
Author: Tatematsuri
Illustrator: Ruria Miyuki
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Tatematsuri / Illust. Miyuki Ruria

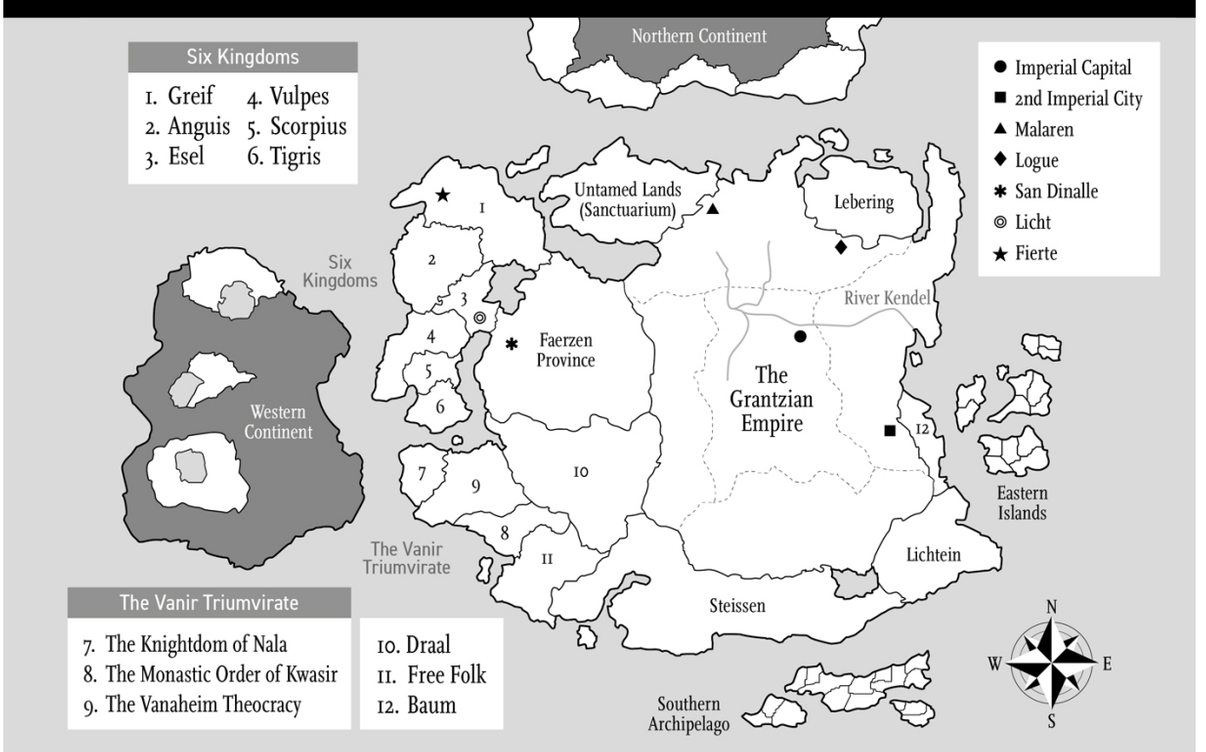

Luka
Aura
Huginn
Skadi
"Interesting."
"Every woman's got needs. You wouldn't turn me down, would you?"
?
Liz
Surtr

STORY

Once upon a time, Hiro Oguro was summoned to the world of Aletia. Under the name of Mars, the War God, he built a lasting empire alongside his comrades before giving up all his powers and memories to return to his old life on Earth. Now, after one thousand years have passed in Aletia, he's been called back. When he meets Liz, princess of the Grantzian Empire, Hiro sees the same spark in her as his old comrade-in-arms, Artheus, and resolves to guide Liz until she is worthy of the throne.

Liz matures as a leader under Hiro's tutelage, but the chaos of war conspires to tear them apart. Hiro feigns death on the battlefield and reappears under the name of Surtr, the masked king of Baum. As he works in the shadows to assume an ancient burden, Liz swears to catch up to and surpass him.

Now, two years after they went their separate ways, their paths converge once more. With the battle for Faerzen approaching its conclusion, the curtain is about to rise on the decisive chapter of the history of Soleil...



CHARACTER



Hiro Oguro/Surtr, the Black-Winged Lord

The original War God, Mars. He claimed to be his own descendant after being summoned back to Aletia. Previously allied with Liz, but he now rules Baum as the masked king Surtr after feigning his death to pursue goals unknown. The wielder of every Spiritblade but Lævateinn.



Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz

"Liz" for short. She's the sixth princess of the empire and heir apparent to the throne. Inexperienced, but she has the makings of a charismatic empress. The wielder of Lævateinn.



Treya Verdan Aura von Bunadala

A valedictorian graduate of the Imperial Training Academy and a strategic wunderkind dubbed the Warmaiden. She admires Mars greatly and works to support Liz's reign.



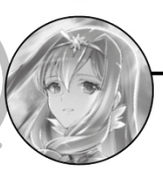
Culann Scáthach du Faerzen

The last surviving member of the royal house of Faerzen. She's working with Liz to restore her homeland, which was ravaged by the empire before being occupied by Six Kingdoms. Relinquished ownership of Gáe Bolg following a battle to the death.



Myste Caliara Rosa von Kelheit

Liz's elder sister and the acting head of House Kelheit, the leaders of the eastern nobles. She's locked in a feud with House Muzuk of the south.



Claudia van Lebering

The reigning queen of Lebering. She assisted Hiro in feigning his death and later entered into an accord with Surtr.



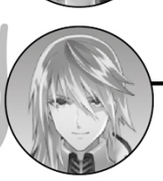
Luka Mammon du Vulpes

A former princess of Vulpes of Six Kingdoms. She led the vanguard of an ill-fated invasion of the empire two years ago, during which she lost her younger brother and her left arm in battle.



Straea

The fourth archpriestess of Baum and the only woman on the continent capable of communing with the Spirit King. She knows Hiro's true identity.



Leon Welt Artheus von Grantz

The first and founding emperor of the Grantzian Empire. He fought by Hiro's side one thousand years ago and considers him a brother. The former wielder of Lævateinn.

INDEX

Prologue

Chapter 1: Restless Darkness

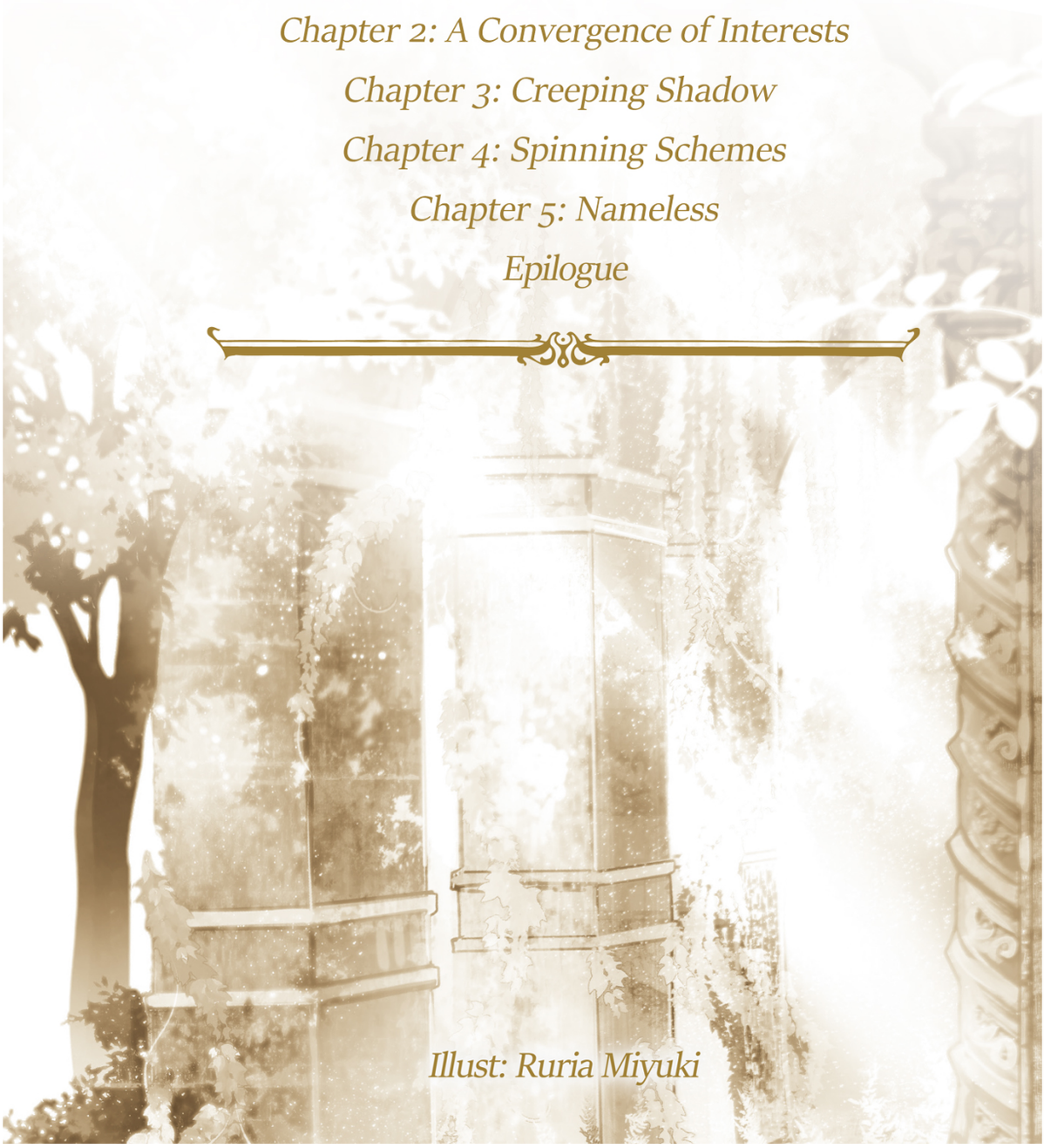
Chapter 2: A Convergence of Interests

Chapter 3: Creeping Shadow

Chapter 4: Spinning Schemes

Chapter 5: Nameless

Epilogue



Illust: Ruria Miyuki

Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Story So Far
4. Characters
5. Prologue
6. Chapter 1: Restless Darkness
7. Chapter 2: A Convergence of Interests
8. Chapter 3: Creeping Shadow
9. Chapter 4: Spinning Schemes
10. Chapter 5: Nameless
11. Epilogue
12. Afterword
13. Bonus Short Stories
14. About J-Novel Club
15. Copyright

Prologue

The boy had nothing to his name.

Not the strength to aid others, nor the resilience to defend what was dear to him, nor the ability to save the ones he loved.

