurely out in front of Liz’s galloping horse and spread his arms wide.

The blood drained from Rosa’s face. “Does he mean to stop her? He’ll get himself killed!”

Liz showed no sign of reducing her speed, and Selene seemed to have no intention of ceding the road. A premonition of tragedy flashed through Rosa’s mind, but there was no stopping it now. Even as she watched in horror, the distance between them was closing.

The collision came. An enormous plume of dust rose up, obscuring the aftermath.

“Liz! Selene!”

As Rosa dashed in a panic toward the scene, a gust of wind blew the dust away. The sight it revealed was not what she had expected. Selene had not been ridden down. Quite the contrary—he was pinning Liz to the ground as she groaned in pain. Her riderless horse looked around in bemusement, whickering anxiously.

Confusion flooded Rosa's chest, but for the time being, all that mattered was that Liz had been stopped. She breathed a sigh of relief and walked toward the duo. As she came closer, snatches of their voices carried to her on the wind.

"Forgive me for getting a little rough. I didn't want to hurt your horse."

"Selene? But...why?"

"I should be asking you the same thing. Now is the time to wait for the empire's nobles to gather, not go charging off alone."

Liz strained to break free, but Selene didn't budge an inch.

"Why can't I...?!"

She looked dumbfounded, and with good reason. With her physical strength bolstered by Lævateinn's Graal, Selene should have been no stronger than a baby to her, but no matter how hard she struggled, she couldn't shake his grip.

"Get off me! I have to go!"

He smiled gently. "I'm sure you must be frustrated, but let's calm down a little, shall we?"

As Liz fixed him with a glare, she caught sight of Hiro's letter fluttering in the wind. "How could I calm down?! Let me go!" Tears welled up in her eyes. She tried to hold them back, but it was no use. Hot, wet droplets trickled down her cheeks to seep into the earth. "Please... I'm begging you... I have to go west..."

Selene's eyes softened sadly as he watched his sister plead. "I fear I can't do that. Otherwise, I would be letting his resolve go to waste."

"Good! I don't care about his dumb resolve!"

"I know you're not in your right mind, so I'll pretend I didn't hear that. But at the moment, the best thing we can do—the only thing we can do—is bide our time until our forces are assembled."

"But if we sit here and do nothing, he'll die! We can't let him go through with this stupid scheme!"

The rage radiating from Liz swelled in intensity. Strain began to show on Selene's face as she grew stronger in his grip, but he kept her pressed against

the ground with all his might.

“Is that truly what his letter said?” he asked.

Liz nodded hesitantly. At that moment, a shadow fell over the pair of them.

“Liz...” Rosa said, leaning down to brush her sister’s cheek. “You must respect his decision.”

“How can you say that?! Why didn’t you stop him?!”

“Even if I could have, the capital would now be surrounded by two hundred thousand men.”

Considering the speed of Six Kingdoms’ assault, it was hard to fault her claim. The capital falling under siege would have dramatically undermined its authority. Reinforcements arriving from other territories would have been left with nowhere to go, and the empire would have crumbled. Nobles would have turned traitor to defend their own interests and defected to other nations. Indeed, a recent investigation had uncovered connections between Six Kingdoms and many of the central nobles. Such ties had always existed through House Krone, but they had been strengthened by Stovell.

“My darling rides forth to flush the traitors out,” Rosa explained. “They cannot be properly dealt with until they are forced out into the light. He hopes that if he shows them weakness, they will take the bait.”

“But I still don’t understand why he has to do this himself.” Now that she had lost the will to fight back, Liz sat forlornly on the ground, released from Selene’s grip.

“He is the best qualified. To the enemy, the War God’s scion presents an ideal opportunity to make their names. To the traitor nobles, he is a thorn in their side whom they cannot easily attack through political avenues. That is why he made himself bait.”

“That’s not fair. It’s not right. He doesn’t have to do this.” Liz’s eyes were red and swollen.

“I know. Believe me, I know, but all we can do now is trust his judgment.” Rosa wrapped an arm around her shoulders and drew her close. “Fear not. He

will return alive, I know it. He'll come sauntering back like he always does, just wait and see. Don't place any stock in that letter. It's nothing more than wicked mischief." She sounded as though she was trying to convince herself just as much as Liz.

Left on the sidelines, Selene watched their conversation. "Mischief?" He cocked his head and frowned at her choice of words, but quickly covered up the expression with a smile. "Return to your chambers and get some sleep. You've had a hard journey. You must be exhausted."

"He's right," Rosa added. "Go. Rest. We can speak later."

Liz headed off mutely toward the palace, ushered away by her sister. Her footsteps were heavy and uncertain, and she looked so frail that she might collapse at any moment. With a bow to Selene, Tris set off after them.

The second prince waved as he watched the trio depart. "Something about this sticks in my throat...but what?" He cocked his head and racked his brains, but no answer was forthcoming. With a defeated sigh, he drew closer to Liz's riderless horse. "Drix, are you there?"

"I am, Your Highness." Drix melted out of the beast's shadow, having been concealed from sight behind its body.

Selene did not seem especially surprised by the man's presence. He patted the horse's neck affectionately. "Have you received anything from Hiro?" he murmured, as though talking to himself.

"A letter, Your Highness."

A brown envelope slid across the ground and came to rest at Selene's feet. He stooped and palmed it under the guise of picking up the reins.

"Does Uncle know of this?"

Inside the envelope was a single sheet of paper, brief and to the point.

"He is aware," Drix replied. "I informed him myself."

"Oh? Then I assume he's read the contents. He always has been a terrible snoop. Did he have anything to say?"

The look of hesitation that crossed the other man's face was brief but

significant. “He sent word to all parties to set his plans in motion.”

“That does sound like him, but... Hmm.” Selene cocked his head as he peered at Hiro’s letter. “How curious.”

“May I ask what you mean, Your Highness? I saw nothing out of place myself.”

“I can’t say for certain. Just a bad feeling, nothing more.” With a shrug, Selene began leading the horse back to the palace. “Now, I ought to see about meeting with my uncle. I worry that these schemes of his risk destabilizing the north.”

“Surely he would never...”

A threatening glance from Selene stopped the sentence dead. Drix stood bolt upright, forgetting entirely to keep himself hidden as the second prince’s right eye gleamed golden. In short order, his legs gave out and he collapsed onto his behind.

“Wha...? Ghhk!”

He began to squirm, clutching at his throat. His face reddened, as though he was struggling to breathe.

“Do excuse my temper. But consider this a warning. The next time you get ahead of yourself, I really will kill you.”

Selene gave Drix a friendly pat on the shoulder. The gesture seemed to release the man from his torment, and he hungrily gulped down air. Sweat poured from his forehead to soak into the ground.

Selene set off walking, reading over Hiro’s letter again. A frown creased his brow. “‘All is one.’ If this is so, then Uncle must be...”

The sun grew low and the wind blew bitterly, its edge cutting to the bone.

* * * * *

The Laryx Plains, in the northwest of the western territories

The world was shrouded in darkness. Clouds covered the sky, blotting out the twinkling of the stars. The moon’s light did not reach the ground, leaving only a chill wind to color the night.

Hiro’s camp traced out a circle on the plain. Owing to the cold, there was not

a soldier to be seen who was not on watch. The crunch of the patrols' footsteps and the clattering of their armor carried far on a night so quiet.

The sentry looked up from blowing on his hands as one such patrol approached, and snapped into a salute. The patrol returned the greeting as they passed by, eyes sweeping the darkness for anything out of the ordinary. The sentry let out a sigh as they walked away. As he did, he noticed a figure approaching.

"Has everybody arrived?" Orlean von Maruk asked.

The sentry cast a glance over his shoulder. "Yes, my lord. They await within."

With a nod of satisfaction, von Maruk strode forward. The sentry hurriedly pulled back the tent flap and von Maruk passed through without a word of thanks. Warm air enfolded him as he entered the tent. Somebody must have brought a heater in, although the large number of human bodies probably accounted for a great deal of warmth as well.

"Gentlemen, thank you all for coming."

The nobles had been seated around the map in the center of the tent, but they rose to their feet as he announced his presence. There were eight in total, all having sworn their loyalty to him.

"I was surprised to be called upon at this late hour," one said.

Von Maruk handed the man his coat and walked toward the head of the table. "Forgive me. Our preparations are complete, and I wanted to let you know as soon as possible."

"Have we not made ourselves too conspicuous, meeting in this way? What if Lord Hiro begins to suspect us?"

"That will not be a concern. I took the liberty of making some adjustments to the patrol schedule. They should be scarcely present at this time of night. Besides, few men will be willing to venture outside in this cold." Von Maruk collapsed into his chair, bracing his left arm on the armrest to prop up his cheek. He raised his right hand. "At ease."

The nobles took their cue to sit back down. Once all were settled, von Maruk

spoke again.

“You’ll forgive me if I omit the pleasantries. I understand that some of you may harbor doubts, so allow me to say this plainly: Our plans proceed apace. Lord Hiro suspects nothing.”

The confidence in his words prompted sighs of relief from the nobles. Delighted smiles spread across their faces, as though they had just won a great victory.

“What say our collaborators?” one asked.

“Fear not. We remain in contact, and their response has been favorable. There will be no harm in biding our time. First Prince Stovell is with them, after all.”

“Then we must act cautiously. If our plans should be discovered now, all will be dust on the wind.”

Von Maruk nodded. There was sense in the man’s words.

The noble’s face quickly turned hesitant, however. “If I had one concern,” he continued, “it would be about our positions. Is it truly wise to trust in a verbal agreement?”

“I understand your reservations, but as I say, First Prince Stovell is with them. He will be our guarantee. The Grantzian Empire may fall, but our lands will be left unharmed—provided we cooperate.”

“But they are asking us to deliver Lord Hiro’s head. He commands tremendous popularity among the citizenry. Even your own people adore him, do they not?” The nobleman looked around the table for agreement. The rest of the assembly nodded, albeit reluctantly. “If they learn that we’ve betrayed him, they might chase us out of our own lands.”

In essence, his point was that Six Kingdoms would have them over a barrel. In times of peace, the nobility often treated their subjects no better than slaves, but in wartime, they had to be more careful in light of the threat of armed uprising. If rumors began to circulate that they had crossed an enormously popular prince and defected to Six Kingdoms, their downfall would be assured.

“Six Kingdoms will do no such thing,” von Maruk replied after some hesitation. “Their priority will be undisrupted governance.”

“By all rights, we ought to be laying siege to the capital by now,” another noble remarked. A crestfallen silence descended over the table.

“I was glad to see that decrepit old fool Brius von Krone dead, but not so much anything that followed,” said von Maruk. “I never imagined Lord Hiro might triumph over the rebel army. He truly has a talent for interfering with our plans.”

That had necessitated some revisions. If the rebel army had held out a little longer, Six Kingdoms would have been able to sweep into the central territories with no resistance, shattering the rebels and imperial capital alike.

“Well, after tomorrow’s battle, he will meddle no more.”

The confrontation would not last long. Thankfully, Hiro had been volunteered to lead from the front. The foundations had been laid for the rest of the army’s surrender following his death. When the fighting was over, the nobles would return home in defeat, only to defect to the enemy once Six Kingdoms invaded the central territories—it would break their hearts, of course, but anything to keep their people safe. Finally, after they took the capital, their shame would be erased and their names would go down in history attached to a historic feat of conquest.

“But does the War God’s blood not run in Lord Hiro’s veins? Will killing him not curse us all? I fear inviting the Spirit King’s wrath.”

The one to voice such pathetic concerns was Lord von Kirschia, ruler of Severt. His father had surrendered to Six Kingdoms, only to be relieved of his head for impertinence during a meeting with their leaders. The Second Punitive Legion had attacked his hometown, intending to make an example of it, and only the timely intervention of the imperial military had saved him. It seemed that Six Kingdoms had foreseen even that, however; not long after, he had followed in his father’s footsteps by switching allegiances to ensure his own safety.

“There will be no curse. First Prince Stovell was quite clear. The gods are powerless. What have we to fear? Tomorrow, we will flee the field and deliver Lord Hiro’s head to Six Kingdoms, and that will be the end of it.” Von Maruk

struck the table in anger, making von Kirschia jump in his seat. “Surely you cannot have come so far only to falter now!”

“N-No, my lord, that is not what I—”

“Listen well. If you value your future, siding with Six Kingdoms is the wise man’s choice.” Von Maruk struck the table again, prompting von Kirschia to look at the map. “Think of it as using them. By playing along, we will secure the central territories for ourselves. And that will only be the beginning. With their backing, the east, the north, and the south will fall before us. We will be the new rulers of the Grantzian Empire.”