He sought, he yearned, he stamped his feet in childish anger, but none of it was any use. He was astonishingly ordinary. The only road before him was one of resignation, of biting his lip in bitter acceptance as he watched his comrades leave him behind.

And then, one day, his dreams came true.

“What would you do, boy, if I offered you power?”

What would anyone do if the prize they had sought for so long were to suddenly appear before them?

A temptation sweet as honey. An invitation to forbidden heights. It was not a goddess’s radiant benevolence that reached for him, after all, but a devil’s black ambition—and that devil’s eyes made all too clear what it had planned.

“You dream of being equal to your comrades, do you not? Of having the strength to stand with them, shoulder to shoulder?”

A moment of weakness born of hesitation. The darkness within him began to swell.

“All would prostrate themselves before you. All would bow their heads. All would bend the knee.”

In the end, his ordinariness was his undoing. He had neither the means nor the strength nor the wherewithal to resist. Perhaps he’d never even had a choice at all. His heart’s desire lay before him. Nobody could stop themselves from reaching out. All rationality begged him to turn away, but his body urged him on, his heart pounding for joy. A cry burst from his throat. He clapped his hands over his mouth, but the figure before him only smiled knowingly.

“Why so anxious to hide it? Are all humans not thus?” The man’s mouth traced a painstakingly gentle line, but his amusement did not reach his eyes. “Cast aside your squalid ideals and embrace your true desires. Wield fire and sword as your ambitions bid. Close all in your grasp with insurmountable might. That is the true nature of this world. The strong revel, while the weak kneel. The strong soar high while the weak crawl

in the muck. There is no wish that power cannot grant."

With ardor on his lips, the man extended his dark hand once more.

"All might will be yours to wield. All schemes will be yours to spin. All prizes will be yours to claim."

Sweet honey oozed around the boy, holding him fast. Unable to move, he was powerless to do anything but stare.

"Tell me...do you seek power?"

And so, wishing only to stand beside his comrades, he reached for the forbidden fruit.

Chapter 1: Restless Darkness

Long, long ago, the zlosta presided over an age of darkness. Nations fell, rose, and fell again under their unshakable rule. Guided by the revelations of the Demiurgos—also known as the Faceless King, one of the gods known as the Five Lords of Heaven—and led by the twelve primozlosta, they sought to unify Soleil.

Those who are not zlosta are no better than beasts was the creed of zlosta supremacy. It crushed nations unfortunate enough to be home to other peoples beneath its merciless heel, and even surrender often did not save them. The continent was beset by endless war, winds of plague swept the ruined lands, and the mounds of bodies birthed new contagions. In short order, the world was glutted with corpses.

Displeased by what they saw, the other Lords of Heaven lent their aid to the other peoples of Aletia, but the Faceless King only grew in power and the zlosta's conquest would not be stopped. They imprisoned the humans, brutalized the álfar, starved the beastfolk, and worked the dwarves cruelly. One day, however, they made a single, fateful mistake. Driven by victors' arrogance to seek new amusements, a moment's indulgence proved their downfall.

The Lionheart was born to the humans of Soleil, while the Hero King was born to save them. Their combined might struck fear into the zlosta's hearts. Even the twelve primozlosta were not exempt—the one named Hydra in particular. He learned the terror of the twinblack boy for himself when they clashed in the climactic battle of the war between zlosta and humans. Hydra had lost the fight and been taken prisoner.

"Finally, we can begin," the boy said. With such kind features, he looked like he would hardly hurt a fly, but the way his eyes flashed as he looked over the torture implements told a more chilling tale.

"What do you mean to do to me?" Hydra asked.

The boy cocked his head. After a long moment, his face eased into a natural smile. "I need power." His black mantle swirled about as he walked up to the captive Hydra, reaching out his

hand. “Power that could kill a god.”

“Still seeking power, after all you’ve done? What is it that you __”

A hand closed over Hydra’s mouth, and he knew true terror.

He heard all the boy’s naive dreams while his eyes were carved out.

He heard all the boy’s wishes while his arms were sawn off.

He heard all the boy’s ideals while his legs were severed from his torso.

As the blade bit agonizingly into his forehead, he learned what was in the boy’s mind.

What had transformed him so? Who was to blame? Or had he perhaps been broken from the start? Hydra took refuge in pointless questions to save himself from despair, but his suffering continued without respite, and in time he ceased to think at all.

After the core of his being shattered, his memories ran as black as ink. He begged the boy with tears in his eyes, praying for a trace of kindness to appeal to even as the tools cut deeper. He apologized over and over as his ordeal dragged on, but his torturer only laughed. His life became nothing but the torment of the defeated, punctuated only by the screams of his comrades. Again and again he begged for death, and again and again and again. Trapped in a lightless world, he prayed to the darkness for deliverance. And then… And then…

And then he woke up, panting, and realized he had only been dreaming.

He needed water. He groped for the bottle he had left nearby but could not find it. He hauled himself across the ground until at last his hand struck something hard. There was a clunk as it fell over, and with the noise to guide him, he managed to grasp it at last. His hands were shaking so hard that he couldn’t remove the cap. He had to quell the tremors before he could finally slake his thirst.

“Another nightmare?”

The voice belonged to his comrade, Ladon: another primozlosta who had survived the great war, if being deliberately spared could be called survival. Hydra could no longer remember his face. A thousand long years had erased every memory of his features. Ladon thought the same of him, no doubt. The boy had blinded all of the surviving primozlosta on

that dreadful day.

Hydra raised a hand to his forehead. “I was back there again.”

He realized there was a fire crackling in front of him, but while he could sense its presence, he could not see its light. Still, the knowledge that it was holding back the night helped to calm his mind from the nightmare and bring his memories back into focus.

“This is no time to be dozing. I have work to do. I must away.” He made to stand, cradling the article he had been given by the Faceless King.

“Why so anxious? There is no need to hurry. It will not be required just yet.”

“I would like to dispense with any uncertainty. None of us will be truly safe until we take our enemy’s head.”

“Have a drink. Take the weight off your feet.”

Hydra waved the proffered beverage aside. “This is no time for that! Do you not see? For a thousand long years we have watched our enemy’s empire grow fat, but now its downfall is nigh!” He stood up and his hood fell away, revealing a face covered in scars. The two yawning pits that were his eyes glared at Ladon, while his whole body heaved with the force of his breathing. “How can you stand to be at ease?!”

The wind blew, a cold blade that scored his skin and prickled his old scars.

“I cannot contain myself, Ladon. The thought of vengeance fills my belly with fire! Every time my scars itch, I remember the golden age he stole from us! And to reclaim it, we need our eyes…our manastones!” Hydra lowered his sightless gaze, covering his face with his hands.

Ladon sighed. “A thousand years is indeed a long time, but that is all the more reason not to be too hasty.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought this chance would never come. I daresay I had given it up for lost, believed him vanished beyond the boundless expanse. Yet now he has returned, and we might cast down the Grantzian Empire before his eyes. Is that not to be celebrated? Is it not cause for joy?”

Ladon paused for a moment, fixing Hydra with his empty gaze.

“Do not let anger cloud your vision.” The fire crackled, sending sparks dancing through the air. “First, we will lay waste to the

empire. Only then will we descend upon the War God."

Finally calmed, Hydra raised his head. His smile broadened. "Of course. As you say. The empire will fall. It cannot escape this fate."

"His struggles will be in vain. All lies in the palm of our Lord's hand."

"Oh, Father, hear our prayer." Hydra raised his hands to the night sky in supplication. "Grant death to von Grantz and bathe the zlosta in glory's light."

Ladon joined him. "Oh, Father, hear our prayer. Curse the foolish with eternal torment. Oh, Father, hear our prayer. Bless the faithful with eternal rest."

* * * * *

The tenth day of the tenth month of Imperial Year 1026

The Grantzian Empire was the conqueror of Soleil, recognized by all as the pinnacle of human achievement. After a thousand long years of reign, few nations remained that could challenge its supremacy. Perhaps it was natural, then, that its nobles had grown fat on peace and turned to despotism. Their tyranny scattered sparks of discontent that grew into raging fires, and the empire's neighbors, smelling blood in the water, set to work in the shadows. Small skirmishes turned into larger engagements. Constant fighting sapped the nation's lifeblood. Doomed to endless warfare by its size and strength, the empire had preyed on its neighbors for sustenance for a thousand years, and now they circled the aged lion with fangs bared, hungering for the fat stored in its belly.

The commonfolk of the empire were aware of its plight, but they were powerless to help. All they could do was pray for its victory in war as they awaited their sons' and husbands' safe return from the battlefield. Otherwise, living for today was more important than fear of the morrow.

The capital city of Cladius, commonly known simply as the imperial capital, was a veritable human utopia. Its historical buildings were wonderful enough, but the true symbol of its prosperity was its central boulevard, the empire's front door. Rare delicacies were shipped in from all corners of Aletia to be sold in the shops lining the street. Statues of the Twelve Divines towered over the crowds as if to prove the empire's glory. They

watched over the people, greeted visitors from other lands, and struck awe into the hearts of the rulers of other nations.

A sightseer's wonder would have little chance to fade before their gaze was once again caught by the imperial palace of Venezyne, sitting in the center of the city like a crown. A thousand years had done nothing to dim its magnificence. The stonework looked as new as the day it was built. If anything, the passage of time had only added to its majesty, granting it a new beauty through amplified grandeur and impressing upon others the greatness of the empire.

The eastern quarter of the palace compound served as the barracks and training ground of the Knights of the Golden Lion, elite troops of the First Legion and guardians of the capital. On most days, a terrible din would have arisen from the site, but not today. The knights were not in the capital; they had joined the sixth princess in her bid to liberate Faerzen. A force of eastern noble troops, predominantly belonging to House Kelheit, garrisoned the palace in their stead. Their mistress, the chancellor of the empire and acting head of House Kelheit, was pacing around her mansion in the western quarter.

"Cerberus!"

Rosa von Kelheit strode down the corridor, a hint of worry in her face. It did nothing to diminish her beauty, but if those who called her a vixen for her wiles were to see her now, they might have died of shock. The sentries positioned along the hallway followed her intently with their eyes as she passed. She was close enough to touch, and yet there would be consequences if they spoke so much as a word out of place. She was, after all, the acting head of a great house and the chancellor of the empire.

"Cerberus?! Where have you gotten to?!"

She opened doors and peered inside as she moved along the corridor, like a mother searching for a lost child.

"Where in the world has she gone?" She placed a bewildered hand on her hip and turned to a nearby guard. "Have you seen Cerberus?"

Addressed directly by his mistress, the man stiffened up and shook his head. "Not today, my lady."

"I see. Forgive me for interrupting you."

The guard bowed his head emphatically and departed. Once he was out of sight, Rosa brushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear and turned to the window.



“Where could she be? It’s almost dinnertime…”

Her sister’s white-furred wolf flashed through her mind. In the islands to the east of Soleil, such animals were revered as divine beasts, noble creatures kept only by those of royal blood. Liz had been very young when she first met Cerberus; she had found the wolf washed up on the seashore while visiting Baum with the emperor and taken her in. It was as if Cerberus had come to save her in her time of need. The shock of losing her mother had rendered her numb, but she had diligently nursed the wounded wolf back to health, and after watching her run around happily for the first time, she had finally smiled again.

From that day forth, the pair had been as close as sisters. It was rare for them to leave each other’s side. The fighting in Faerzen was bound to be grueling, however, so Liz had left Cerberus in Rosa’s care. Rosa still recalled how despondent the wolf had looked as she watched Liz go.

“Don’t tell me she’s gone after her…” Rose mused under her breath. She shook her head. Liz had told Cerberus very firmly that she was to stay, and the wolf would not break a promise. She was a clever beast, capable of understanding human language, sensing human emotions, and acting on her own initiative. Then again, those were precisely the qualities that might lead her to seek Liz out.

“No, it couldn’t be. Even Cerberus couldn’t follow her scent now.”

Three months had passed since Liz had left the empire. Cerberus might have been clever, but she wasn’t intelligent enough to remember a map. Or was she? For all Rosa knew, she really might have been as clever as a human. White wolves weren’t native to Soleil, after all. Who knew what they were capable of?

“If she hasn’t gone after Liz…then where is she?”

Rosa racked her brains, but with no flash of inspiration forthcoming, all she could do was wander aimlessly around the mansion. Cooking some meat in the courtyard might flush the wolf out, but if she wasn’t coming to her name, she was likely no longer in earshot.

“Perhaps I should send out a search party…”

The odds of finding her that way were small, but it was better than doing nothing. Aside from anything else, Rosa dreaded to imagine what would happen if Liz returned to find her

companion missing.

“Although there’s not much chance of that happening anytime soon.”

The empire’s plans would not be easy to see through. She was unlikely to reunite with Liz until the next year, if not the year after that. The future was like a night sky shrouded in clouds. Its impenetrability made it terrifying, tempting the mind to imagine the worst. Even now, Liz and her camp were striving to stop their fears from coming to pass.

“But if all goes well, once she returns, she’ll be the empress.”

The groundwork was already being laid—a great era of peace to stabilize the nation. An empire could not exist without its people, but neither could it exist without its emperor, and Greiheit’s death could only remain hidden for so long.

“So we must take Faerzen and what lies beyond. Then nobody will be able to object to her rise.”

It was only a matter of time now. The empire’s thousand years of sins would soon come home to roost, and a revolution would envelop the world. Nobody would be exempt. Nobody could fight fate. Weep, wail, rage, or laugh, their end would be the same.

“As to how this all ends, only the gods know…”

Schemes did not always play out as one hoped. This tangle encompassed tens, thousands, hundreds of thousands of people’s desires. There was no way to truly know on whom victory would smile.

“Or,” Rosa murmured, “perhaps it’ll be the devil smiling in the end.”

* * * * *

Friedhof, the great wall across the north of the empire, first figured in history five hundred years prior to the present day. According to the records of the time, the northern territories had been suffering from unrest caused by a surge in monster activity, and the local noble assembled task forces to cull the offending creatures. A few months into the expedition, several task forces fell out of contact. The noble thought little of it, reasoning they must have been attacked by bandits or wiped out by the very monsters they were hunting, and sent in more experienced men. However, those units soon fell silent too.

Around the same time, strange rumors took to the streets. People were vanishing by night from towns and villages. Petitioners came before the noble, asking for something to be done. With so many troops tied up in the monster cullings, however, they received only noncommittal answers.

Eventually, the noble mustered his forces and embarked upon a grand campaign of extermination, aiming to eradicate the monsters once and for all. It met with moderate results. Still, the unrest remained—if anything, the peace seemed to worsen by the day. As he dithered over what to do, worse news reached him: whole towns and villages were going missing, simply vanishing overnight. Such tidings were unprecedented, and realizing he was out of his depth, he braced himself for a reprimand and sought help from the capital.

The twenty-second emperor recognized the severity of the situation and made for the north with twenty thousand men. He arrived to find ruined towns, empty villages, rampant plunder and destruction, and a universal breakdown in order. Worse yet waited at the lord's stronghold. Bodies littered the streets, humanoid monsters raked through the corpses, and the handful of survivors wandered in a dead-eyed daze. There was nobody sane left alive, only crazed madmen who attacked on sight. Fearing the spread of disease, the emperor hardened his heart and put the city to the torch.

While investigating the cause of the disaster, the emperor came to a troubling discovery: the monsters he had seen feasting on corpses had originally been humans—indeed, the very commonfolk who had disappeared. They had acted as though possessed, compelled by some mysterious transformation to cast aside their pride and dignity. As such, the emperor christened them archons—corpse-eaters.

Once it became clear that the creatures were not monsters but imperial citizens, voices arose to criticize the emperor's decision. Powerful nobles used the chaos to further their own designs. Seeing this, the emperor sought aid from outside the empire—namely, from Baum and its ruler, the third archpriestess. After receiving a revelation from the Spirit King and quelling his nobles' discontent, he made his way north again, this time at the head of more than two hundred thousand soldiers.

Over the course of the purge, the emperor discovered who

led the archons. They were commanded by creatures with bodies covered in curious marks, later dubbed yaldabaoth, or "branded." The battle was a brutal one. The yaldabaoth possessed strength far in excess of mortal men, while the archons felt no pain from the most grievous of wounds, and although they numbered fewer than twenty thousand, they made a formidable fighting force. Even the emperor's enormous army was hard-pressed.

As casualties passed thirty thousand, the emperor summoned the third archpriestess to the north. It was then that the tide turned. With the archpriestess's assistance, he called upon the Spirit King's strength and the spirits' powers to drive the archons and yaldabaoth back to the western fringes of the northern territories. Seeing that he could not eradicate them entirely, he and the Spirit King raised a great wall with a sacrifice of spirits. The Spirit Wall of Friedhof stood as a dividing line from that day onward, separating the human territories in the east from the devils' den in the west—a hostile land known as the Sanctuarium from which it was said none returned alive. Pelted by blizzards all year round, the region was likened by many to hell.

"Now that's what I call heavy security," the man said. "You'd need a bloody army to get through that."

He stood out of reach of the sun beneath a sky shrouded in white, his brown skin hidden beneath heavy winter clothing and his scarred face shrouded by a hood. His manner was as rough as his speech, and his eyes darted about furtively as he crouched behind cover. Named Muninn, he was one of the most trusted servants of Surtr, the king of Baum.

As he heaved a tense sigh, a small flame struck up next to him. He turned. "Could you lay off the pipe, old man?"

His words were met with a grin from the figure beside him, a man in the early onset of old age. "Bah! They'll never see it. It's howling a blizzard out here. Any man who could spot pipe smoke through that could give a hawk a run for its money."

"Aye, but it stinks. Anyone with a good nose'll sniff us out in no time." Muninn peeked out from his cover once more and looked around before squatting back down again. He was of half a mind to smack the man's pipe out of his hand, but he managed to restrain himself. "Bugger me... I picked the wrong help."

It hadn't been easy to find someone willing to help him infiltrate Friedhof. This old man, a carriage driver, had been the

only person willing to lend his help…in exchange for a healthy sum, of course, but beggars couldn't be choosers. He had stowed away among the man's cargo and successfully sneaked inside.

The first thing that had struck him was the height and length of the wall. It stood twenty-five rue—three hundred and seventy-five meters—tall and ran for two hundred and fifty sel—seven hundred and fifty kilometers—from end to end. One could not see one end from the other. Muninn had been able to tell at a glance that it was not a natural construction, but nor could such a thick wall of ice have been built by human hands. That would have been next to impossible with modern technology, let alone with whatever was available five hundred years ago. Still, its existence was undeniable. It reigned over the north with such majesty that it made one believe the legends might be true. Its presence was a constant reminder to the empire of the Spirit King's power and holiness, and to the rest of Soleil of the magnificence of the Twelve Divines.

Carved out from the very heart of the wall was an imperial fort. Muninn had heard the rumors, but a picture was truly worth a thousand words. His mouth fell agape as he looked out from the cover of his crate—even if his companion's utter lack of concern was somewhat ruining the mood.

"I appreciate the help, old man, but if you weren't my ticket in, I'd pop you one."

The old man cackled. "No, you wouldn't. You're a good lad at heart."

"That so, aye? Well, you did come through for me in a scrape. Here's the rest." Muninn tossed the man a pouch full of coin and grinned. "Go buy all the ale you want, or maybe some leaf for that pipe."

The old man stared at the pouch with more than a little surprise. "That's more'n we agreed."

"Call it a bonus for stickin' your neck out. You get me into a place like Friedhof, you've earned a little extra."

"Aye, s'pose I did. Well, I won't say no to more coin." The man stowed the pouch away with unmistakable delight and looked back to Muninn, his brows knitting. "So what's your plan from here, son?"

Muninn frowned. He could hardly divulge the details of an important mission to someone he had only just met. Aside from

anything else, it would make the old man complicit. Nor could he afford to linger for much longer; there was no telling when a guard might come by on their rounds. He wanted to get moving as soon as he could. Still, the question lingered oddly in his ears.

After a long moment of thought, he lowered his gaze to the ground, scratching the back of his neck awkwardly. “I can’t say much. You know how it is. I’m just gonna look around a little, then I’ll be on my way. I don’t want to get you in trouble. You’d be best off heading on home and forgetting you ever saw me.”

He rose to his feet, but the old man stopped him. “You seem like a good sort, lad, so here’s a word to the wise. Don’t let von Heimdall catch wind of you or you’ll regret it.”

The security of Friedhof was maintained by House Heimdall, one of the three most powerful houses in the north, and its head, High General Hermes von Heimdall. Any citizen of the empire knew his name. Muninn had never met the man or even seen him, but there was no question that his strength was formidable. Weak men did not climb to a rank that high. If things somehow came to blows, Muninn doubted he would stand a chance. That was not his mission, however. He was not here to make war, only to conduct reconnaissance. He might not have been able to defeat a high general, but he was confident he could run from one. If it came to it…

“Old age is a terrible thing, you know.” The old man interrupted his thoughts. “Gets the better of the mightiest warrior. A decade or two ago, the five high generals might have matched the stories, but not anymore.” He stroked his beard with a rueful sigh. “They’ve clung to their posts for too long, I reckon. Should’ve let younger blood in years ago. Word came the other day that old Stoutarm von Cain fell in Faerzen. That proves the point as good as any, I s’pose.”