“I-I understand, my lord,” von Kirschia stammered. “Forgive me. I see now that my question was foolish.”

Another noble wrapped an arm around the quailing man’s shoulders. “He is not to blame, my lord. He has only just succeeded his father’s seat. You mustn’t be too harsh on him.”

“Indeed.” Von Maruk inclined his head. “Please excuse me. You must understand that I speak only out of concern for your people.”

“No, I was the one at fault. My comment was not needed.”

“Then we’re all agreed! You were both at fault” The nobleman leaning on von Kirschia’s shoulders grinned. “Now we can—”

He abruptly pitched over backward.

The minds of everybody present froze, struggling to process what had just occurred. A crimson stain spread over the map. A severed head rolled across it, still smiling.

Von Kirschia vomited as the head’s severed stump came into view. The rest of the nobles stared in blank surprise, while von Maruk rose to his feet, stupefied.

“Well, well. What a lively conversation you’re all having.”

A flat voice cut through the astonishment hanging in the air. The nobles’ spines ran cold at the sound—there was not an ounce of emotion in it. They spun as one to look at the entrance.

“I received a tipoff from an anonymous benefactor. They said some nice, fat

livestock had convened in one of my tents.”

Black hair, black eyes, a soft face that looked too young for his years without its eyepatch. Yet Hiro’s ghastly smile put the lie to any trace of kindness in his features. He stood at entirely ease. Jaws dropped at his nonchalance.

“I’ve come to slaughter them myself before they can get away. Every cut of meat is precious on the march.” His voice dripped with amusement. With a glance at von Kirschia, he soundlessly stepped forward. “The meeting that will bring down the empire... What a historic event. You wouldn’t leave me out, would you?”

“Someone, call the sentry—” The nobleman’s head hit the ground before the rest of his sentence left his lips. A dull *thump* sounded through the tent, like a sandbag being hit with a stick, as his decapitated body collapsed.

“Here’s your sentry.”

A fresh head landed on the table. The soldier’s mouth was frozen in a rigid smile, as though he had been killed before he knew what was happening.

“No bleating from the sheep. Speak another word and I won’t hesitate to cut off your head.” Hiro set a finger to his lips and adopted a serene smile, although the expression only looked uncanny when it didn’t reach his eyes.

The nobles froze in terror. They could not have spoken a word if they had tried.

Hiro gave an approving nod and walked up to von Maruk. “Good evening, Orlean. How have you been?”

Von Maruk blanched. “How long have you known?” he stammered.

Hiro set a finger to his chin. A second passed, and then a wide smirk spread across his face. “From the start, of course. You did exactly what I expected at every turn. It took everything I had not to laugh.” He patted von Maruk on the shoulder. “Naming you my vice-commander... Turning to the central nobles in the first place... It was all to bring about this moment.”

With every word Hiro spoke, Von Maruk’s expression morphed from confusion to bitter understanding. He ground his teeth.

“Outwitting your half-baked schemes was child’s play.” Hiro circled around behind von Maruk’s back and cast his gaze over the rest of the nobles, his smile widening. “But there is still one way your lives might be spared.”

“And what is that?” von Maruk asked hesitantly.

“Something I’ll need your help with.”

Hiro extended his right arm. A rent appeared in empty space and extruded the hilt of a sword. It was no spirit weapon. Rather, it was a curved blade of the kind favored by the people of the south, although it hardly looked fit for use—it was rusted over and caked with dirt. The cutting edge was chipped like the blade of a saw, and it looked so battered that it might break with any impact.

“Try to grit your teeth.” Without a moment’s hesitation, he plunged the rusted blade into von Maruk’s shoulder.

“Gyaa— Mmph!”

As soon as the man opened his mouth to scream, Hiro covered it with a hand. Von Maruk struggled, but he did not move an inch. A blast of raw hostility told the remaining nobles that if they called for help, they were dead men. They cowered in fear, their teeth chattering.

“I’m going to torture Orlean now. If he manages to tell me anything useful, I’ll let your little plot slide. Otherwise, once he’s dead, I’ll move on to the rest of you, one by one.”

Globules of flesh clung to the sword’s chipped blade as Hiro withdrew it.

“Tell me, have you ever heard of tetanus?”

Tears filled von Maruk’s eyes at the word. He started to tremble.

“This sword is a little something I acquired from the third prince of Lichtein. I call it Beil’s Measure. The mortality rate of tetanus is fifty percent, you see—it puts its victims on the scales. Quite a clever name, don’t you think? Although maybe that’s not very important to you right now.” Hiro brought his mouth up to von Maruk’s ear. “I’m going to take my hand off your mouth now, but if you make a squeak without my say-so, I’ll cut off your right arm. I’d prefer not to have to do that. As you can see, this isn’t the most durable of swords.”

Hiro took his hand away from von Maruk's mouth. The man clenched his teeth so hard that blood ran down his lips, but he endured, stamping his feet against the ground to try and distract from the agony.

"Oh, I should mention," Hiro whispered, "I don't need you for my plans. Only von Kirschia."

Von Maruk stiffened, forgetting about the pain for a moment. "Surely you cannot mean—"

Hiro clamped a hand over his mouth again. "Oh dear. I never said you could speak. One arm down, I'm afraid."

The night was short tonight. He didn't have the time to torture everybody in the tent.

I have to get started soon, or I won't make it in time.

He put Beil's Measure to work, hoping that it would not be long before somebody broke.

* * * * *

At the same time, final preparations for the following day's confrontation were underway in Six Kingdoms' camp. Two women and one man sat inside the command tent at the camp's center.

"No word has come from the head of House Maruk. Perhaps his schemes have been discovered." Luka frowned. Beside her, Igel bit his nails in frustration.

By contrast, Lucia's smile was brimming with confidence. "That is no great matter. I have spun many plans. The failure of one will not lose the battle. How fares the reorganization of our forces?"

"Fine, so long as everything goes to plan. But if the enemy knows where to stick a wedge, we could find ourselves in deep shit."

Igel tossed a report across the table. As all three had suspected, fully reforming the army in such a short span of time had proven impossible. The report, now in Lucia's hand, explained that the seams were beginning to show. Taking the time to avoid friction between nations was probably to blame. The six powers that made up Six Kingdoms might have been allies for many years,

but that did not make them friends; currently, they were vying with one another for rulership of the region known as Klym.

The kingdoms of Anguis and Vulpes were on notably bad terms. Once, in the age of the king before last, they had been close allies—a bond commonly reaffirmed by marriages between noble families. The king had passed away, however, and the Vulpes siblings had been robbed of the throne they were supposed to inherit. If not for that, the alliance would have remained intact, but the previous and current rulers had destroyed in two generations what had taken centuries to build. Now, relations between the kingdoms were tense.

The same situation was mirrored elsewhere. With such a large-scale offensive, it was inevitable that some would refuse to take orders from a commander of this or that kingdom; that was why the army had been divided into different divisions to start with. By assigning them different roles in the high king's name, conflict had been avoided.

"A trifling concern. Indeed, 'tis necessary to draw the War God out."

Some form of weakness was required to convince the enemy that he could win. If they wanted to lure him into organically believing the balance of war favored him, they could not let him suspect their hand on the scales. Otherwise, he would fall back.

"And he has taken the bait. If no word has come from the head of House Maruk, all the better. That will only quicken the poison's passage through his blood."

For Lucia, who wanted his head, the War God's coming was cause for celebration, but the Vulpes siblings did not share her joy.

"Or he has drawn it out to use against us." Luka pulled a displeased face. "I would have preferred that we allowed the punitive legions to continue their work and secured our hold over the western territories."

Despite Luka's objections, Lucia knew that leaving the punitive legions to ravage the imperial lands would have risked prolonging the war. The western nobles had surrendered, but they had not pledged their loyalty. They would turn on Six Kingdoms the instant the empire launched its counteroffensive. The

Punitive Army's invasion had seized the initiative, but ever since the War God's scion had ridden forth, they had been slipping onto the back foot—a fact that seemed to be lost on the Vulpes siblings.

Truly, "magnificent" is the only word. With a mere twenty thousand, he rekindled hope in the western nobles' hearts. Had we not withdrawn, this war would have dragged out interminably.

In war, speed was the key—seizing victory before the enemy could muster an effective resistance. Hiro's offensive had blunted Six Kingdoms' momentum. The Second Punitive Legion had been a necessary sacrifice to bring things back on track. It was a small loss for the sake of a greater gain; a victory scored in view of the bigger picture would turn the tide of war far more decisively than on one battlefield.

And besides, I have little interest in winning territory.

That was the fundamental difference between Lucia and the Vulpes siblings. Six Kingdoms had not expanded its borders in more than four hundred years. None of the kingdoms had the capacity to manage annexed land. They might be able to conquer the western territories, but they did not have the experience to rule them effectively. More to the point, laying claim to the west would only invite problems dividing it with the other kingdoms, and that was to say nothing of the question of Faerzen. Lucia intended to avoid such irksome matters if she could.

For now, I shall watch and wait.

Some kingdoms would succeed in ruling, while others would fail. First, she would observe the successes and make a note of their practices. Then it would be child's play to carve away a portion of the western territories from the other kingdoms and take it for herself. For now, it was better to focus on the prize at hand: the glory of killing Mars's scion.

"The empire's military will be far lesser once the Lord of Eld is slain. Still, if we do not eliminate its best minds where we can, soon it shall be we who are hard-pressed."

The empire might have grown old and rotten, but it was still the empire. Its land, resources, and military strength were orders of magnitude greater than

any other nation could boast. Six Kingdoms had managed to create its current advantage by attacking too quickly to respond to, but the empire was not guaranteed to stay on the back foot forever. Odds were high that it would soon strike back with greater numbers. With the question of supplies still unresolved, Six Kingdoms could not afford for the war to drag out. That would mean guaranteed defeat, expulsion from the western territories, and a shameful march back home with nothing to show but enormous losses.

Then we shall need to find a point of compromise.

A show of strength was required to ensure that potential negotiations went favorably. As a queen responsible for her kingdom's stability, she had to consider the grander picture—not only victory, but also the possibility of defeat.

"The man is Mars's own blood. His value is incalculable. Defeating him will be more than enough to earn the high king's favor. Who knows? You may even be able to wrest your throne back from the witch who stole it."

"If you do not claim all the glory for yourself."

"Oh? Is that mistrust I hear? Did we not play together as babes? Did we not grow up side by side?"

"We were both more innocent then. More trusting of others, as children are. But now that I have grown, I know to treat serpents with due caution."

Luka was not mincing words. Lucia shrugged but did not refute the barb. Sparks crackled between them. Igel, caught in the middle, looked pointedly at the table.

Silence fell over the tent for a while. In the end, it was Lucia who broke it, slapping her fan into her palm with a sharp smack.

"Then you may claim the Lord of Eld's head for yourself. You have my trust, even if I do not have yours. Does that satisfy you?"

"Do you truly mean that?"

"If it will set your mind at ease, where's the harm? Let the glory be shared."

Smiles spread across the Vulpes siblings' faces.

“Very well. In that case, I have no objection to our current strategy.”

“If Luka’s happy, so am I.”

“Excellent. Then there is nothing more to be said. Return to your beds and rest. Tomorrow, you shall take the head of the Lord of Eld.”

“And where will you be in all of this?” Luka asked.

“I will make myself a target to draw him out.” Lucia spread her fan wide and smiled.

Luka cocked her head dubiously. “You would have us fight alone?”

“If you seem hard-pressed, I could see my way to lending a little assistance.”

Luka’s expression visibly stiffened—Lucia was all but nakedly declaring that she was plotting to use them for her own ends. She stood, knocking her chair to the floor with a clatter. “Those are the words of a leech. One who means to take the credit for herself.”

The crimson flame of anger burned in her eyes, but suddenly...

“You stay out of this, Your Majesty.”

The fire dissipated. “Igel? What are you—”

“Shut it, sis!” Igel thrust an arm out to silence Luka. “It’ll be us who take the War God’s head. The Vulpes siblings. And we’ll go home in glory. That’s all that matters.” He turned away and stomped toward the exit, making no attempt to disguise his anger.

“Igel! Stop right there! What in the world has gotten into you?!”

Luka chased after her brother, confusion written on her face. Igel’s sudden turn clearly had her at a loss. It was rare for him to defy his sister’s will. The anxiety that he had turned against her drove any thoughts of anger from her mind, and she ran out of the tent like a child desperately pursuing their parents.