Three high generals had fallen in as many years: von Hass, the Warden of the West; von Loeing, the Warden of the Capital, and von Cain, the Warden of the South. The impact of losing such revered figures in quick succession would be profound.

“Stoutarm von Cain is dead?” Muninn was so surprised that he couldn’t help but ask.

The old man cackled. “Well, he was a much younger man when he earned that name. Even in the empire, folks were starting to doubt if he still had it in him.”

Certainly, other nations were beginning to question whether

the high generals were truly to be feared. The role was now referred to mockingly as an “honorary position” outside imperial borders. Apparently, von Cain had begun to attract the same criticism from the empire’s own citizens, who believed he was embarrassing his office.

“Now there’s only two left,” the man continued. “The mongrel of the north and the she-bitch of the east.”

He did not hesitate to speak of either with contempt. Muninn cocked his head. “You got a bone to pick with them, old man?”

It certainly didn’t sound like he had a high opinion of the high generals. Perhaps that was why he had agreed to offer his assistance in the first place.

“Me? No. Just sayin’ what I see, that’s all.” The old man puffed on his pipe, looking faintly frustrated.

Muninn sensed that his question had been deflected, but he found himself intrigued. He squatted back down. “The mad dog of the north and the she-wolf of the east,” he said, using their proper monikers. “So have you seen ’em, then? For real, I mean?”

The old man stroked his beard, thinking. “The mongrel I know well enough, aye. I’m from the north, after all. As for the she-bitch, all I know’s what I’ve heard.”

“Huh…” Muninn couldn’t conceal his disappointment. The Warden of the East was notoriously reclusive, and little was known about her. He had continued the conversation in hopes of returning to Baum with something Hiro could use, but it seemed he had wasted his time.

“I can tell you this, though. She won the rank in a duel. Something like that happens, even the north hears about it.”

The so-called she-wolf had come from nowhere several years ago to defeat one of the standing high generals with raw might. In recognition of her strength, then-Emperor Greiheit had granted her the defeated general’s position. She had immediately retreated from the public eye again, flatly ignoring any imperial summons, but had somehow never been stripped of her rank, which she still retained. Theories abounded as to why, the most prominent claiming she had kept her predecessor on hand as an advisor and sent him to fulfill her obligations in her stead, but as for whether that would be enough to excuse her…

Muninn cut off his train of thought with a slap to the cheek. This was no time to be getting distracted. He was supposed to

investigate the state of affairs at Friedhof.

“Sorry, old man, but I’d best be getting on. Any more chatter and I’ll freeze my toes off. Get home safe, will you?” He raised a hand in farewell. A freezing gust caught him, and he stiffened for a moment but forced himself to his feet.

The old man took a drag of his pipe and sighed regretfully. “That so? Well, I s’pose you’ve forced my hand, lad. Can’t let you go like this, see.”

“Hm?” Muninn turned around in surprise. The old man had gotten to his feet and was standing atop his crate. A shiver ran down Muninn’s spine to see that he now radiated strength.

“‘Old man’ you keep calling me. I’ve seen my share of years, it’s true…but I reckon you could stand to show me a little more respect.”

His affable manner from earlier was nowhere to be seen. Muninn gulped. The man’s gaze was so powerful, it felt like if he averted his eyes for the slightest moment, his head would roll.

“And you could start by calling me Hermes von Heimdall.”

This was unmistakably a warrior. The distinctive aura of a seasoned combatant emanated from him, hot enough to melt the surrounding snow. Before, he had seemed as thin and brittle as a twig, but now, he stood as strong and full of life as a grand old oak.

“Why don’t we talk a little more over a round of drinks? As luck would have it, I’ve just come into some coin.” Hermes rested a hand on the pommel of his sword, his grin broadening. “You wouldn’t turn an old man down, would you?”

Sweat dripped from Muninn’s brow. Clearly, he didn’t have a choice. He smiled ruefully. “Knew I shouldn’t have stayed to chat.”

* * * * *

The stronghold of House Brommel, one of the three most powerful houses in the north, was located in Logue, a large city one hundred sel to the east of Riesenriller. A scant few years prior, its prosperity had been the envy of Soleil. Now, however, with the recent strengthening of Lebering, the fragmentation of House Scharm’s support base, the decline of confidence in Second Prince Selene, and the sixth princess’s resulting rise in favor, the entire north’s economy was flagging. Logue had been

affected just as surely as anywhere else, and its merchants' feet dragged as though they were wading through deep water.

In the center of the city rose Castle Himinbjörg. Logue was built on inhospitable land ravaged by endless blizzards, but it had still managed to become one of the largest cities in the region, and this was why. It was an important strategic location, the watchtower that held Lebering in check.

The local lord was the head of House Brommel, a man named Typhos von Brommel. The day found him not in his chambers but on the snow-blown balcony, watching the blizzard impassively with goblet in hand. He had been standing for so long that his mead had frozen over and was beginning to accumulate a dusting of snow, but he did not seem to mind the cold. His eyes were fixed on something in the distance.

"My lord," came a voice from behind him. Footsteps crunched and fabric rustled. A knee pressed into the snow.

He showed no great surprise. With a shake of his head as if to wake himself up, he pitched his goblet over the balcony. The cold metal tore a layer of skin from his palm. "Ladon. What news?"

"The Iron Monarch of the northern continent has been slain, my lord. His head will be delivered to you forthwith."

"Oh?" Typhos arched an eyebrow. "That did not take long."

"He has grown weak over the past thousand years, it seems. Keeping the mountain's rage in check took a heavy toll."

"That was his folly. The defeated cannot choose where they dwell."

The dwarven homeland of the northern continent was home to a great many active volcanoes. Eruptions were a daily occurrence, turning the land into an uninhabitable waste blighted by pyroclastic flow. Mount Vyse, at the center of the continent, was the only exception, and the dwarves had built a great city there after the humans drove them from Soleil. For a thousand years, they had spurned contact with other races, developing a singular culture as they built a paradise for themselves. But their utopia could only last as long as the Iron Monarch held back the eruption of the mountain.

"So too are my dear children confined to Ambition, where they spend their days consumed by war, their grand dream forgotten."

One thousand years ago, the humans had prevailed over the zlosta and won dominion of Soleil, but their expansion had

proven a threat to the other peoples. The third emperor's reign had perhaps been the bloodiest. He had shown no mercy to his own compatriots, let alone other races.

"The man inherited his father's worst traits and none of his strength of heart."

The third emperor had embarked upon a campaign of relentless expansion upon taking the throne. Unprepared to fend off the rampaging lion, the empire's neighbors had fallen one by one. Naturally, there had been resistance within the empire—the descendants of Mars's Black Hand had opposed the man's warmongering, but they could not contend with an emperor's authority and quickly found themselves outmatched. Those who survived had fled west in search of a new place to call home, but dogged pursuit had pushed them to the very edge of the continent.

If the third emperor had been cruel to his fellow humans, the other peoples suffered worse. After losing in battle, they had fled Soleil entirely. All that remained for them there were the same centuries of oppression that Lebering had endured.

"How obligingly he danced to our tune," Typhos said. "Imagine my disappointment when I learned he took his own life out of guilt. His father would have been far more shameless."

"The human heart is frail, my lord. It is all too easily swayed by honeyed words and just as easily shattered."

"Frail indeed, but not weak. Humans have been persistent in every age. Many trials have threatened them, but ever do they endure."

The snowstorm blew stronger, chilling the castle and effortlessly extinguishing its bonfires. A warm hearth counted for little in the face of such extreme cold. Even so, humans made their home here, striving against all good sense to adapt to its inhospitable climes. The night would pass, the dawn would come, and they would greet one another with smiles on their faces, the blizzard little more than a distant memory.

"Therein lies my fear. They threaten to undermine all we have built."

One boy's impossible growth had foiled him one thousand years ago, and the knowledge that humans were capable of such miracles cast a shadow of dread over his heart.

"To hold the heavens within my grasp, only to be undone by my own poor judgment… Never have I known such regret. Who

would have thought that a young boy could so defy our expectations?”

One bite of the forbidden fruit had rewritten an immortal history penned in the gods’ own hand. The common had become unique, the ordinary extraordinary, the mediocre exceptional, and the mortal divinity manifest.

“On that day,” Typhos said, “I learned there was no limit to human greed.”

“And so you chose to hide, my lord. To endure.”

They had made scrupulous preparations in order to ensure their mistake was not repeated, striving to undermine the empire from the shadows. Typhos walked up to the edge of the balcony and reached out into empty space. The blizzard obscured the outside world, but he knew what lay beyond: the city that had reigned victorious for a thousand years, the imperial capital of Cladius.

“A thousand years of planning will soon bear fruit.”

Venezyne, living witness to the height of human glory, would burn. The perfect city, laid brick by brick over long centuries, would crumble in an instant. The smug smiles of the humans who so arrogantly believed themselves rulers of Soleil would twist in despair. Awe would turn to terrible glee, and passions would run wild. Chaos would fall, and the world would once more overflow with corpses.

“Nothing shall be left to chance, my lord,” Ladon said. “Bebensleif has already been delivered to its new wielder.”

“And how fares Hydra?”

“A little more agitated than is appropriate, perhaps, but otherwise well. Still, given that he draws his strength from vengeance, I worry that he may not be able to restrain himself once he sights his foe.”

“I realize you have only just arrived, but I would ask that you return to him. Lend him your strength.”

“As you command, my lord.”

Typhos spread his arms wide, letting the freezing wind blow over him, and closed his eyes as if listening intently. “The soldiers of the empire forge deeper into the west. The south, too, shall soon fall to turmoil. Send the signal to my children beyond the wall. They are to begin.”

“Of course, my lord. May the world descend into chaos so that a new age might be born.”

“Lay before me the heads of all the world’s kings, and the empire of von Grantz shall soon fall.”

He opened his eyes. The sky was unchanged, a raging expanse of white. Nonetheless, he reached out, believing beyond question that what he sought lay beyond.

“The sun shall rise in the dark of night, and the world shall meet its end.”

* * * * *

San Dinalle, the new capital of Faerzen

The night was growing late. The moon peeked through the gaps in the clouds, showering the land in faint silver light. A poor excuse for grassland unfurled across the barren earth. Wild birds roosted in trees hardly the height of a man’s waist, insects screeched in the undergrowth, and beasts stalked their prey with eyes agleam.

The night wore on, minute by minute and hour by hour, carrying with it small whispers of change. Quiet nights were the norm in this place, but this one was marked by an uncharacteristic tension. Something strange had sneaked in amid the usual: an encampment full of tents laid out in regular rows. Banners adorned with lion devices fluttered on the wind. The wavering light of countless bonfires turned the night to day. Boots crunched harshly as guards patrolled with wary eyes, their figures casting long shadows in the firelight.

Among the imperial tents was an even stranger sight: a patch of curious quiet where the night seemed to bleed back in. A handful of sentries, clad in pitch-black armor, kept watch there, but there were no guard patrols to speak of. Only one tent had significant security: that of Surtr, the king of Baum. The banner outside depicted a dragon on a black field clutching a silver sword.

Hiro reclined within. Before him, a woman in light armor was apologizing profusely.

“Forgive me, Your Lordship!” she cried, throwing her forehead to the floor. “It’s all my fault! I went and got myself caught, and now...now you have to work with Anguis!”

The woman’s name was Huginn. One of Hiro’s most trusted lieutenants, she had fallen into the clutches of Queen Lucia of Anguis around a month prior. Fortunately, Hiro had managed to

retrieve her safe and sound, but she had remained unconscious for a long time afterward. Whether that was because of exhaustion or some strange power of Lucia's, it was hard to say, but as soon as she awoke, she had come to make a tearful apology.

He looked down at her as she pressed her head to the ground. "There's nothing to be sorry for," he said, resettling himself in his chair with a rueful smile before reaching for the goblet on a nearby table. "I was just thinking I could use an informant."

He looked around for his carafe of water, but the one-armed woman at his shoulder already had it in hand. She began to fill his goblet. He raised a hand in thanks, but she only glared back.

Luka Mammon du Vulpes was a former commander of Six Kingdoms, and she held a grudge against Hiro for killing her brother in battle. There was not a second of the day when she wasn't looking for an opportunity to take his head. Her terseness had mellowed a little in recent months, but she was still liable to lash out whenever he let his guard down, leaving him obliged to watch his back at all times. In short, there was nothing to be gained from responding.

He took a sip from his goblet and turned back to Huginn. "I will say, though, I never expected that informant to be a queen."

The woman pressed herself even lower—she seemed to have taken his humor as sharper than he meant.

He shrugged, smiling helplessly. "Don't beat yourself up. It all worked out for the best. We have a friend in a high place now, and it's all because of you. If anything, I owe you."

There was no point talking about might-have-beens. Should have, could have, would have—none of it would yield anything useful. The more important question now was how to recognize her accomplishment.

"You deserve a reward. What would you like?"

"It's reward enough just to make myself useful, Your Lordship. I don't want—"

She shut her mouth, cutting herself off. Evidently, she had remembered what he had once told her: most people only tried when they stood to gain. Someone like Huginn, who served out of loyalty, was satisfied with her current lot, and had no ambitions to advance her station, might not need a reward for risking her life, but the soldiers needed to see her receive one or

morale would fall. It would affect their opinion of Hiro too. A king was measured by how he treated those beneath him. If he was seen to value effort, his troops would be incentivized to follow Huginn's example.

"I... I'll take a new mission, then."

"No. Choose something else."

Huginn looked up, caught off guard by the refusal. There was a hint of pleading in her eyes.

Hiro sighed heavily. "To put your mind at ease, I'm not punishing you for poor performance. I just want you to rest and recover. You spent a long time in captivity. I can't send you straight back into action."

Technically, she had gotten plenty of rest during her monthlong period of unconsciousness, but her strength had atrophied during that time. If she wasn't allowed to recuperate, she wouldn't be able to perform as she had in the past.

"Your Lordship—"

"I understand your concerns, but you're in no fit state to be out in the field. You're desperate to prove yourself, and the smallest mistake could cost you your life." He fixed her with a piercing gaze, compassionate yet reproachful. "There are hard times ahead. I'll need you soon enough, and when I do, I'll call for you. But until then, I want you here with the rest of the Crow Legion."

She looked like she wanted to argue, but she would have to swallow her complaints. Luka's stability hinged on her safety. If she didn't comply, she would risk damaging the Crow Legion's effectiveness as a fighting force.

"Is that understood?" Hiro's tone made it clear that he would not take no for an answer.

Huginn's shoulders slumped in undisguised disappointment. "Yes, Your Lordship."

"All right. I'll send your reward once I think of something suitable."

She gave a small nod. Luka had been watching the proceedings in silence, but at that point, she approached Huginn and patted her gently on the shoulder.

"Hateful he may be," she said with a smile, "but there is sense in what he says. You need to rest."

"I know that, Miss Luka, but—"

"I will take care of you for the time being, but you must not

leave my sight. You do not object, I trust? When your messages stopped coming, I almost died of worry."

"Erm…Miss Luka?"

"Oh, Igel, how I feared for you. All those sleepless nights… Why, if anything were to happen to you, I could hardly go on living…"

"I-I know I've said this before, Miss Luka, but I'm not—"

Huginn looked uncomfortable as Luka's arms slipped around her neck, but Luka was undeterred as she nuzzled her with a cheek. "Oh, but you are. Those defiant eyes, that coarse tongue, those slender limbs, that dark-hued skin… Who else could you be but Igel? And you are just as rewarding to tease. Yes, you are Huginn, but you are Igel too. Igel reborn. Igel returned to me. That is the truth, is it not? Tell me, is it not?"

"Erm…I don't really think…"

"I am right, am I not? You are Igel, Igel, Igel, my Igel."

"Miss Luka, I…I don't know how to say this, but…I've already got an older brother. His name's Muninn—"

"You have no brother!" Luka's face was suddenly inches from Huginn's, twisted with rage. "There is no such man!"

Huginn backed down instantly, her resolve in tatters. "Y-Yes, Miss Luka! Whatever you say, Miss Luka…"

As Hiro watched the vaguely uncomfortable exchange, he cast his mind back to his duel with Igel. He could say with certainty that Huginn was nothing like Igel in any capacity. Indeed, if the man were still alive, Luka would sooner have lopped off Huginn's head on the battlefield than doted over her as was now her wont.

As Hiro gazed at Huginn, trying to understand the connection, Luka leaned into his line of sight. "So?" she asked. "What exactly did that witch have to say to you?"

"Weren't you there when we were talking?"

"She was not my concern. Caring for Huginn demanded all of my attention."

"I see." Well, that was hardly out of character. Still, Luka was supposed to be his retainer. It would have been nice if she had at least tried to pay attention.

As Hiro breathed a weary sigh, Huginn seemed to register their topic of conversation. "Erm…should I make myself scarce, Your Lordship?" She seemed concerned that she was intruding.

With a rueful smile, he began to tell her to stay, but Luka got

there first. “Not at all. You are as welcome here as you are anywhere. Show me the scoundrel who would dare refuse you and I will happily crush them to pulp with my bare hands.”

“There you have it,” Hiro sighed. “As she says, I don’t mind you hearing.”

There was no harm in telling them the details. He closed his eyes pensively, as if collecting his thoughts. At length, he began to speak.

After the fight was over, Lucia proposed an alliance.

“I offer you this, Black-Winged Lord,” she said, brushing the dirt from her clothes. “I shall give you San Dinalle. In exchange, you shall aid me in toppling the High King.”

She spoke as casually as if she were suggesting lunch. Nonetheless, Hiro could not accept her proposal lightly. There were several significant obstacles to an alliance. For one, he held no sway over the imperial forces. At a push, he could leverage his position as king of Baum, but that would cause discord in their ranks. If they were off the table, the only troops he could offer Lucia were the Crow Legion, but they were very few. Even he would struggle to take on all of Six Kingdoms with only two thousand soldiers.

“I won’t be able to guarantee the empire’s assistance,” he said. “I’m the king of Baum, after all. From the sound of it, though, you’re not interested in a public alliance.”

“Quite right. Our relationship must not come to light. Well, after we oust the High King, I care not, but it must stay hidden while he remains on his throne or all will be for naught.”

It was hard to say what specifically she was suggesting might happen—perhaps Nameless’s interference, perhaps the commonfolk turning against her. Regardless…

“If you’re contacting me like this, the stakes must be high.”

She had gone to a great deal of trouble to arrange this proposal, fending off the empire with one hand and manipulating multiple nations’ interests with the other, all while using Huginn as bait to draw him in. He had taken that to show that she was determined, more so than he had given her credit for, but she was clearly devious too. Placing his trust in her would risk betrayal. She was a snake, coiling about her prey and crushing the breath from its lungs before finally swallowing it whole. No, if her schemes were what he expected, perhaps she would be better likened to a spider, disorienting and exhausting her prey before sinking in her fangs to

the music of its cries. Either way, she was not to be trusted, but then again, her capabilities were beyond dispute. Her cooperation was too dangerous to accept but too valuable to pass up. A dilemma indeed. Still, there was no harm in hearing her out.

"Even if I could persuade the empire to play along," he said, "Nameless would see straight through your plans as soon as we attacked Greif."

"True enough. But then, that is why I have sought your assistance."

Hiro's brow furrowed quizzically for a moment, but he soon nodded in understanding. "You want to keep this a secret from the empire as well as Six Kingdoms."

"Precisely."

That was an extremely tall order. It would be next to impossible for Hiro to direct the imperial forces while keeping his true goals hidden. In theory, there was a way: he could use the Leonine Sight that Artheus had left him to bend them to his will. In practice, however, that would not be wise. He had not yet mastered the power, and this was not the time to employ it, in any case. Now that Liz had a sight of her own, it would risk too much. He racked his brains, trying to think of another way.

Lucia supplied the answer. "Will it truly be so difficult?" she asked. "After all, I cannot imagine the empire means to stop at San Dinalle."

Hiro nodded. "I see. You want them to take Esel. In fact, you don't even need them to succeed. The chaos will be enough."

"'I am glad to see you have your wits about you. Yes, indeed. I do not need the empire to push as far as Greif." She leveled her fan at him with a lascivious smile. "In exchange for San Dinalle, you will ensure the empire moves into Esel. In the ensuing confusion, I shall lead my soldiers north to Greif, where I shall finally put an end to that instigator, Nameless." The fan turned back, wafting her gently as her eyes narrowed like a snake's. "And I should very much like you to join me for the confrontation."

So Anguis was looking to use Esel's plight as cover to take Greif. It was a good ploy. Even if the more southern kingdoms realized what they were planning, any prospective aid to Greif would have to pass through Esel or Anguis, and the former would not be easy to traverse with the empire invading. Anguis needed only to close off its own roads and Greif would be isolated.

"I think I get the picture, mostly. But I don't understand why you want me with you."

“Nameless is certain to stand in my way. You shall provide a distraction while I secure the High King.”

“I see. But what do I get out of this arrangement?”

“Why, plenty. Was I not clear?”