Lucia chuckled to herself. “Whatever would you do without one another?”

Since being cheated out of their throne, the Vulpes siblings had lived in conflict with the adults around them. Once stripped of their authority, even those of royal blood were nothing more than playthings for nobles. All of the

humiliation the nobles had suffered and the resentment they had accumulated was taken out on the pair.

“My, but how the light had left Luka’s eyes...”

Lucia had taken pity on them and, with an appeal to the high king, seen them recognized as royalty once more. They had been able to lead normal lives again, albeit at the foot of a table they had once ruled. However, while they had quickly won fame thanks to their natural talents, they were yet to achieve their dream of reclaiming their throne.

“Mayhap ’twould be kinder if they never did.”

Their dream was destined to go unrealized. The woman they faced was closest to the high king and wielded her power with impunity; the gulf between them was too wide for determination alone to bridge.

Lucia’s teeth ground bitterly. “But they will make good enough pawns for my ambitions.”

The title of queen carried an obligation to use whomever she could. Ruling was not a charitable enterprise. The good of the nation always had to take precedence, even over personal sympathies. If one was not prepared to harden their heart and sacrifice even their closest relatives, they were not fit to wear the crown.

“Your shortcomings are too many. ’Tis unwise to wear your hearts so openly on your sleeves.”

The Vulpes siblings were utterly dependent on one another. Either’s heart would break without the other. That was their greatest weakness as commanders. But there was no room for sentiment in war: it was kill or be killed.

“’Tis hardly rare for soldiers to fall shielding loved ones from their fate.”

Such stories shone all the brighter for their blood-soaked backdrop, making ready fodder for wartime propaganda. Then, once the fighting was done, it was easy enough to extol their subjects as saints and see that their names went down in history.

“Will they leave behind an ugly reality or a beautiful legend?”

She would see that they had the choice, at least.

“Either way, ’twill be as my pawns.”

What truly tragic lives they led. How pitiful, to be born as royals only to die as puppets.

“And as for the one who remains... I can hardly wait to see how they fare.”

Lucia spread her fan wide and turned her eyes to the heavens, smirking all the while.

* * * * *

The eleventh day of the second month of Imperial Year 1024

The Laryx Plains, in the west of the western territories

Day swept night from the sky. The sun glittered like a kaleidoscope as it rose in the east, bathing the world in vibrant hues. White clouds dotted a sky of royal blue. Yet while the heavens were calm, a shroud of ferocity hung low over the earth. A black dragon sigil rose highest among a churning sea of banners. Lusty battle cries split the air. Soldiers raised their weapons high and bellowed praise of their nation to the sky, trying to intimidate the enemy with their zeal.

The core of Six Kingdoms' forces had taken up position not far away, overlooking the battlefield. Lucia and the Vulpes siblings had gathered in the makeshift command tent erected in the center, along with the various leaders and aides of the army's constituent kingdoms.

Lucia reclined upon an ostentatious bed laid at the head of the table. She plucked an apple from the basin by her hand and bit into it. "They sound awfully spirited this morning."

The mouth of the tent burst open, providing a momentary glimpse of the battlefield. A chill wind tousled her hair. The hostility radiating from their foes sapped the warmth from her bones.

"All units are ready, Your Majesty," the messenger announced.

"Splendid. Sound the horns. We shall encircle the enemy and annihilate them."

They had one hundred and eighty thousand. The enemy had forty. The difference was clear. Yet none at the table took that as a guarantee of victory.

"You are all awfully quiet."

An odd hush lay over the command tent, so stifling that it was hard to breathe. Nobody was foolish enough to think the battle was good as won. The fear of defeat hung in the air unspoken. They faced the Grantzian Empire, the monarchs of Soleil whose rule had lasted a thousand years. What was more, the enemy commander was none other than the fourth prince, the blood of the mythical War God who had spawned countless legends. None at the table had

seen him; only word of his ingenious strategies had reached the far-flung lands of Klym.

“I can’t say I’ve ever feared forty thousand this much,” one of the aides remarked, his face tense. Others around the table nodded in solemn agreement. Lucia considered snapping at them for their cowardice, but cowing them further would accomplish nothing. Besides, she was not unsympathetic to their concerns. Even she was uncertain whether her schemes would bear fruit.

House Maruk is a lost cause, I fear.

Word had still not arrived from Orlean von Maruk. She could only assume that the fourth prince had caught wind of his treachery.

But that was not the last of my schemes.

She had succeeded in drawing the fourth prince out to this place. That was worth celebrating. She cast a glance at the stack of papers by her pillow and reached to take one in hand.

At that moment, a horn blew. She stopped and listened intently, engraving the sound into her memory. It was the clarion call of a battle that would be spoken of for generations to come. The tension dissolved as the tent filled with murmuring.

The retainer charged with keeping an eye on the battlefield reported in. “The first cohort is moving...with the first and second cavalry out in front.”

The aides set about placing pawns on the map. Six Kingdoms’ first cohort had taken up the dragon-wing formation, best suited to encircling an enemy. Its first and second cavalry numbered twenty thousand apiece. The first infantry—thirty thousand highly trained soldiers—made up the center. All in all, the cohort came to seventy thousand, almost double the empire’s numbers even without the rest of Six Kingdoms’ army.

“What formation have they taken?” Lucia asked.

“The flowing formation. Not the easiest to deal with.”

Lucia’s eyebrows rose. “Truly? The flowing formation? With their patchwork force?”

She could not deny her surprise at the enemy commander's recklessness. The flowing formation was an unorthodox tactic that deployed an army's units in a diagonal line. It took its name from the ease with which it could transform into the dragon-wing and dragon-scale formations, as well as its resemblance to a dragon in flight flowing through the sky. However, it required a great deal of coordination to execute—nobody would be so foolish as to attempt it with a cobbled-together army. While it had the advantage of allowing every unit ready access to the fray, that made it unsuitable for drawn-out battles and downright foolish to employ against a significantly larger force. Its presence on the field meant that Mars's scion was almost certainly plotting something.

"Let us place our faith in the first cohort. If the enemy has crafted some scheme, we shall see it soon enough." Lucia peered at the vanguard, narrowing her eyes. It was about time for the first and second cavalry to bite into the enemy's flanks.

A thunderous noise rang out, an earth-shaking crash that reached as far as the command tent. Screams rose. Battle cries rang out. Steel clashed, sparks showered, blades hewed heads from necks in a display of might. A red mist rose as ribbons of gore sprayed across the battlefield. In the coming hours, dozens, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of lives would slick the soil.

"Marvelous," Lucia breathed. In her eyes, it was beautiful. Only in mortal combat did men's true natures surface. The fair and the ugly, revealed side by side in one perfect moment—*that* was war. There was neither compassion nor animosity here, only the pure urge to survive, pitted against that of others in desperate contest. The innocent act of spilling an enemy's life to preserve one's own.

"Truly, no words do it justice. 'Tis the privilege of being born human." Lucia's eyes gleamed. Her tongue snaked out lasciviously to lick a drop of apple juice from the corner of her mouth. "But when shall this scheme reveal itself?"

The more time passed, the more pronounced the imperial disadvantage became. They fought fiercely, showing passionate resistance in the face of death, but they were doomed even so.

"The fifty thousand in our second cohort are on the move. The end of the

imperial force is nigh.”

“The end? Does he mean to let himself be massacred? Surely not. This cannot be all there is.” Lucia picked up one of the letters by her pillow. The writer—not Orlean von Maruk, but a different collaborator—claimed that Fourth Prince Hiro was plotting a raid on her camp.

Could it be that they, too, were found out?

She crushed the letter in her fist and stood up. “Seleucus, what news of our perimeter?”

Her handsome young vice-commander stepped forward, wearing his typical insolent smile. His expression was downright aggravating under the circumstances, and Lucia shot him a furious glare.

“I notice that you are scowling, Your Majesty.”

“In light of the urgency of the situation, I shall let that discourtesy pass.”

“You are most gracious, Your Majesty. Our perimeter, you said?”

“Indeed. Has the enemy been sighted?”

“Let’s see here... Our scouts report no suspicious movements within the vicinity, but we are unfamiliar with the terrain of the western territories. There are likely multiple places that our foe could conceal themselves.”

“Are there, indeed...”

Lucia cupped her chin in her hand, stood up, and exited the tent. The elevation provided her with a commanding view of the battlefield. The imperial forces appeared to have launched no schemes or traps worthy of the name. They simply held their ground and fought like wild beasts, dying in droves.

“Mayhaps I ought to send the third cohort out and leave the core exposed...”

“Will victory alone not suffice, Your Majesty?” Seleucus asked.

Lucia looked back, eyes burning with anger. “You have served me for how many years, and you give me this foolishness?” Her expression looked like it contained more fury than a human should have been able to muster. A wild wind swirled about her, gouging at the earth as if to underscore her outrage.

Seleucus's smile turned fixed as he took a step back. "Forgive me, Your Majesty. I spoke out of turn. I simply feared that the War God's scion would make an appearance." He chose his words carefully, conscious that his life was under threat.

Lucia's eyes widened as it dawned on her that he did not understand. "But of course he will. I am certain of it."

Seleucus's smile fell away as his eyes shrank to points. "Then why your anger, Your Majesty?"

"*Their resistance is too fierce!*"

"Excuse me?"

Lucia ignored him and extended her hand toward the battlefield, pointing at the imperial troops. "Why do they still fight? Who commands them?"

"The War God's scion, surely. But he must be leading the raid, so by process of elimination, one of his subordinates..." A look of confusion passed across Seleucus's face. "But who is left?"

"Now do you see? Now do you begrudge me my anger?"

Almost all of the central nobles riding with Fourth Prince Hiro had defected to Six Kingdoms, but he had presumably seen through their schemes and executed them. If any of the central nobles remained, they would already have raised the banner of Six Kingdoms and turned on their allies.

"The western nobles, then?"

"Impossible—"

A scream from the field cut Lucia short. She looked over her shoulder to see the occupants of the tent come rushing out, shock written on their faces. An odd sight was unfolding on the battlefield. Familiar standards went up from the battered imperial troops.

"Is that...the serpent of Anguis?" Luka whispered at Lucia's side. Lucia had not even noticed her arrival.

"It cannot be..."

That was not possible. The central nobles who had plotted to turn to Six Kingdoms' side were dead. They had to be. If not, they would have acted far earlier in the battle.

"Seleucus! What are the first cohort's orders?!"

"We prioritized reforming their ranks over updating their battle plans, Your Highness. Their orders remain what they were."

Lucia had commanded the first cohort not to attack once the central nobles showed their colors. If they followed that command faithfully, they would end up turning their backs to the enemy.

"Send a..." *Send a messenger to rescind their orders,* she made to say, but then thought better of it. That would only cause chaos in the ranks. An elementary mistake. The corners of her mouth twitched. "No, there is no other choice. We must fall back."

Victory was right before their eyes, but if they fixated only on grasping it, they would pay a dear price indeed. Lucia came to a decision and opened her mouth to give the order.

"It cannot be..."

What came out was not a command, but a gasp of shock. An incomprehensible sight unfolded before her eyes. Where the first and second cohorts had encircled the imperial forces, another unit was charging from behind. The observers on the hill watched, dumbfounded. The newcomers were no imperial ambush or late reinforcements. They were soldiers of Six Kingdoms —Vulpes cavalry.

"What the...? Those aren't ours!" Igel protested. "We didn't set up any ambush!"

"So this is your ploy..." Lucia whispered.

Her head spun. New problems were flying in from all directions and her mind could not keep up. She only knew one thing for certain: her army was at risk of turning on itself. Even if the newcomers were not truly Vulpes troops, it was Esel infantry they were attacking. That presented a serious danger. The cracks in the union would surface. The various kingdoms may have been longtime

allies, but they were their own nations with their own interests. They did not think of one another as family, and they did not think of one another as friends. Their soldiers could not possibly recognize every member of a hundred-and-eighty-thousand-strong army; if the Esel troops struck back against the imposters, the real Vulpes troops would believe their allies were under attack and join the fray.

"Recall them all," Lucia commanded. "Now."

One wrong step and the situation would become unrecoverable. To think that the enemy would try to turn her army on itself while the sun was still high...

"At once, Your Majesty!" One of the retainers hurried away, holding a banner high.

What next? She struggled to draw her thoughts together. She could almost feel a blade pricking at her throat. Still, if she could not maintain a level head under any circumstance, she was not fit to command.

"Remain calm," she told herself. "'Tis but the first battle. You will have opportunities to erase this disgrace."

She was trying to convince herself more than anything. This kind of embarrassment would only earn her mockery from one woman in particular, and she had no intention of tasting such humiliation a second time. She had already cried enough childish tears for one lifetime.

"No more. No more. None shall get the better of me again." Lucia's eyes smoldered with rage as they regarded the battlefield. She slapped her own cheek with her fan. "'Tis a trivial setback. Nothing that a little thought cannot solve."

Most likely, rattling her like this was precisely the enemy's goal. Their schemes were nothing more than childish tricks. As long as she did not let her anger run away with her and analyzed the field appropriately, they would be easy enough to foil.

However, in the end, she took too long to organize her thoughts—and in trying to unravel the array of problems before her, she made one crucial oversight.

“Hold a moment. Why wait so long to reveal their schemes?”

Why only now, when their defeat was all but certain, was the enemy unveiling all of these tricks to throw the battlefield into disarray? Lucia looked around. Only then did she realize that all of her retainers’ eyes were glued to the front lines.

“So that was your ploy... Mars!”

And darkness fell upon the world.



* * * * *

Screams split the air, pitiful, tear-streaked pleas born of unbearable pain. Figures slumped to the ground, unable to find cover from the deluge. Even so, the black clouds of arrows showed no sign of abating. They fell mercilessly upon the bodies to finish off the dying where they lay.

“Aim for the command tent. They’ve been kind enough to come out from behind their walls. We mustn’t waste the chance they’ve given us.”

Fourth Prince Hiro Schwartz von Grantz stood out on the battlefield thanks to his black hair and black eyes—a hue that only one man in Aletia had ever boasted. His usual eyepatch was nowhere to be seen upon his gentle features.

“What a sight. A fitting end for a pack of fools.”

Now that his left eye had been freed, it glowed with an uncanny radiance that chilled the blood.

“The way here wasn’t easy. They put up sturdy defenses.”

Seated astride his swiftdrake on a small hill, he smiled down at Six Kingdoms’ command tent. During the previous night, he had taken two thousand riders and circled around behind the enemy army. Imperial forces naturally knew imperial land better, but in order to be certain of getting the upper hand, he had enlisted Lord von Kirschia, a local noble, to lead them around the battlefield. Now the core of Six Kingdoms’ army unfolded below him.

“Warfare needs panache. One eyecatching scheme will earn the praise of historians for generations, and they will gladly beautify the events in text.” His words were matter-of-fact, but his voice was tinged with joy. “Now, where is Six Kingdoms’ commander? Where is the general who will be my stepping stone?”

He narrowed his eyes and swept an amused gaze across the camp, but there were no signs of any likely figures. All the while, the archers rained arrows on the troops below, turning the scene into a nightmare of blood and gore.

“Took them long enough.”

Horn blasts rose from all around, warning of an enemy assault. The solemn chorus resounded across the battlefield. The first and second cohorts must have

noticed that they were under attack. Still, the order to retreat had not come through, so they could do nothing but fight on. They would turn on each other, ally would slay ally, the core would fall into chaos, and before long, the situation would be unsalvageable.

"One wrong move can be fatal on a battlefield. Their commander was a little too indecisive."

Admittedly, he had primed them to act that way, but he did wonder how the battle looked from their perspective.

"Time to get moving. I wouldn't want to give them time to reassemble their defenses."

He drew Excalibur from his hip and raised it high. The gleaming blade shimmered with rainbow hues, holding fast the gazes of the soldiers behind him.

"All units, mount up."

The archers lowered their bows and hefted themselves into the saddles of their waiting horses. Sensing that they were mounted up, Hiro lowered Excalibur so that it lay flush with the ground. The black dragon fluttered in the breeze—the same sacred standard beneath which the War God had once proclaimed conquest to the world.

"Take fear in your jaws and swallow it whole! Let fury guide your fangs to your enemies' throats!"

Bring down the hammer of righteousness upon these savages who dare defile imperial soil.

"In Mars's name, I command you: charge!"

A war cry swelled at his back, urging him forward as he kicked his swiftdrake's flanks. Enemy archers began to nock their arrows as they registered the cavalry hurtling down the slope.

Hiro swung Excalibur out to the side and shouted over his shoulder. "Do not falter! Shields out, heads low! Ride straight through!"

Wind hissed by his ear. Several men toppled from their horses behind him.

Clicking his tongue in annoyance, he cleared the encroaching arrows away with a wave of his arm.

“Out of my way.”

He launched himself from his swiftdrake’s back, alighting in the midst of the enemy troops.

“Wha— Argh!”

One soldier went down with a thrust through the throat. Hiro pulled his sword free and swung around to cleave another’s head from his shoulders. A spear thrust toward him, and he twisted to avoid it before closing on the wielder in the blink of an eye.

“Ah—”

A short scream escaped the man’s mouth in the split second before Hiro cut him open from hip to shoulder. He picked up the dropped spear and hurled it toward another soldier who was nocking an arrow. The shaft passed clean through the man’s head, shattering his skull.

“Let’s clear a path, shall we?”

As the words left Hiro’s lips, the imperial cavalry caught up. They slammed into the enemy forces, sending them flying. The wall of bodies before him crumbled in an instant. Horseshoes crushed screams into the muck, spearpoints drew forth cries of pain, blood rained down from the sky.

Hiro strode ahead over a carpet of corpses. His advance was regal, sparing the foe not a glance as he dispassionately cut them down.

“There are more of them than I expected.”

The enemy core had deployed troops to the rear, as though they had been anticipating a surprise attack. The cavalry continued to sow chaos, but as the enemy numbers grew, more and more found themselves dragged from their horses. Even so, they carried on, believing in victory. With weapons in hand and shields held high, they fought for their families. They would not yield until their lives were spent.

“Forgive me.”

Hiro looked on with a faint smile on his lips. An apology was all he could offer. There were no limits to human greed, and good will was easily tainted by ill intent.

“And I’m no better.”

He faced the oncoming enemy horde and brandished Excalibur. That motion alone projected a terror no ordinary man could withstand. He beckoned his foes to death before they could scream, before they could suffer, before they even knew what had occurred.

An unparalleled danse macabre unfolded on the field. Blackness blotted out the world. Life, death, even light itself guttered out before the dark.

“The Desperation...” someone whispered fearfully. It was impossible to tell whom. All of the soldiers in Hiro’s vicinity had perished to a man.

Hiro shot the remaining enemies a glare, and they stepped back. He let loose a blast of power to keep them cowed, then rested Excalibur on his shoulders and cast his gaze over his allies.

“To me, soldiers of the empire! It is too early to—”

An impact to his back forcibly cut him off. A roar shook his eardrums, as though he were caught in a rainstorm. There was no pain—the Black Camellia had shielded him from the threat—but the suddenness of the blow caused him to stumble forward.

“I see. So this is where you’re going to do it.” Although physically unharmed, Hiro brought a hand to his chest in anguish as he looked around. “I knew this was coming...but that doesn’t make it any easier.”

His former allies had joined his enemies in leveling their spears at him. One by one, the black dragon banners were torn from their standards and cast to the ground. Serpents danced against the sky in their place.

A sharper hostility flared behind him. “Forgive me, Your Highness, but I must take your head.”

Hiro turned to face the voice. “I suppose it’s a formality at this point...but may I ask what you’re doing, Lord von Kirschia?”

“I am truly sorry.”

Anger flashed in Hiro’s eyes. “I didn’t ask for an apology. I asked for an explanation.”

He stepped toward von Kirschia but found his path blocked. The soldiers around him thrust their spears toward him. A flourish of Excalibur knocked the lethal points aside with ease. He picked up a spear with his left hand and sliced open the carotid artery of the soldier in front of him before thrusting the haft at the man behind, shattering his jaw. Dust whipped up around him as he spun the weapon around, sending heads flying. Finally, he flung it away, sending a spray of gore splattering across the ground where it landed.

“Sit quiet and wait your turn,” he ordered the surrounding traitors. His mouth pulled into a crescent smile as he set a finger to his lips. The motion was slight, but it was enough to make the men stiffen in place.

“Now then, Lord von Kirschia. You were about to explain yourself.”

Von Kirschia fell to his knees in terror, his mouth parting into a broken smile as though he had forgotten how to express any other emotion. “Forgive me, Your Highness! Forgive me! I had no choice!”

“That’s not what I want to hear. I’m asking *why* you did this.”

“For my people, Your Highness! They took my people hostage!” Von Kirschia, a grown man, wept openly in front of a boy young enough to be his son. His eyes pleaded for absolution. With his back bent low, he looked pathetically small.

“So that was why you told me about Orlean. To gain my trust.”

“Forgive me, Your Highness! I know that it was wrong!” He ground his forehead against the earth.

Hiro shot him a cold glance and turned away. “I knew, you know. From the start, I knew you were in bed with Six Kingdoms.”

“You...what?”

“‘For my people,’ you said? How dare you lie to my face. You wanted to save yourself, that’s all.”

He swung around. Excalibur flashed. Von Kirschia's head flew from his shoulders, trailing a ribbon of blood.

"But you've served your purpose. I kept you alive for the sake of this moment."

He shot the head a single, frigid glare as it rolled away. As the sound of the world crumbling rose around him, he turned his eyes to the sky.

"Save yourself, Your Highness! You must live on!"

The remaining loyal troops were trying to break through the circle and help him escape, but it was costing them dearly. They fell one after another, their backs laid open, their chests run through, their arms lopped off.

"Stand firm, men!" someone cried among them. "Are you not children of the Grantzian Empire?! We offer turncoats no mercy but death!"

Soldiers wept tears of blood as their curses vanished on the wind. One by one they fell to spear thrusts, but still they held their weapons high.

"Oh, great Spirit King, strike down these traitors! Glory to the empire!"

The traitors in question had chosen their course in order to save their own hides. If they showed the slightest hesitation, they would be killed on the spot. Both sides had no choice but to harden their hearts and cut down yesterday's friends. Agonized cries echoed skyward. The screams of men slain by their former allies rang ceaselessly across the plain.

Amidst the din, the cry of a creature with no place on the battlefield reached Hiro's ears. His bitter smile turned into a dangerous scowl as he spun toward the noise. There was his swiftdrake, surrounded by enemy troops.

"The beast's a stubborn one! Hurry and finish it off!"

Spearpoints stripped away its scales and bit deep into its flesh. Its cries of pain rose to the sky. The soldiers kicked it and wrestled it to the ground, where they continued to torment it.

"Swiftdrakes are a rare breed. This hide'll fetch good coin."

However, no matter how fiercely they beat it or how cruelly they kicked it, the swiftdrake struggled valiantly back to its feet.

“We’d be better off keeping it for ourselves. Still, makes you wonder how a beast like this ended up on the field in the first place...”

“Just don’t let it get away! Stick it good! Anything with that many teeth needs put down before it causes any trouble!”

There was a cold kind of sense to their words, but even so, a human being could only bear so much.

“The scum of the world should know its place.”

Hiro surged forward, his mind boiling with white-hot anger. A dark, stagnant aura billowed from his every pore.

“Don’t you dare lay a finger on my kin.”

He sent the head of the man pinning down the swiftdrake’s neck flying with a single swing before rounding on the rest of the soldiers. None who had touched the beast’s hide lived to tell the tale. None who had scorned it or spat on it received any mercy. He clove their heads from their bodies before turning on those around them, curing them down to a man. At last, the swiftdrake stood alone in the center of a world of blood.

“I’m sorry.” Hiro stepped toward it. “I should have come sooner.”

He laid a hand on the beast’s neck, and it nuzzled his chest. He smiled. It—no, *she*—had always been loyal to a fault.

“I’ll be all right. Go on. Get out of here.” He patted her neck one more time and stepped reluctantly back, retrieving the banner slung along her flank as he did. “With your legs, you’ll have no trouble getting away.”

He flashed the animal a small smile before producing a letter from his pocket, which he slipped into the saddle.

“Take that to Liz for me, would you?”

The swiftdrake cocked her head with a plaintive whine. He could tell from her eyes that she wanted nothing more than to stay with him.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be all right.” He brought the beast’s head close and laid his forehead against it. “I’ll be right behind you. Wait for me with Liz, okay?”

His voice was gentle, and for once, his smile looked no different than that of any boy his age. He drew back from the swiftdrake and she set off, accepting his will. A short distance away, she stopped and looked back, crooning softly. The sound was low and sad, like a final goodbye. Hiro didn't let his smile falter as he waved back.