“The empire will assume control of San Dinalle no matter who captures it. Chaos in Esel doesn’t benefit me; it just moves you closer to the throne. The same goes for me accompanying you to Greif. The only parties that stand to gain are you and the empire.” Hiro grinned provocatively. “And I’m sorry to say I’m not a decent enough person to help you out of the goodness of my heart.”

Lucia moved closer, her tongue slipping out to wet her lips. “I can offer information. I daresay I know much that may interest you.” She laid a hand on his shoulder and brought her lips to his ear. “For instance…”

By the time she finished speaking, he was smiling broadly. “All right. I’ll help. But you know what’ll happen if you break your word, I assume?” The words dripped with cold threat.

“But of course. Do as you like.” Lucia did not so much as blink. She fanned herself, clearly pleased with the outcome of their negotiations. “Now, I must away. Lest you have forgotten, I have an injury to feign.”

True to her word, she had retreated from the battlefield, leaving the empire to claim the day. She had remained behind the walls of San Dinalle ever since. Meanwhile, the imperial forces were reorganizing as they prepared to lay siege to the city. The attack was scheduled to commence in the coming days.

“That’s about the long and short of it,” Hiro concluded. “I saw that we stood to gain, so I accepted her offer.” He looked between Huginn and Luka. Satisfied they understood, he added, “I know you won’t be happy about it, Luka, but I’d appreciate it if you could hold your nose.”

There was little love lost between Luka and Lucia. They had parted on bad terms three years prior, during Six Kingdoms’ invasion of the empire, and time had not healed their wounds. That much was clear from their recent clash on the battlefield. Huginn’s fate had been uncertain at the time, and once Lucia mentioned the woman had been caught, Luka had been unable to restrain her rage. There was little doubt that she still held a grudge about that episode.

“For what it’s worth,” Hiro said, “if you want the throne of

Vulpes, I'd be happy to help you take it."

"I no longer have any interest in thrones. And the thought of serving *her* makes my skin crawl." Luka turned to regard him with dull eyes. The crease in her forehead made her displeasure plain. "There is nothing I could want from Vulpes, save perhaps its utter destruction."

"All right. Never mind, then."

It was hard to predict on what or whom her loathing would settle. Perhaps on Hiro, who had stolen her dead brother's arm; perhaps on Huginn, in whom she saw his face; perhaps on her motherland, which she still despised. If she asked, Hiro would have no qualms about presenting her with the heads of Vulpes's current rulers. Lucia would certainly not object; Vulpes was presently occupied by the álfar, so she might even be pleased. Sooner or later, he would return Igel's arm as well. But once all of Luka's scores had been settled, what then? What would she have left but nothingness?

With her wings plucked before she had even learned to walk, she had found meaning and hope in her brother. Yet Hiro had stolen away that twisted happiness, and now she lived only for vengeance. What would she do with freedom if she found it? A bird that had only ever known a cage could not survive in the outside world. It only knew how to live behind bars, dependent on the morsels offered to it by its master. And if its master was gone, and it had no wings with which to fly on its own...

Then I suppose it'll fall to me, he thought with a rueful smile.

Just then, he noticed Huginn looking at him anxiously. She started to ask a question, but he got there first. "Now that I think about it," he said, smiling gently, "I might have a job for you after all."

"Eh? You do, Your Lordship?"

"I want you to check on Scáthach. They should be willing to let you in."

Gáe Bolg—which was currently stored within the Black Camellia—had informed him of Scáthach's clash with Stovell, but he didn't know what had become of her since. He hoped she had recovered, but her memories suggested otherwise. Most likely, she was still on the brink of death.

"Wouldn't you prefer to go yourself, Your Lordship?"

"I'd like to, but the imperial side is trying to suppress word of her injuries. I'd only draw unwanted attention."

“But wouldn’t I just do the same?”

“I’ll send you in a messenger’s capacity. That way, nobody will question why you’re there.”

The imperial forces and the Crow Legion might have been working together, but that didn’t mean the members of one camp could intrude upon the other—or at least, not without permission from the higher-ups. Still, the empire had just won a significant victory against Six Kingdoms. Morale would be high, which meant vigilance would be low. The king of Baum himself might not be able to visit without causing a stir, but Huginn would be able to slip in without raising many eyebrows, especially if she was carrying a message from her master.

“Understood, Your Lordship. I’ll go make sure Miss Scáthach is all right.” Huginn moved to stand.

“I will accompany you.” Luka rose behind her like a shadow.

Huginn spun around in alarm, clapping a hand to her ear; Luka’s breath must have tickled it. Coming from anybody else, it would have made for an endearing sight, but it seemed oddly ominous when Luka did it.

“You can’t, Miss Luka. You’ll cause a fuss.”

“I have this.” Luka produced an ostentatious mask. Huginn’s mouth twitched. She seemed to be trying not to say it would only draw more attention.

Hiro had given Luka the mask when they first left Baum as a way for her to conceal her identity. In principle, she should have been wearing it at all times, but she had fallen into the habit of removing it while out of sight of the empire.

“You can’t, Luka,” he said. “You’ll cause more of a stir than I will. Leave it to Huginn—”

“Then I shall disguise myself as a common soldier.”

“That wouldn’t—”

She wheeled around to glare at him. “Wouldn’t what?”

Hiro backed down. He could try to argue the point, but knowing Luka, she would not be dissuaded. She would have no choice but to follow a direct order, but that would have its own consequences. It would be less harmful in the long run just to let her go.

“All right. But could you dress up as a man, at least? I don’t know if the size will fit, but please try.”

At least one person in the imperial camp was unlikely to be fooled by any disguise, but she knew enough to exercise

discretion. It would be enough to hide Luka's identity from the masses.

"Very well. I will gladly take a man's armor over this ridiculous thing."

Luka tossed the mask at Hiro and stalked out. She returned in short order with a pile of armor in her arms. The metal made an outrageous clatter as she tossed it to the ground.

After a moment, the pile began to groan. "Lady Luka...what is the meaning of this?"

The soldier sat up, took off his helmet, and looked around blearily. The blood fled from his cheeks as he registered Hiro's presence, and he hurriedly pressed his forehead to the ground.

"L-Lord Surtr!"

He trailed off after that. Most likely, he didn't know how to continue. He had not been summoned, nor had he come to deliver an urgent message; he had simply been abducted by Luka and dumped unceremoniously on the floor. No one could blame him for being confused.

Hiro felt much the same himself. He turned to Luka, rubbing his temple as if trying to soothe a headache. "I'm not sure I follow."

Luka ignored him. She stood over the soldier, looking down. "Strip."

"M-My lady?"

"You have no need of that armor."

"I fear I don't understand..."

A cold sweat broke out across the man's forehead, but the invisible pressure issuing from Luka only grew more forceful. By this point, Hiro had surmised what she wanted, but he was so taken aback by the way she had gone about it that he was slow to react. Still, feeling the air grow heavier, he came to the man's aid.

"We do have an armory, Luka. You don't need to steal."

The soldier looked back at him in teary-eyed gratitude. Hiro only shrugged before resting his elbows on the arms of his chair and crossing his legs.

"Could you find her a spare set of armor? Huginn, you can help her change."

"At once, Your Majesty!"

The man all but leaped to his feet and ran from the tent, bowing to Hiro as he went. As Luka scowled after him, Huginn

took hold of her arm.

“Right, then, Your Lordship! I suppose we’d best go and see Miss Scáthach!”

Huginn’s touch seemed to have a pacifying effect. Luka allowed herself to be led from the tent with no resistance. Once they were gone, Hiro heaved a sigh. He looked to the ceiling with eyes devoid of warmth.

“Four Spiritblades I have now. Just like you once did.” His voice took on the tone of a confession, but the man it was meant for could no longer hear it. “Everything is coming together. Caelus. The Spiritblade Sovereigns. Mars. The Time of Turning. All that’s left now is the coming of chaos.”

He lifted his arm to the moonlight streaming in through the entrance to the tent. A small lump of flesh writhed in his palm.

“Stovell. Why do you still cling to life in that state? What is it you want so much?”

Before Liz could deal the finishing blow to Stovell, Hiro had intervened. His intention had been to claim the remaining Spiritblades—Gáe Bolg, Mjölnir, and Gandiva—but he had found they bore an unintended passenger: a crusted scrap of Stovell’s flesh. A symbol of the first prince’s tenacity, it wriggled in his hand even now, striving stubbornly to regenerate.

“You don’t die easily, especially for a failed experiment. I suppose you’ve just absorbed that many curses.”

There were several flavors of power at work in the glob of flesh. So potent was Stovell’s resentment that touching it would drive an ordinary person mad, if not kill them outright. What could have transformed him so thoroughly? Forcing Gandiva to obey him would have invoked the spirits’ curse, but that wouldn’t have been enough on its own. Somebody had done something to him, added their own strength to the curse to produce a monster. Even as Hiro watched, the lump swelled to the size of his fist as it tried to reconstitute itself.

“Your story’s done, I’m sorry to say. Whether or not you’re willing to accept it.”

He reached into the Black Camellia with his other hand and produced a crystal: the dharmastone that had been embedded in Igel’s arm. Without hesitation, he pressed it into the lump of flesh. There was a grisly tearing noise. Blood spilled from the ragged wound, dripping to the ground in a torrent of gruesome crimson.

“A weak dharmastone won’t fully purify a curse this potent.”

The crystal shone bright, and there came the sound of sizzling meat. A stench flooded the tent. While at first Stovell’s flesh shrank away from the dharmastone’s purification, soon the tables turned, and it swelled to consume the crystal.

“Instead, the abundance of poison will turn to magick, and the two will mix…giving rise to a new power.”

The blue crystal was now lined with violet bands. Hiro gazed at it and smiled.

“You can never have too many cards to play. Don’t worry, Stovell. I’ll make sure your death isn’t in vain.”

He held the crystal up in its new, more ominous incarnation, narrowing his eyes against the moonlight glinting from its surface.

“Are you listening, Demiurgos? Why don’t we pick up where we left off a thousand years ago?”

Their paths had not yet crossed, but their plans were already circling, intersecting, transforming each other into something new. Hiro raised a hand to his mask, covering his right eye with his palm.

“Artheus…your will lives on in Liz. Everything else you left undone, I’ll take care of myself.”

His great dream now resided in Liz, where it would surely grow stronger and grander. All that was left was the final test. To ascertain her resolve.

“As for my own mistakes…I will have to pay the price.”

Everything had gone awry because of his failure, and easing it back on track had taken a great deal of time. At last, however, the end was in sight. He closed his fist around the crystal and held it to his forehead, offering a prayer to his long-dead comrades.

“Rey…Artheus…watch over Liz. That’s all I ask.”