Few could stop a swiftdrake running at full speed. So long as she focused only on escaping, she would have little trouble fleeing the battlefield unharmed. Her flight made for a beautiful sight. Soldiers stopped and stared as she streaked across the plain, forgetting for a moment the weapons in their hands.

"Thank you for waiting."

Hiro readied Excalibur, planting his standard in the ground. The sight of the black dragon fluttering in the wind was nothing short of majestic. The banner might only have been cloth, but it still caused the enemy to shrink back, overawed.

He looked around. Only foes and former allies were left within his field of view, but if he strained his ears, he could still hear the clashing of steel. Somewhere, pockets of loyal soldiers were continuing to hold out, although the sound grew fainter with every breath.

He heaved a sigh. "Well, I suppose we should get started. Just remember—you asked for this."

With a snap of his fingers, the air around him began to distort. Brilliant light spilled forth as tears appeared. Such was the privilege of Excalibur's chosen. A dizzying number of spirit weapons filled the sky, a million stars newly born upon the earth. Although the sun was high, the budding night sky rivaled it for splendor.

"I hope you're prepared."

The words had the air of a death sentence. Fear colored the enemy soldiers' expressions. If Hiro had been any other teenage boy, they would have laughed in his face, but even they could sense the abnormal power he projected. For the briefest of moments, he showed them a glimpse of a god's strength and a devil's brutality.

“Try not to make any sudden movements,” he said. “You wouldn’t want to suffer before you die.”

And then he disappeared.

In that moment, the battlefield fell silent, as though all sound had vanished from the world. The soldiers stared at the black dragon standard, bewildered, as though they had forgotten how to breathe.

“What the... What’s he—”

It came without warning. A soldier abruptly fell to the ground as though his legs had given out. One became two became five became ten became twenty. In the span of an instant, the number of victims multiplied exponentially. The darkness claimed them before they could even comprehend what had occurred.

“Gyaaaaaahhh!”

Their descent into terror and the breaking of their minds was simultaneous. They threw down their weapons and fled in confusion, not even knowing where they were running to. More slumped to the ground even as they ran. Those who bowed down and prayed to their gods had their throats laid open; those who turned tail and fled were speared through the heart; those who mustered enough courage to stand and fight had their heads lopped off without mercy.

“It’s Cornix...” one of the Six Kingdoms soldiers whispered. “The herald of the end—”

A glimmer of silver passed beneath his chin. His head rolled from his shoulders, blood spraying from the stump.

The spirit weapons floating in midair began to vanish with frightful speed—one, three, eight, fourteen. All that remained of them was the whistling of wind drifting across a scene of indiscriminate slaughter. White streaks scored deep into the soldiers’ flesh, stifling their screams in their throats. The barrage of slashes knew no cessation, only increasing in speed. Such was the privilege of Excalibur’s chosen, the power of its Graal: Lucifer.

Divine Lightning—Liegegrazalt.

The heavens fell, and the world was gleaming silver. A blinding light, white

and searing, consumed all.

When the deed was done, corpses carpeted the earth. Not one living soul remained to quip or joke. The soil was stained with the blood of the dead, like a sun swallowed by cloud, and a black dragon standard stood alone, fluttering gracefully in the middle of the hellish tableau.

“That should about do it.”

Hiro came to a quiet stop beneath the flag. Bodies surrounded him. The enemy soldiers eyed him from afar, inching closer with weapons in hand. Their eyes were filled with fear, but none fled. They mustered their courage and forced themselves onward.

“What a magnificent showing! Truly, you do not disappoint.”

A lilting voice filtered through the ranks, and the horde of soldiers parted like a wave. A woman stepped forth, applauding as she came.

“And you make not a move to conceal your strength! Bravo, I say, bravo!”

Her pale skin was as smooth as spun glass, and her amber eyes had the cold gleam of burnished copper. Her angular lashes gave her a steely edge, but she was by no means lacking in allure—her dignified figure had surely drawn sighs of admiration from many a throat. Yet what stood out most was her attire: a garish affair wholly unsuited to the horrors of battle. With no armor to protect her from blades or arrows, it would have been a mark of insanity on anyone else. Her willowy frame looked like it would snap at the slightest blow. She seemed for all the world a noblewoman who had strayed onto the field.

There must be more to her than meets the eye. Some hidden power, perhaps...

Hiro breathed a sigh of relief. Here, at last, was the enemy commander.

“You may call me Lucia Levia du Anguis.” Her lips drew into the lascivious smile of a serpent as she leveled her fan at him. “And you are Hiro, I take it? The scion of Mars?”

“Imperious” perhaps suited her best. Her voice did not waver even in Hiro’s dreadful presence. Indeed, with her dauntless grin, she seemed entirely at ease.

“I am. Hiro Schwartz von Grantz.”

“I have dearly hoped to meet you. So very, very dearly.” Her tongue moistened her lips as a beguiling smile spread across her face, as ominous as a snake that had caught sight of its prey.

“What a coincidence. I’ve been wanting to meet you too.”

“My, what hostility. Look at me with such murder in your eyes and I might just burst into tears.” Lucia’s cheeks flushed pink and her breathing grew ragged. She wrapped her arms around herself in delight.

“And with a woman as beautiful as you gazing into mine, I just might freeze up.”

“Like a serpent with a mouse, perchance? And I feared you would be impervious to my charms.”

Their exchange was oddly flippant as they stared at one another, each trying to divine the other’s intent.

“I must say, you did not hesitate in cutting down Lord von Kirschia’s boy.”

“I don’t show mercy to traitors. No matter their reasons.”

“I had heard tell that you were as cold as ice, and it seems that is true.”

“He claimed that he didn’t care about his family, he just wanted to save his people. I wouldn’t have minded letting him live, really, but then I saw the lie in his eyes.”

Von Kirschia had not acted out of fear for his subjects. His had been the eyes of a man concerned solely with saving his own skin. There was no sense in leaving somebody like that alive. Indeed, the world of the future would be better off with him dead.

“You preach righteousness,” Lucia remarked, “but you act with cruelty.”

“I just don’t want to be left with regrets.”

“Then you are wise, and decisive, too. I have a liking for such men.” Her gaze lingered on Hiro as though sizing him up. A faint chill ran up his spine, and she chuckled at his discomfort. “Do you recall the Venerable Master?”

Hiro’s shoulders twitched. Of course he did. Shortly after his original arrival in Aletia, the Venerable Master had taken him under his wing like a kindly grandfather and taught him much about the world. In time, the old man had become a member of the Black Hand. Hiro could not have forgotten him if he had tried. He frowned at the question.

A triumphant grin spread across Lucia’s face. “Few would know that name in

this day and age. You must truly be the War God in the flesh."

"What if I am?"

"Then I ask you—will you not join me?"

That, Hiro had not expected. He floundered for a response.

Seeing his hesitation, Lucia held out a hand, her expression soft. "Surely you know the truth of things. The truth of Six Kingdoms' founding. By all rights, you ought to stand with us."

"And what if I turn you down?"

"Then I shall take your head." Lucia did not hesitate for a millisecond. "With apologies to my great ancestor, I would have no choice."

"Then it looks like we're fighting. I'll never forsake the empire." With an apologetic smile, Hiro readied Excalibur.

"As I should have known. Forgive my offer. 'Twas boorish of me." Lucia's voice sounded sincere; she seemed to genuinely respect his position. She lowered her eyes, as if ashamed of her own words, and raised her fan over her mouth. "I trust there is naught more to be said?"

"So it seems. Shall we get started?"

"You face thirty thousand men. I bid you struggle to the last, and when you fall, leave behind a death worthy of the War God."

As Lucia thrust her fan out toward Hiro, two figures leaped forward from behind her back.

"Took you long enough, Your Majesty! I was startin' to think you weren't gonna call us!"

"Watch your tongue, Igel, or you'll bite it off."

The man and woman made an odd pair, but Hiro could tell at a glance that they were skilled warriors. He met them with full force.

"Well, well," he murmured. "What do we have here?"

"Look at that!" the man shouted back. "The brat's tougher than he looks!"

“And you’re loud for an insect.” Hiro raised Excalibur above his head to catch the man’s weapon. A tremendous impact echoed down the blade. The ground broke first, buckling beneath his feet to form a steep crater. As dust flew skyward, he leaped back to gain some distance.

The woman’s voice sounded behind him. “That’s far enough, I think.”

He immediately passed his sword behind his back from his right hand to the left and raised it vertically. Bracing his right hand against the blade gave him just enough stability to weather the incoming attack. Still, he could not nullify its momentum entirely, and the blow sent him bouncing across the ground. He sprang back to his feet to see the pair rounding on him, brandishing their weapons.

“You may call me Luka Mammon du Vulpes. The honor is mine, I’m sure.” The woman bent at the waist in a formal bow, offering a glimpse of a shrewd and twisted character. In spite of her slender build, she wielded an enormous warhammer.

“And I’m Igel du Vulpes—the man who’s going to end your life!” Her counterpart was short-haired and handsome, but his looks were put to waste by an overpowering arrogance that he made no effort to hide. He wielded a three-section staff emitting curious motes of light, which he carried slung over his shoulder. Both he and his sister radiated the auras of veteran fighters.

“I’m Hiro Schwartz von Grantz.”

Hiro braced his foot against the ground and surged forward. First, he would test them. He swung Excalibur without too much force, just enough to gauge their strength.

“Hah! Too slow!”

The three-section staff lashed out like a living creature, its joints whistling, and knocked the Heavenly Sovereign away. The air screamed as the greathammer swung in from the side. Hiro kicked up a cloud of dirt, then, seeing that he had disrupted its arc, thrust his gleaming sword into the swirling dust. A dull impact rang up his arm, telling him that Luka had blocked the strike. He pivoted on his right leg and lashed out with his left, driving his heel cleanly into Igel’s cheek.

“Urgh!”

With a cry, Igel tumbled away. Hiro spared him only a glance before stepping in and striking with his hand.

“Ngh!”

The heel of his palm connected with Luka’s chin as she closed on him, snapping her head upward. She staggered back, reeling. He had struck with the intention of breaking her jaw, but it seemed she was hardier than she looked.

“Those wouldn’t happen to be Noble Blades, would they?”

Hiro had no memory of the weapons the pair bore, but if they could keep up with his attacks, they could only be Noble Blades like Excalibur. A pureblooded zlosta like Garda could have kept pace with lesser arms, but the blood of Six Kingdoms had grown so mixed that any of its people were almost certainly mostly human.

“Consider me impressed.” Luka was the one to reply. “As you say, this is one of the Dharmic Blades—Vajra, the Adamant Hammer. Igel’s is Saranga, the Purging Staff, of the same.”

The Dharmic Blades were five treasure blades created in the days when humans and álfar were still on friendly terms. Each contained the soul of an auf, granting them their own wills much like the Spiritblade Sovereigns, but they originated from the Faerie King rather than the Spirit King. Unlike the other Noble Blades, they had little preference in who they chose as their master, and were said to appear in the dreams of those who earned their favor to grant them great power.

I should have taken the time to learn more about them.

Hiro had only known one of the wielders of the Dharmic Blades—the chosen of Sudarshana—during his time as Schwartz. The others, much like the other wielders of the Noble Blades, had been scattered throughout the world resisting the zlosta expansion. Relations between the humans and the álfar had soured during the twilight of the war, so he had never gotten the chance to meet them.

Luka cocked her head. “And is that sword of yours another of the Noble

Blades?”

Igel, for his part, peered curiously at the Black Camellia, but seemed to think better of asking about it. He only stared, his eyes boring into Hiro.

There was no reason to hide the truth. The time for deception was over.

“It’s one of the Spiritblade Sovereigns. The Heavenly Sovereign.”

“Truly?” More surprised than either of the Vulpes siblings was the woman watching from behind them—Lucia. She covered her mouth with a hand, as though embarrassed by her own astonishment. “Indeed, they say no blood shall ever stain its steel, no matter how many foes it butchers...”

A blade of gleaming silver was the mark of a hero. By that regal steel had a doomed kingdom been saved and its neighbors conquered. Yet after its legend was made, the sword had vanished in the mists of time and was now thought lost to history.

“‘To the king blessed with twinned black, commander of all creation, there came a mighty sword, and it knew no defeat, bringing only victory assured.’” Lucia chuckled. “I had my suspicions...but now I know that our triumph is certain.”