Once no obstacles remained to block her path, she would soar high, higher, to the highest heavens. With the lion of Soleil at her command, her name would resound across the world.

With thoughts of her future glories dancing through his mind, Hiro fell into a deep, deep sleep.

* * * * *

The core of the imperial encampment was heavily guarded.

The Knights of the Royal Black, the Knights of the Golden Lion, and the Knights of the Rose stood on watch among the veritable sea of tents, their units carefully deployed to ensure nowhere was left unsurveyed. Hardy veterans had been selected for patrol duties, and bonfires burned throughout the night, turning the camp as bright as day in a bid to extinguish every last shadow.

Next to the command center, among the quarters of the aides-de-camp, was the tent where Scáthach was sleeping. Two women were within, one with crimson hair, one with silver. The former was Liz, the sixth princess and heir apparent to the throne. She was a noble jewel, with features so fair she was rumored to have been blessed by the gods themselves. Though she was heir to the throne, her rank as princess meant she was beset by offers of marriage, even if they were no longer as frequent as they had once been. A particularly shameless merchant had once offered her a mountain of coin for a single night. In another life, she might have gone down in history as a beauty to lay nations low, or so it was whispered at court.

She approached the bed, lustrous, waist-length hair swaying behind her. “How is she, Aura?”

She addressed her question to the petite figure in a bedside chair. The girl looked up, revealing dainty features and gleaming, doe-like eyes that would stir anyone’s protective instincts. Between her silver hair and leaden gray irises, she might have looked stern, but her clipped bangs softened her cold impression. Her small frame made her look younger than her years, which caused her constant consternation, and her youthful face did not help matters.

Her name was Aura von Bunadala. A valedictorian graduate of the imperial training academy, she had been handpicked as an aide to the commander of the Third Legion at a historically young age. While failures in battle against the Grand Duchy of Draal had seen her demoted, she had steadily rebuilt her career. Now, she served as a retainer to the sixth princess and the chief strategist of the imperial army.

She shook her head weakly. “No change.”

“I see…”

Liz gazed down at the bed. Beneath the covers lay Scáthach, swathed in bandages. The woman was in a pitiful state. Her face was pale and bruised, her breathing was ragged, her arms were broken, and any new change of dressings soon became sodden

with blood. Her injuries had grown infected, causing a fever that was sapping her strength. Once upon a time, she would have recovered in short order, but not now that she had lost Gáe Bolg. Without a Spiritblade's blessing, she was an ordinary human being with ordinary weaknesses.

Her condition had stabilized, but she was by no means out of danger. She could deteriorate at any time. Liz, Aura, and their ladies-in-waiting were watching over her in shifts, ensuring there was always somebody at her bedside. A physician was on call in the neighboring tent, ready to attend to her if she worsened. She had not regained consciousness since her battle with Stovell, and Liz and Aura were growing more and more concerned. No matter how much time passed, she did not wake, and her life seemed to fade away a little more with every passing day.

"Her injuries are bad, but the physician says they aren't why she won't wake up. He thinks the cause is mental."

Vengeance had been Scáthach's raison d'être. She had lived solely to kill her nemesis, Stovell. Now her mission was done, but success had come at a heavy price: the loss of her steadfast companion and her claim to the nation she loved. Once San Dinalle fell, Faerzen would be free from Six Kingdoms' control, but its reconstruction would progress under imperial leadership. The royal family would eventually be reinstated, but Scáthach's name would not be among them; the throne would pass to some distant relative who might not even have du Faerzen blood. They would be a puppet of the empire, which would place Faerzen under its control and reap the rewards of their conquest. That had been the empire's condition for lending their aid.

In short, Scáthach had no reason left to live. Her nemesis was dead, her Spiritblade was lost, and her homeland was no longer her home. Perhaps that was why her slumber remained unbroken. Still, only she knew the real reason. It was easy enough to contrive answers for someone else—to imagine a convenient might-be-truth to satisfy one's need for explanations—that they might abhor if they heard. Speculation would not help Scáthach now. All Liz and Aura could do for her was keep calling her name, watching over her to ensure someone would be by her side when she woke.

"I'll sit with her today," Liz said. "You need to take a break."

"All right." Aura nodded. "For a little while."

She lowered herself onto the spartan bed nearby. No matter

how concerned they were about Scáthach's well-being, it would not do to fuss over her at the expense of their own health. They were the leaders of the imperial army, and the campaign against Six Kingdoms was still ongoing. They had to ensure they were in good shape at all times.

Both Liz and Aura had slept in Scáthach's tent since the day she was brought there. Neither had any medical knowledge; if her condition worsened, the best they could do was call for help. They were more or less nothing but a hindrance. Still, having her within sight helped to set their hearts at ease.

"We're all selfish in our own ways, aren't we?" With a rueful smile, Liz lowered herself into the chair. "Say, Scáthach…once you wake up, I think you should have a good, long rest. You don't need to suffer anymore. You don't need to cry any more tears."

Even as the words left her mouth, she knew they were untrue. The flow of time was unforgiving, and the world would grant Scáthach no reprieve. The day she could rest was a long way off yet. Still, something told Liz that without hopeful what-ifs, her friend would never wake.

"In the east of Baum is a place the first archpriestess loved more than anywhere in the world. A hill covered in the most beautiful flowers, they say. Nobody can visit without the archpriestess's permission. But once this is all over, I'd like it if we could all go together."

There was no answer. Silence fell once more but for Scáthach's pained breathing. Liz had not been expecting a reply, but she had resolved to continue these one-sided conversations nonetheless. She would do the same the next day and the day after that.

"Hm?" Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a copy of the Black Chronicle lying by Scáthach's pillow. She picked it up, glanced at the cover, looked it over. Her gaze turned to Aura. "Was that what you were reading her? Was it for her or for yourself?"

Aura didn't quite meet her eyes. "Her, of course. Scáthach loves the legend of Mars."

"Does she?" Liz cocked her head, laying a finger to her chin. She had certainly seen Aura pressing Scáthach to read the Black Chronicle more than once, but Scáthach had always looked more overwhelmed than enthusiastic.



As she was wondering whether to point that out or let the matter lie, there was a clatter from outside the tent. Both Aura's and Liz's eyes turned to the entrance.

"'Scuse me, Your Ladyships." A woman entered—one they both recognized. "Pleasure to see you again, Miss Liz. It's been far too long."

"Huginn! The pleasure's all mine. How have you been?"

The pair kept their voices down in view of Scáthach's condition, but they were nonetheless pleased to see one another again. Once the greetings were done, however, Huginn grew oddly hesitant. She averted her eyes as if choosing her words carefully.

"His Lordship—erm, I mean, Lord Surtr sent me to check on Miss Scáthach, but..." She trailed off, glancing at the bed behind Liz. "Seems like there's not been much of a change."

"No," Liz replied. "But she'll wake up eventually. I'm sure of it."

"'Course she will. Miss Scáthach is strong like that."

"If you don't mind me asking..." Liz indicated the figure behind Huginn. "Who is that?"

The newcomer was clad from head to toe in armor. They carried themself with a strange air, a little disquieting, a little sorrowful. The color of their emotions changed anxiously as she watched, anger burgeoning and fading in its depths. She narrowed her eyes, instantly on guard.

Huginn rubbed the back of her neck awkwardly. "Erm...no one you need to worry about, Your Ladyship."

At that moment, malice emanated from the armored soldier, pointedly directed at Liz. "My name is Igel."

"Eh?" Huginn let slip a noise of alarm. She dashed up to the figure, clearly flustered. "Lu— I mean, Ig— I mean, mister! You can't call yourself that!"

"Why not?"

"What d'you mean, why not?" Huginn glanced furtively back at Liz. "Ain't it obvious?"

Liz gave a shrug, smiling wryly. She recognized the name. Igel had been one of the leaders of the Vulpes forces during Six Kingdoms' invasion—a man who had been dispatched by Hiro, if she remembered correctly. The soldier wore male armor, but they spoke with a female voice. It was almost certainly his sister, Luka, which would certainly explain her strange aura.

"I'm glad you're in good health," Liz said.

The figure stiffened, but after a long moment, she gave a curt nod. On the sidelines, Aura still looked leery, but if Liz didn't object to Luka's presence, it was not her place to say otherwise. She lay down in her bed and closed her eyes.

Liz turned back to Huginn. "You and Lu— I mean, this fine soldier should take a moment to talk with Scáthach. I'm sure she'd like that."

Huginn's arrival had thoroughly dispelled the gloom hanging over the tent. There was no telling when Scáthach might wake, but a cheerful atmosphere was bound to do more for her than despondency.

"Why don't you tell her what you've been up to since you last met?"

Huginn nodded. "Of course, Your Ladyship. I'd be glad to."

Chapter 2: A Convergence of Interests

San Dinalle, in the southwest of Faerzen, had recently become the nation's new royal capital. The change had been unilaterally proposed and enacted by Anguis, but there had been no one left to resist. Most of Faerzen's nobility had perished alongside the royal family in the war with the empire four years prior. The Faerzen Resistance—formerly led by Scáthach, the last of the royal line—had voiced its opposition, but now that its leader had thrown in her lot with the empire, many of its members had deserted and its influence had waned. Besides, with the old capital of Skye long reduced to rubble, the people had naturally fallen in behind Six Kingdoms' proposal.

Newly risen to prominence on the backs of various political interests, San Dinalle had transformed into a bustling metropolis thanks to its proximity to both Esel—the gateway to Six Kingdoms—and the Grand Duchy of Draal. Faerzen's west was so peaceful compared to its ravaged east that the two might as well have been different countries. As a result, the city had become a prime destination for Draali merchants and a desirable place to relocate. The population surged and the town rapidly transformed. In a few more years, many had said, it would become as great a city as had ever existed in Soleil.

Everything changed with the empire's invasion. With the last princess of Faerzen to grant it *casus belli*, its forces had surged across the eastern border, driving a wave of refugees before it to San Dinalle. The Anguis officials, already struggling to manage the growing population and contain the associated rise in crime, found themselves thoroughly out of their depth. Even as they fought to restore order, Six Kingdoms' forces fell to the empire's advance, and by the time they had assembled a plan of action, the empire's armies were knocking on the front gate.

The merchants had fled. Large swathes of the population had evacuated to nearby towns and villages. One by one, the surrounding cities had raised the white flag, and soon San Dinalle found itself much emptier—not quite deserted, but far quieter than its glory days. The only ones to remain were its original residents and soldiers from Greif, Esel, and Anguis. The

air hung sullen, and the townsfolk's faces were lined with worry. The joyous prosperity of several months prior seemed a distant dream.

Here and there, new evacuees traipsed toward the gates with their belongings in tow as if fleeing the oppressive gloom. They cried insults to soldiers of Anguis as they passed.