Hiro saw her shoot Igel a glance, but before he could wonder what they were planning, Luka was hurtling toward him.

“Ngh!” he grunted.

“Show me your strength!” she cried. “The strength of the Hero King’s blade!”

Her greathammer—Vajra—screamed through the air as it approached. Hiro deflected the blow, but the impact left an odd sensation lingering in his fingers. Before he could ponder its nature, however, Igel was upon him.

“Can’t be easy, huh? Going up against two Dharmic Blades!”

The erratic motions of the three-section staff coalesced into a strike at Hiro’s cheek.

“Sorry to disappoint, but I can see every move you make.”

He ducked out of the way of the blow and drove his fist into Igel’s nose. Igel

flew away, bouncing across the ground. He stretched out his arms and brought himself to a halt. When rose and looked back, his face was colored with fury.

“Won’t even deign to use your sword, huh? Start trying already!”

“Try? This is just a game to me.” The air froze with Hiro’s declaration. He gave a small shrug and cocked his head. “But that does make me want to ask you something.”

“Huh?”

“Why should I bring all my strength to bear just to crush an ant?”

Stillness, dead air, incredulity, repudiation. The silence that fell between them was beyond what words could describe.

“Aha...ha ha...” A mask seemed to fall from Igel’s face, leaving behind something twisted beyond recognition. “Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! You are *SO* FUCKING DEAD!”

What issued from him was nothing so kind as hostility. He exploded with rage that was outright murderous.

Hiro only narrowed his eyes, flashing the man a mocking smile. “I’m sorry, I didn’t quite catch that.”

“DIE!”

Igel closed the gap instantly. He was inches from Hiro’s nose in a heartbeat. Hiro ducked low beneath a blow coming for the back of his head and batted back the knee that lashed reactively up toward his face. Igel let the leg buckle, raking at Hiro’s left eye with an upward swipe, but Hiro struck the ground with his fist, forcing himself out of the way.

The move worked, with only a second to spare—in the corner of his eye, Luka’s greathammer crashed down in the space he had occupied. He aimed a kick at her ankle, but before it could land, he felt the Black Camellia take a defensive posture and switched his attention to Igel. Saranga collided hard with the black mantle.

The shockwaves of the battle whipped up a cloud of dust. Sparks bloomed and scattered as the clashing of steel rang loud. As their contest reached its

height, two figures flew from the haze—Luka and Igel. Shoulders heaving, covered in scrapes and bruises, they glared back at the beast lurking in the cloud. The wind cleared it away, revealing Hiro standing unharmed.

“Is that all?” He smiled. His breathing was a little labored, but that was all.

The Vulpes siblings’ lips pressed together tightly with frustration at the show of martial skill.

“Two of us and one of him, yet not a single blow came near...” The corners of Luka’s eyes twitched in undisguised astonishment. “Is he truly human, or is he a monster indeed?”

Always the same words, every time Hiro’s enemies felt the wall against their backs. Could anyone blame him for growing bored? He heaved an exasperated sigh. “I’m only human. Just a little sturdier than most.”

One thousand years ago, he had resolved to push himself harder than anybody else. His need to protect those he cared about spurred him to train himself half to death. He had striven desperately in search of power—and found it. The Black Camellia and Dáinsleif had come to him as a result of that aspiration, not because of any underhanded trickery. It was the desire to be the strongest that had made him who he was.

“But still, I was always just a little too late. I always lose everything I hold dear.” Hiro’s voice was flat and low as his lips drew into a ghastly smile. “So tell me...when will my withered heart will be sated?”

His expression sought no answer, but it confused the Vulpes siblings. They hesitated for a crucial moment, knocked off balance as much by the change in Hiro’s demeanor as the question. Hiro lunged at them, wreathed in madness and with the speed of a feral beast.

“Ngh!”

Blood sprayed from Igel’s mouth as a vicious blow took him across the cheek. White teeth scattered across the ground. Luka tried to riposte, but a savage kick caught her square in the abdomen. She fell to her knees, clutching her stomach. Hiro gave her no reprieve; he drew her close by the fabric across her chest and slammed her into the ground. The breath burst from her lungs. Pinning her

slender neck down with his left hand, Hiro deftly flipped Excalibur around in his right and drove it down toward her chest.

Inches from bare skin, the blade glanced away, its arc knocked askew. It drew blood from Luka's cheek as it sank into the ground next to her head. Saranga's intervention had knocked it aside.

"No one lays a hand on my sister!" Igel bellowed.

Hiro tensed his legs and leaped backward. The Vulpes siblings took their chance to retreat and regroup, cautious now they realized that they were at a disadvantage.

"Why bother keeping this up?" Igel wiped a glob of bloody spit from the corner of his mouth. "No one's coming to save you."

Luka said nothing, but she stared at Hiro with burning hatred as she caught her breath.

"I suppose you're right."

Hiro looked around. He could make out no allies, only a ring of enemy soldiers with spears, swords, and bows. The metallic clangor of desperate resistance had grown silent now. With Lord von Kirschia's betrayal, he may as well never have had any friends at all. But even so...

"That's no reason for me to give in."

The situation was hopeless. Any ordinary man would have resigned himself to his fate. But Hiro was not equipped with such weak faculties.

Igel snarled with undisguised annoyance. "Cocky little shit, aren't you? Figure you've got some way of escaping this deathtrap?"

Hiro's demeanor seemed to have rubbed the man the wrong way. The battle was over—the imperial forces had no strength left with which to turn the tables—but even with enemies on all sides, Hiro remained unflappable. If the unease in Igel's fierce gaze was anything to go by, the man still suspected some kind of trick.

He's on the brink. Just one more push. One more hint of weakness.

Hiro loosened his collar and breathed a sigh. He had been goading the enemy

constantly, taking care all the while not to reveal his true intentions; now it was time for the finishing touch.

“Deathtrap?” He took one step backward and cast a glance behind him. “Without an army slowing me down, I can get away any time I like.”

“You’re not going anywhere!”

Igel lunged forward, a vein throbbing in his forehead. Repeated provocations and now the threat of his prey getting away provoked him into charging with wild abandon. The blow was heavy enough to echo through Hiro’s innards, but he managed to block it. At the same time, he cast a glance at Igel’s left hand. There lay a blue crystal, scattering azure light as it caught the sun’s rays.

Such crystals were concentrated masses of dharmic energy and were hence known as dharmastones. They harbored the miraculous power particular to the álfar. If the manastones that grew on the bodies of the zlosta stood for domination, the dharmastones that grew on the bodies of the álfar stood for healing; indeed, the smaller cuts and scrapes crisscrossing Igel’s body had already sealed. He was certainly not a pure álf, but many álfar had lived in Klym since before Six Kingdoms’ founding. Their blood ran thick in his veins—and the same was true of his sister.

“Thank you for waiting, Igel. Now we can crush him as he deserves.”

As Hiro ducked between Igel’s attacks, Luka charged into the opening, brandishing her greathammer. Her skin was once more pale, lustrous, and unblemished. There was a thunderous crash as Vajra shattered the ground. A squall whipped up around her, raising a plume of dust that shielded her from view, but it was clear that her wounds, too, had healed.

“Now that’s what I’d expect from wielders of the Dharmic Blades. It would have been boring if you’d gone down too easily.”

“Keep talking, you loudmouthed brat! You won’t find it so funny when I break your jaw!”

Their attacks were fruitless, their attempts to hit him futile—and all the more frustrating for it.

It’s about time, I think.

Hiro slashed the cloud of dust aside and closed on Igel with Excalibur held low. All at once, he was within killing range. Igel's confident front crumbled in an instant. He cast a tearful glance at his sister, his eyes screaming that he didn't want to die.

"No—"

But Luka's plea for mercy came too late.

Smack. The soft sound echoed across the battlefield.

"Huh?"

A dumbfounded noise escaped Igel's mouth. There was no pain. His head was still attached. With eyes wide open, he raised a hand to the small red mark on his forehead.

"Life flash before your eyes?" Hiro's voice dripped with amusement. He held up his left hand with his middle finger curled. Instead of landing a killing blow, he had flicked Igel in the forehead.

"What in the hell..."

"I told you, didn't I?" Hiro donned his most mocking, most arrogant smile. "This is all just a game to me."

"Heh heh... Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!" Igel's eyes bulged and his voice grew strained. The shame had broken him utterly. "GRAAAAAAAAHHH!!!"

As his anger burgeoned, his dharmastone began to glow with a dazzling light.

Hiro narrowed his eyes against the glare. "At last..."

An immense torrent of power poured from the crystal like a swirling vortex.

"The rest is up to you, sis!" Igel shouted. He spun to face Lucia, who, as ever, was watching in silence. "And you! You'd better keep your word!"

No sooner had the words left his mouth than he charged wildly at Hiro. His three-section staff traced a wild arc through the air as it soared towards his target's head.

Hiro dodged the first attack with a twist of his neck and blocked the second with Excalibur's hilt. As the staff glanced away, the connecting chain wrapped

around his right arm and seized hold of his forearm like a vice, dragging him forward with incredible force. Immediately, he passed Excalibur from his right arm to his left and thrust it at Igel, but where the point had been intended to spear the man's neck, it only sliced through his cheek.

Delight filled Igel's face as he saw that he had evaded the blow. At the same time, a scythe-like blade sprang from the staff in his hands. He braced his foot against the ground and unleashed a furious slash.

"Got you now, you brat!"

Hiro scowled. With his right arm trapped, he couldn't move away, and he had no time to dodge. Sensing that its master was in danger, the Black Camellia stirred. The tangling folds of its black cloth stopped the blade inches from Hiro's neck. Igel froze in astonishment. His hesitation hardly lasted the span of a breath, but it was enough.

"You're wide open."

Hiro did not miss his chance. Excalibur's glittering blade bit mercilessly into Igel's flesh. The man's left arm sailed high, painting the sky red.

"You think that'll stop me?!" Igel roared.

With his face contorted into a vision of rage, he dragged Hiro close with his right arm alone and unleashed a vicious headbutt. Their skulls cracked together. Hiro's vision rocked. Still, he was not content to remain passive.

"You little *shit!*" Blood sprayed from Igel's mouth as Excalibur stabbed deep into his side. His face contorted in agony. With a demon's visage, he retaliated with a rain of blows, paying no mind to the sword lodged deep in his flesh. Marshaling his inexhaustible power, he swung his three-section staff at Hiro's head.

Hiro made no move to evade, trusting the Black Camellia to protect him.

"Think that'll stop me, huh? You think I don't know the Black Camellia's tricks?!" Igel's eyes shone fiercely, as though he had been waiting for Hiro's garb to spring into action. "Give me back my arm!"

He flung Saranga away and tackled Hiro, knocking him to the ground and

straddling him. As he did, his left arm fell from the sky.

“You wanna eat something, do you? How about this?!”

Igel snatched his own limb from the air, blood still flowing from its severed stump, and thrust it squarely into the Black Camellia. The effect was immediate. The garment’s motions ceased and it fell limply to the ground.

“Looks like there’s somethin’ to those legends after all!” Igel’s remaining fist drove hard into Hiro’s face. “If your Black Camellia’s really made of what they say, it stands to reason that a dharmastone can seal it!”

Again and again, the punches fell. Hiro lay on the ground with his limbs sprawled out, powerless to defend himself from the rain of blows.

“I’m gonna take my sweet time killing you! You’ve caused us enough disgrace —”

Igel seized up like a deer in the headlights. In the split second before he swung his fist down, he had caught a glimpse of Hiro’s face—of the ghoulish smile on his lips, and of the all-devouring abyss in his eyes.

“That’s all? I expected more.”

“Nnngh?!”

Hiro’s fist only struck once, but it carried extraordinary force. Igel’s muscular body sailed through the air. The man twisted nimbly in midair and landed gracefully, but after a moment, he listed sideways. It was hard to fault him. With blood pouring from the severed stump of his arm and a deep gash in his side, it was a wonder that he was even still conscious. Even so, he showed every intention of continuing to fight.

“Stand back, Igel. I will take things from here.”

Vajra cracked the ground, its colossal size belying its wielder’s slender frame. Luka hefted it like a toy and closed the distance in a flash. Hiro tried to take a step out of the way, but—

“Perhaps that worked a little *too* well...”

His legs wouldn’t—couldn’t—move. The Black Camellia was unresponsive, fallen entirely silent. A beat passed, and then a pulverizing impact blasted

through his body.

“Gah!”

With no defense to negate its momentum, the blow sent Hiro bouncing away. When he finally came to a stop, he tried to get to his feet, but his body felt as heavy as lead.

“Your Black Camellia has absorbed my brother’s dharmastone,” Luka said, “and what affects the garment affects the wearer. You could annul your contract, of course...but that isn’t easily done, is it?”

Hiro snorted.

“Does something amuse you?”

“Nothing at all.” He raised his eyes to look at her. “Only, I figure we’re finally evenly matched.”

The corners of Luka’s mouth twitched. “You shall eat those words before I’m through!”

A brutal kick to Hiro’s side sent him tumbling across the ground. He used the momentum to rise to his feet, but at once, Luka was upon him.

“I will leave your head intact,” she cried, “but I’ll spray your guts across the field!” Her eyes gleamed with delight as she pictured the gruesome spectacle.

Vajra swung down toward Hiro’s head. He tried to dart out of the way, but he wasn’t fast enough. A tearing sound split the air. Agony coursed through him, as though his own body was being ripped apart. Before he could process what any of that signified, however, Igel lunged in from the sidelines.

“Ha ha ha! Take this!”

The world flickered. Hiro’s eardrums seemed to fill with static. Still, his mind remained lucid. Mentally plotting out his next move, he tried to brace his hand against the ground—and found that he couldn’t.

“Ah...”

There was nothing there. His movements felt restricted, like there was a hole where something should have been. He looked down at his right arm with

empty eyes, trying to compute what was missing, only to see that it had been torn off at the shoulder.

“DIEEEEEEEEE!!!”

A savage blow knocked his head skyward. A sickening noise rang through his skull, like his jaw had been crushed to powder. It sounded like the end of the world.

“Ah...”

Blue sky above. Cerulean. Ultramarine. All at once stained red. A droplet of something warm and wet smacked against his cheek. His own black-clothed arm came tumbling from the heavens.

“How’d you like that, huh? Shouldn’t have gotten sloppy!”

A man celebrated his triumph in a world dyed blood-red. So presumptuous was his joy, how could one not want to see him weep in despair? By his side, a woman breathed a sigh of relief—and her tears, too, would be delightful beyond compare.

“Just one more...” Hiro did not even register the words passing through his lips. He struggled to rise, but to no avail.

“Black Camellia weighing you down? And you’ve lost your sword arm too. Give it up. It’s over.” The grinning man landed a vicious kick in Hiro’s ribs, knocking him to the ground. “Now my sister’ll be queen, and I’ll be her right hand. And all we gotta do is take your head.”

His breathing was ragged, as though his victory had gone to his head. The corners of his mouth drew up in uncontainable glee.

“Well, Mars? Got any last—”

Snick. A gruesome noise fell on Hiro’s eardrums. The warm wetness of gushing blood poured onto him from above. A moment passed, and then a dull thump, like a sandbag hitting the ground, resounded across the battlefield.

His emotionless eyes flicked to the head rolling across the dirt. “You shouldn’t whisper in my ear like that. Now look at what you made me do.”

There was a bear of silence, followed by a scream. Rage became grief and

grief became voice, a haphazard patchwork of sound.

“NOOOOOOOOO!!!”

Hiro turned toward the source. Luka stood with both hands over her face, trying to avert her eyes from reality.

“Pride always comes before a fall.” Hiro stood, his smile widening. “That advice might not be much good to a corpse...but perhaps he can put it to use in his next life.”

Excalibur had vanished from his hand. In its place was Dáinsleif, shrouded in baleful darkness. The Black Camellia was still unresponsive, but the flow of blood from his shoulder had stemmed. His senses had dulled, but they were still sharp enough to do what needed to be done.

“I’ll kill you... I’ll kill you!”

An explosion rocked the earth. Hiro turned to look. Luka was glaring at him, her expression demonic. The ground gave out beneath her feet as her power swelled, sending a cloud of dust into the air.

Hiro’s smile grew uncannily wide as he felt her rage crackle against his skin. “Give someone hope, show them despair, dangle one last glimpse of salvation before their eyes, then plunge them into the depths of hell.”

That was how to empower a dharmastone. The process would make them more lustrous than any jewel, replete with curative potential—and the wielder of a Dharmic Blade would surely produce a dharmastone powerful beyond imagining.

Hiro raised Dáinsleif. “Those are the conditions. And now you’ve fulfilled them too.”

Luka lunged at him, her face twisted hideously. “Die, die, die, die die die DIE DIE DIIIIIIEEEEEE!!!”



In contrast to the blazing beauty of the dharmastone in the back of her left hand, her face was a mask of loathing. By the second, she descended further and further into a pitiful, bestial state.

“Hate me all you like.” Hiro smiled gently. “I’ll take it all.”

He dropped his hips. A white streak split the air, and her left arm flew away. For a moment, her feet lifted from the ground, but her momentum could not be stopped, and the maelstrom of violence she unleashed could not be halted.

“Aaaaaahhh! Give him back! Give him back! *Give him baaaaaack!*”

She swung wildly, her stance full of openings, but Hiro, weakened as he was, could not react quickly enough. He took the blow full-on. A grisly crunch echoed through the air. He couldn’t guess how many bones he’d broken, but he gritted his teeth against the pain and stayed standing.

“Only after people lose something precious can they become truly strong. And you will be strong indeed.”

Hiro’s arm shifted position. Sensing danger, Luka leaped back.

“It’s no use. You’ll have to run a lot farther than that to escape the darkness.”

Thence came Muspell—Mortal Terror.

Luka stopped dead. Only her eyes remained in motion, filling with surprise. Around Hiro, everything that lived had fallen free from time’s flow—grass, wind, insects, horses, and men, all likewise frozen in place.

“To slay time itself. That is the power of Dáinsleif’s Graal.” Hiro raised his black blade until it lay flat, the tip pointed at Luka. “All lives are beckoned likewise to nothingness.”

And he unleashed Schwartzwald—Deathly Stillness.

No change came upon the field. Time remained frozen in its tracks. Yet the pressure in the air magnified. A blood-chilling presence cradled the world. A moment passed in stillness, and then a gout of blood exploded from Luka’s chest.

“Wha...?”

She gazed dumbly at the crimson streak arcing through the sky. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she slumped to the ground. No sooner had she fallen than Hiro collapsed to one knee, vomiting blood.

“Ngh... Looks like I didn’t quite cut deep enough.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, grimacing. Judging by the shuddering of her shoulders, she was still alive.

“Medics! Attend to her!”

A commanding voice pierced the air. Before Hiro’s eyes, a unit of medics converged on Luka.

“Truly, you are monstrous indeed.”

At last, the woman waiting on the back lines stepped forward. With her fan spread wide and an elegant smile on her lips, she looked every bit a legendary beauty—but on closer inspection, that smile had the calculating twist of a serpent regarding its prey.

“I fear I cannot lose her yet. From here on out, ’twill be me you face.”

“Jumping in at the eleventh hour, are you? Hoping to steal their glory?”

“Those who fall on the battlefield have only their own weakness to blame.” Lucia grinned without a hint of shame. “Had they the wherewithal to win glory, they would have done.”

With a wry smile, Hiro drove Dáinsleif into the earth and levered himself to his feet. “So is this it, then? Do we fight?”

“But of course. I do desire your head, after all.”

Lucia’s lascivious smile oozed pitch-black seduction that would bring any man to his knees. Here was a true femme fatale; she made Claudia look like a precocious child.

“I would prefer you not resist. I would rather keep that darling face intact.” She held up a glowing dharmastone. From the blood crusted on its surface, it could only have been Luka’s. “But fear not. I shall love your corpse no matter what becomes of it.”

All at once, her arm was a blur of motion. Her hand sank into Hiro's stomach like a blade. A scream forced its way from Hiro's mouth. It felt like she was rearranging his innards.

Lucia's remaining arm folded around him lovingly as her cheeks flushed a sensual red. "Your battle lit such a fire in my breast," she whispered. Her face was rapturous as her teeth closed hungrily on his ear, and sweet sighs tickled his eardrum as her tongue traced his earlobe.

At that moment, the Black Camellia mustered its strength, struggling feebly to move.

"Oh? Still you resist?" Lucia's brow furrowed in an irritable frown, and she flicked open her fan. That slight gesture was enough to render the garment silent. She slowly retracted her hand, making certain that Hiro felt every inch of it. "I suppose you ought to know—I too bear a Dharmic Blade."

Hiro groaned weakly. It felt like she was dragging his guts out of his body—like there was a hole where something important should be. If anything, however, the opposite was true. She had left Luka's dharmastone behind within his body.

She gave a demure laugh. "Why so plaintive? Have you grown to miss my touch so soon?"

He wanted to say that she made him sick, but when he opened his mouth to speak, he only coughed up blood.

Lucia regarded his wan features for a moment, licking her gore-stained fingers. "Mmm. How delectable...and how deeply sinful." She shot him a sidelong glance as she licked droplets of scarlet from the back of her hand like a cat. "So you too have partaken of the power of the Demiurgos—the Faceless King."

Suddenly, she was flying. She plowed into the ground in the midst of the soldiers treating Luka. A dust cloud blasted up into the air. Voices rose, shouting after her safety.

Hiro rolled his shoulders. His face was as pale as a corpse, but a flame burned in his eyes—the flame of rage. He took a step forward...and collapsed to one

knee.

“Ah,” he murmured. “Of course.”

Only then did he notice the blood pouring from his right shoulder. The hole in his stomach, too, showed no sign of closing, spewing forth a fearsome volume of blood to feed the soil. The power of the dharmastone had disabled his regenerative abilities.

He narrowed his eyes. “I’d love to know how deeply you had to search to find that out.”

The dust cloud dispersed, revealing Lucia standing unharmed. “Why, to the bottom, of course. I know all there is to know about you. Who you truly are, how you became the poor creature that stands before me now. She told me all.”

“And who is “she”?”

Lucia’s eyebrows rose. “Oh? I was led to believe that you were already acquainted.”

Hiro fell silent for a moment. “Nameless.”

They—she—lay at the root of everything. She was collaborating with Orcus and their desire to resurrect their Father, and it was she who had manipulated Stovell into starting his rebellion.

“Well, at least now my path is clear.” The whisper was for his own ears alone. He tensed his trembling knees and forced himself to his feet.

“Men!” a voice cried out. “Bring me the head of Hiro Schwartz von Grantz!”

The command dripped red-hot rage. It did not come from Lucia. Hiro knew its source immediately. Luka stood nearby, her treatment unfinished, leaning on a soldier for support, but glaring down at him with hatred in her eyes.

“I do not believe you command this army,” Lucia retorted.

“Silence! I will have vengeance for my brother!”

The soldiers watched with confusion as the commanders bickered, but in the end, it was Lucia who capitulated. She threw up her hands with an exaggerated

sigh. “Very well. I ask only that the corpse remain recognizable.”

Like that, Hiro’s death sentence was pronounced.

“Farewell, Black-Winged Lord.”

“Bring me his head!” Luka’s rage-filled shriek echoed across the battlefield.

The ground began to tremble, shuddering beneath a horde of armored boots. Hiro’s already bloodless face blanched as he looked around. As far as the eye could see, soldiers were closing in on him.

There’s no way out. It looks like I’m not going to be able to keep my promise to Liz after all...

He had not set out on this mission intending to play the hero. He had simply wanted to repay a thousand-year-old debt. The kindness that his friends had once shown him, he wanted to return through Liz. Many might laugh at that reason. They might turn up their noses at its modesty. But for Hiro, it was enough; a reason he would yield to no one, precious enough to risk his life to uphold.

“So I’ll fight on.” He looked over the thirty thousand men surrounding him. “And through her, I’ll show them my devotion.”

At that moment, Liz’s face flashed through his mind.

Forgive me, Liz. I’m too awkward to express my feelings any other way.

A serene smile spread across his face as he gazed up at the sky.

But I have to die here. The success of my plan depends on it.

Blue skies spread out above him, high and clear and indifferent to the blood spilled below. The heavens were beyond anyone’s reach, beyond anyone’s claim. They extended without bound, the world’s true and only ruler.

I’ve bought the time I needed. I’ve left behind a path to the empire’s survival.

Now that his work was done, he looked toward his final battle.

I hope you can forgive me for saying goodbye by letter.

With a sheepish smile, he turned his gaze earthward. The clamor around him

faded away.

Your worth as empress is about to be tested. Stay alert for any and all opportunities until you seize victory. You can afford a mistake or two. I've left countless possibilities at your feet; you need only stoop to pick them up.

He lifted the black dragon standard at his feet and set it upright once more.

"Well, then. What are you waiting for?"

His lips curled into a bestial grin as he tightened his grip on Dáinsleif. With no one left to ride to his aid, he strode over the corpses of his allies, glowering at the encroaching enemy. Their eyes widened in astonishment at his foolhardiness.

"Come on. See if you can overcome despair."

He leveled his blade at the enemy soldiers and unleashed a slash. The stroke had little weight, but it contained uncommon strength. A garden of gory flowers bloomed in the span of an instant. Heads fell to the ground with a series of sickening smacks before the dead even had time to scream.

"He's half-dead already! Don't just stand around slack-jawed! Kill hi—"

Another slash. Another buzzing insect silenced.

This should be enough.

With every man rushing to be first to claim the head of Mars's scion, the enemy lines had all but disintegrated.

"I'm healed up now. No more playing around."

Hiro spoke to intimidate the enemy, but in truth, his knees were shaking hard enough to buckle at any moment. His strength was about to run dry. Still, that was no reason to make this easy. People were waiting for his return. Summoning all of his strength, he braced his foot against the earth and launched himself forward.

"H-He's a monster!"

He sprinted ahead, sparing time only on the commanders, cutting down only those poor souls unfortunate enough to stand in his way.

This isn't good. I have to draw a little more attention to myself.

More foes had converged on him than he had anticipated. That would get in the way of his plans.

"Surrender! You've no hope!" an enemy officer cried, reaching for the sword on his hip.

Hiro closed the distance in a heartbeat. "You mustn't care much about living if you won't even ready your weapon."

"Curse you—"

Before the officer could draw his blade, Hiro stepped on the pommel and leaped high. "Never let your guard down on the battlefield," he said as he struck the man's head from his shoulders.

He landed nonchalantly and surveyed his surroundings. A number of enemy soldiers had withdrawn and begun readying their bows. A fearsome number of arrowheads pointed his way.

"Not bad." Hiro's chilling smile never faded. "You're thinking along the right lines."

It was precisely because people did not have the strength to fight monsters barehanded that they invented weapons at all. Bows were perhaps the ideal example; they were perfectly suited to overwhelming a foe with sheer numbers.

He sighed. "But what happens when you use them at close range?"

The order came to fire, unleashing a gale of arrows. When Hiro dodged out of their way, they fell upon the soldiers amassed behind him. It made for a pitiful sight. He almost felt sorry for them. How many lives were the enemy prepared to sacrifice to kill just one man? Still, the commander's willingness to make heartless calls demonstrated their strength; they knew that a moment's hesitation could spell defeat.

Hiro snorted. "They're clever, and they don't hesitate. They must really want to make sure I'm dead."

Now that he had been stripped of the bulwark that was the Black Camellia, he

only had one defense against the arrows descending on him: cutting down the concentrated deluge with his one remaining arm. In short, it was all he could do to avoid fatal injury. When the storm finally passed, the ground beneath him was so thickly carpeted with arrows that there was no space to walk.

“Ha ha... I’m not done yet...”

Tearing his feet free of the shafts pinning them to the ground, he took a step forward.

That took out my right eye...

One side of his field of view was mired in dark fog. When he rubbed the back of his hand against the affected area, it felt unpleasantly warm and squishy. Even so, his left eye still remained. Losing one arm was not a problem as long as the other functioned; similarly, the loss of an eye was no great matter as long as the other could still see.

Oh... I can’t feel my hand.

That wasn’t all. Hiro gradually became aware of other holes in his senses too.

My wounds don’t hurt any more either. This can only mean...

“Now!” a voice cried. “Ready your blades!”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“The honor is ours, men! We’ll live like kings! Finish him and take his— Agh!”

“I warned you not to get ahead of yourself. Now I need to cut you down to size.”

Forcing movement from his weakened limbs, Hiro lunged forward and lopped off the officer’s head. He wielded his sword with the detached precision of a machine executing a directive. The Abyssal Sovereign sliced the head from a stunned soldier’s shoulders with a gentle touch, crushed the skull of another who was turning to run, reaped lives wherever it—

“Ngh!”

The strength left Hiro’s legs, sending him sprawling.

“So this is the end...”

He couldn’t move so much as a finger. With his face pressed against the dirt, he felt his vision darkening.

“Take his head!” someone shouted. “Raise it high!”

A fist seized him by the hair and wrenched his head upward. Faces loomed down into his blurring vision, twisted with greed. Cold steel set against his neck.

“Hold! I will do this myself!” Luka emerged from the wall of soldiers.

“’Tis a poor commander who steals her soldiers’ accomplishments. I am beginning to think you are ill suited to the role.” Lucia appeared by her side, stone crunching beneath her feet. Her brows furrowed as though she were scrutinizing an exotic animal. “My, but what a futile show this was. Surely you knew that there was no escape. There is no undoing this defeat.”

Hiro snorted. “You’re the ones who’ve lost. Can’t you hear the sound of your defeat?”

“I hear nothing. But I don’t doubt that false hope rings sweet in dying ears.”

“Maybe so. But to me it sounds like Six Kingdoms’ downfall.”

“And to me, it seems your life ebbs away by the second.”

“Then I win.”

Hiro had seen through Lucia’s schemes from the very beginning. That the head of House Maruk and the rest of the central nobles were in bed with Six Kingdoms, that von Kirschia and the western nobles were in on it too—all of it. They would have been obstacles to the future that he hoped to build, but his reputation would suffer if he had executed them without proof. How, then, to get rid of them? The best way was to send them to die in battle against Six Kingdoms, which would also buy the empire time to assemble its defense.

“Really, I should thank you,” Hiro said.

“I was well aware that you had seen through my schemes—but seeing as all I desire is your head, I am nonetheless content with the result.”

“So am I.”

Lucia’s smile froze. “Excuse me?”

Hiro's lips pulled into a sinister smile. "The final stage of my plan is the hero's death."

"Do you truly believe idle threats shall preserve your life?"

It was true that renowned warriors were easily deified. Someone as famous as a war hero would likely be venerated as a god. The military nation that was the Grantzian Empire would make full use of Hiro's death; it would justify the war in the eyes of the people, and his deification would raise the soldiers' morale. It could even lend them leverage in diplomatic negotiations with other nations.

"Your head is worth more to me than anything I might forfeit."

"I'm glad. The success of my plans depends on it."

"Defiant to the last..." Lucia snapped her fan shut with a sigh.

"Stand back, Your Majesty! If all is said and done, I will take his life!" Luka's boots crunched as she approached and laid a keen blade against Hiro's neck.

"You certainly kept me waiting."

"Silence!" she barked.

Hiro lowered his gaze. The pebbles on the ground were trembling faintly. A savage grin spread across his face.

"Kept me waiting for far too long."

The blade swung down.

* * * * *

"Hiro? Are you listening?"

She brushed her crimson tresses back behind her ear as she peered into his eyes. Behind her, the hillside was bathed in sunset hues.

"Sorry, what?"

"Oh, you're unbelievable sometimes! I *said,* why did you decide to help me?"

He gave a rueful smile and shrugged. "Do I need to have a reason to help someone?"

She grabbed his cheek and tugged gently. “No deflecting, mister!”

“Yesh...”

Her physical punishments were always vicious. They didn’t hurt, but that only made them more effective at flooding his heart with guilt.

“I know I’m not very clever, and I bet that causes you all kinds of trouble. I mean, I can have a short fuse, and I often act without thinking...”

“Well, at least you’re self-aware.”

“You weren’t supposed to agree with that.” The corners of her mouth twitched. Apparently, she had been expecting him to push back a little. Still, she recovered quickly and clasped her hands behind her back. “Well, anyway, I suppose the point is, I want you to find something that *you* want to do.”

“What point? What’s this about?”

“If you really, truly think I’m worthy of the throne, from the bottom of your heart, then I want you to help me get there.”

He said nothing, letting her continue.

“I’ll get stronger. And wiser. That’ll take some of the weight off your shoulders, right?”

“Right.”

She gave a bashful little smile. His eyes half-closed as a sudden pang of solitude plucked at his chest.

She might not look anything like Artheus, but she’s got his heart.

What would he say if he was here to see her? If he was alive, in this age, in this time?



He would be surprised, no doubt. Perhaps he would even be moved to see himself reflected so clearly in his descendant.

And she's nothing like Rey in temperament, but she's got her looks.

No doubt the future his comrades had envisioned was different to the one that had arrived. Yet that did nothing to dim its brilliance. There was good and bad in every age. That was as true one thousand years ago as it was today.

And if the future you dreamed of can *be made, the path lies through her.*

He narrowed his eyes against the setting sun.

But until the day her wishes take root...

He would shield her from all threats and protect her from all malice. That was the duty before him, his atonement for abandoning his past.

"By the black dragon's roar shall the world's fabric warp, and by the lion's roar shall order be restored." He raised a hand to the heavens, still so far beyond his grasp. "Let the world hear us roar."

Until your ears ring with her name.

Epilogue

A great cheer went up. From within the cloud of dust, a victory cry echoed across the land. Flame consumed the black dragon banners, turning them to ash that scattered on the wind. Corpses emblazoned with golden lions sank into the dirt beneath the dancing feet of rejoicing soldiers. Such was the occasion that they forgot all protocol. They looked toward the center of the host, where a garishly dressed woman held a severed head high.

Amidst the uproar, however, there were those who watched in silence. They stood among the soldiers, neither noticed nor chastised, yet clearly distinct from their fellows. The air around them carried a biting cold that pierced the skin and clawed at the bowels. While the men around them whooped and cheered, their faces betrayed no emotion to speak of.

“The Lord’s presence fades. The usurper is no more.”

“Then what shall we do now?”

There was no joy in their eyes, no sorrow in their voices, no anger in their bearing. They spoke only what was, in a tone without inflection.

“The time has come to emerge from the abyss.”

The wind shuddered. The air groaned. A tangible change had occurred, but it went unseen and unheard. That which passed within a closed world was not for outside ears.

“Oh, Father, hear our prayer. Curse the foolish with eternal torment. Oh, Father, hear our prayer. Bless your faithful with eternal rest.”

And, unseen and unheard, they disappeared.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up volume 6 of *The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles*. To all my returning readers, it's been too long. Did you enjoy this volume? If it made your left eye twinge uncontrollably, congratulations. You, too, are a bearer of the Baldick. I hope you find your way to an otherworld of your own.

More to the point, this volume is something of a bridge to the next arc of the story. It really comes out swinging, the front cover included. Now that the stage is set, I feel like I can finally tell the story I really wanted to tell. The plan for the next volume onward is to weave in episodes from Hiro's past, expand the narrative across multiple perspectives, and ramp the chuuni up yet another gear, so I want to handle it with care. Liz is also going to put on her heroine shoes and take another step toward becoming worthy of the throne, although with many characters plotting schemes of their own, that's going to be easier said than done.

Oh, and one more thing. To bring it back, I want to say a little bit about one of the new characters introduced in this volume: Lucia. I see her as the kind of raunchy character that splits opinion—some people like her, others will hate her. I'm a fan, by the way. Underboob and all. So, while I'm sure she doesn't need the help, I'd like to say a magic spell to boost her popularity:

Lucia does not wear underwear. I repeat, she's going commando. If you can tear your gaze away from her underboob, you'll realize the shocking truth: she's covering herself with a snake decoration and nothing else.

You didn't just sneak a peek at the front cover, did you? Did you just think to yourself "no way"? Because that's exactly what I did when Miyuki Ruria-san told me (:D).

Anyway, I'd better get to the thank-yous.

To Miyuki Ruria-sama, your artwork never fails to exceed my expectations. It's a feast for the eyes and a balm for the soul. I'm eternally grateful for everything you do.

To my editor, S-sama, I’m truly sorry for all the trouble I cause you with every volume. I’m sure this won’t be the last time I inconvenience you, but I hope you’ll continue to support my efforts.

To my editor, I-sama—thank you for your help on this volume and beyond. I hope you can find it in your heart to overlook my shortcomings, and I look forward to working with you again.

To everyone in the editing department, the proofreaders, the designers, and everybody else who helped make this book a reality, these pages would not exist without you. I look forward to working with you again.

And last but not least, a heartfelt thank you to everybody who has kept up with this series. I could never have made it this far without your support. I’m truly, truly grateful.

I’m going to keep the chuuni rays on full blast over here, so I hope you’ll stick around.

Goodbye for now. I hope we meet again soon.

奉 (Tatematsuri)