"We'd be living peaceful and happy if not for you bastards!"

"We put our faith in Six Kingdoms, and what do we have to show for it?! The empire's wrath, that's what!"

The soldiers said nothing outwardly, but they resented the townsfolk's flightiness. In times of peace, the same people had greeted them happily, but now that they were at war, Six Kingdoms was at fault for everything. Still, it could have been worse. At least the soldiers weren't dealing with riots.

They watched the evacuees leave in silence. Forcing these people to stay would only lead to unrest, and that was the last thing the soldiers needed when they had a city to defend. Besides, they were under strict orders from the governor of San Dinalle not to harm anyone leaving the town.

The governor's mansion was located in the center of the city. It was a wooden building of modest size, surrounded by a fence that would be easy enough to climb. It had formerly housed members of Faerzen's royal family, but they had perished in battle with the empire and the mansion had burned to the ground. San Dinalle's new ruler, one Lucia Levia du Anguis, had overseen its reconstruction.

Lucia was in the mansion's study. She stifled a yawn, rubbing her eyes in an attempt to stave off sleep. Stacks of untouched paperwork were piled high on her desk, but she did not look inclined to start attending to them.

Seleucus offered her a cup of tea. "Perhaps this will wake you up, my lady."

"Indeed."

She offered neither thanks nor appreciation, taking the cup as if she were entitled to it, but Seleucus was accustomed enough to her ways not to raise an eyebrow. He knew how to be the model subordinate.

Lucia raised the cup to her lips, but she stopped short of taking a sip, glancing sidelong at Seleucus. "Have you seen Nameless of late?"

"I'm afraid not. I daresay she is no longer in San Dinalle at all."

“Hm.”

The álf had vanished following her battle with Hiro a month prior. Most likely, her Dharmic Blade’s Graal was at work, but even Lucia, who wielded a Dharmic Blade of her own, did not know exactly what power it possessed.

“One can only wonder what she’s planning.”

It was disconcerting for Nameless to be so quiet. Now there was no way to tell what she was up to. Only one thing was certain: no matter how far away she was in body, she would be watching.

“’Tis a pretty mess we’re in,” Lucia murmured. She stifled another yawn as she laid out pawns on the map. Contrary to her words, she did not seem the least bit concerned.

Seleucus smiled knowingly. “What do you intend?”

“What to choose? As of our last battle, we hold far more cards in hand. The only question now is when to play them.”

San Dinalle was now more or less under siege. The bulk of the imperial forces had regrouped with the third army and were in the process of reabsorbing it into their ranks. Once their armies had reorganized, they would march on the city. On Six Kingdoms’ side of the field, the only parties actively garrisoning San Dinalle were Anguis, Esel, and Greif. The other three kingdoms had withdrawn to Esel to watch the fighting unfold.

“So what happens now?” Seleucus asked. “I know we have been strengthening the city’s defenses over the past two years, but they will not hold off an army of that size.”

Lucia nodded. “Especially not now that Steissen has joined the fray.”

Even accounting for the first army’s devastating losses, the imperial forces still numbered more than a hundred thousand, and they had the two-thousand-strong Crow Legion in tow. Now, five thousand soldiers from Steissen had joined their ranks.

“And the Knights of the Golden Lion, the Knights of the Royal Black, and the Knights of the Rose all ride with them,” she continued. “Even Six Kingdoms would struggle to fend off such forces.”

“They have committed a great many men,” Seleucus mused. “One wonders if they left enough behind to defend their own lands.”

“I have heard speculation to that effect, ’tis true. How well-informed it is, I cannot say.”

Certainly, the empire had seemed to have concentrated its forces inadvisably. Almost all of its strength had ridden in the west, leaving the rest of its lands sparsely defended, which presented a chance to draw blood from a normally untouchable foe. An enterprising invader could certainly sack a few towns in the confusion. While the meager takings would put off anyone concerned with short-term self-interest, those who took a longer view would see an opportunity to change the board in interesting ways. Still, capitalizing on that chance would be no easy matter. Only a small number of nations would be capable.

"The north?" she mused. "No, Lebering is allied with the empire, at least on the face of it. Then the south? Just as unlikely. The empire beat Draal and Lichtein bloody not three years past. 'Tis doubtful they have the stomach to defy it again."

"None seem particularly likely, do they?" Seleucus replied. "And the high consul of Steissen is fighting alongside the empire in Faerzen."

"Then that would leave...the Vanir Triumvirate."

"I believe it is unlikely they would act, my lady."

"Why do you say that?"

"To reach the empire, they would have to pass through either Draal or the lands of the Free Folk. The imperials would catch wind of them before they got close."

"Would they now? Draal and the Triumvirate have closer ties than one might think." Lucia rapped the south of Draal with the back of her fist. "'Tis common knowledge that many in the south subscribe to faerie worship. Who can say what they would be willing to conceal?"

Regardless, Draal itself doubtless had little intention of attacking the empire. Handhaven von Draal had become grand duke following the death of his older brother, and on the occasions Lucia had met him, he had struck her as a timid, weak-willed man. His hesitant leadership was the reason Draal had yet to recover from his father's passing. It was hard to believe he would have the nerve to take a gamble that could destroy his nation. Among his retainers, however, was one man who might—a man with bottomless ambition.

"Eguze von Martina, I believe his name was."

"A general of Draal," Seleucus supplied. "I understand he is commonly known as Grand Duke Handhaven's right hand."

That brought back Lucia's memory. Von Martina had been on

Handhaven's shoulder at all times, accompanying him everywhere like a leech on his leg. Handhaven had scarcely spoken a word without looking to him for approval.

"Now I recall. I wonder what he intends?"

Word of his humiliation at Hiro's hands had reached as far as Six Kingdoms. He might still hold enough of a grudge that anger would cloud his judgment. If the Vanir Triumvirate was willing to deliver judgment to the empire in his stead, he would no doubt be happy to let them.

"Well, little use puzzling over it. Fires on the other side of the continent are no business of ours."

Lucia would not shed a tear to see the empire attacked. There was, however, another concern.

"That said, if the empire comes under attack, 'tis likely they will withdraw troops from Faerzen."

She had brokered an alliance with Surtr in the hope of insuring against that possibility, but it remained to be seen how useful he would be.

"So long as they cause enough chaos in Esel first, I care not…but the Vanir Triumvirate's involvement might pose a greater problem."

That was her only real concern. The Vanir Triumvirate held a great deal of influence over Tigris, Vulpes, and Scorpius. If they moved at the wrong time, her plans would collapse in on themselves, and she would never seize control of Six Kingdoms.

"Fortunately, they seem content to wait."

If the three kingdoms had received support from the Vanir Triumvirate, they would have sent soldiers to San Dinalle's defense, but presently they were watching the fighting unfold from Esel. If the empire were to invade there, no doubt they would abandon what they disdained as a human kingdom and return to their homelands.

"'Twould be wise to consider what to do if that comes to pass."

It was always prudent to prepare for any eventuality. Once her plan was made, she could simply file it away in her mind until some stroke of fortune decreed it could be used. Still, such matters could wait. First, she had to navigate the situation at hand.

"Now to weaken Greif and Esel a little. All is ready, I trust, Seleucus?"

"Perfectly, my lady. We are the only missing pieces."

“Wonderful. Well, I daresay we have nothing more to gain from this land. Let the empire have San Dinalle.”

“As you command, my lady. I shall draw us a carriage.”

Lucia let out a bark of laughter. “How interesting the game grows!” She strode from the room, flicking open her fan to hide her face. “Finally, my time is nigh. The path to the High King’s throne is clear.”

* * * * *

The history of the Vanaheim Theocracy, one of the three nations that made up the Vanir Triumvirate, spanned more than a thousand years. Its roots stretched back to the moment the fair-featured people of the western continent first made landfall on Soleil. These people, who would later be called álfar, had shared gifts of higher knowledge with the indigenous human population.

The humans transformed their lands with álfen learning, bringing water and greenery to dry earth. The álfar levied mysterious powers to save the humans from monsters and teach them how to fight. In time, the humans began to revere their benefactors as messengers of the gods. Tales of their bounties drew settlers from neighboring lands. Settlements became villages, villages became cities, the cities became a nation, and the nation became the Vanaheim Theocracy.

The neighbors of the newborn theocracy regarded it warily. It was not long before war broke out. The nation’s armies had grown strong under álfen leadership, however, and they repelled the would-be invaders. Endless retaliations dragged the fighting on. Soon, the Vanaheim Theocracy had become so vast that it covered the south of Soleil.

Its prosperity would not last, however. The age of the zlosta was coming. Even the strength of the álfar, revered as gods, could not save the people from the threat of the fiendkin, and the theocracy’s territories gradually shrank. The álfar banded together with the beastfolk, the humans, and the dwarves in what became known as the Fourfold Alliance, but disputes with the humans in the latter days of the war led to their exit from the pact. Even after the humans secured ultimate victory, relations between the two remained bitter.

The reign of the third emperor would turn the division into a

decisive rift. The humans began to purge Soleil of the other races. Nations fell and former comrades' blood was spilled. Grieving for what they saw, the Vanaheim Theocracy extended its aid to the oppressed, granting them lands of their own where they could be safe from persecution. These became the Knightdom of Nala and the Monastic Order of Kwasir, which would join hands with the Vanaheim Theocracy to resist the empire, together becoming the Vanir Triumvirate.

A thousand years had passed since those times, but álfar lived long lives and had long memories. Their resentment of the empire and its purges ran deep. The Vanaheim Theocracy had weathered many threats over the centuries, and it had survived many periods of strife. Although long past its glory days, it still exerted great influence over its neighbors and was justly considered one of the most powerful nations in Soleil.

Under the distinctive culture it had developed, the theocracy was ruled not by a monarch, but by a figure known as the Holy Emperor selected by the Faerie King. The capital of the nation was Vanr, and in its center stood the grand cathedral of Vana Vis, where adherents of faerie worship came every day to pray. Multiple artists had contributed to the construction and renovation of the historic structure. It watched over the town with solemn majesty.

Newcomers to Vanr often found themselves cowed by its gravitas, but the longer they stayed, the more welcoming they would find it. Its people were not especially outgoing, but perhaps because of the city's tropical clime, they were cheerful in manner and cordial to outsiders. There were many sights to see, and people of all stripes could be found passing through. Crowds of merchants hawked a plethora of curiosities. Today, however, the city was particularly bustling. People packed the streets, all headed to the grand cathedral. Mass would be held in Vana Vis, providing the rare opportunity to see the Holy Emperor in public. The religious leader would only be visible for a few seconds, but they hoped for good fortune.

The Holy Emperor was in Galta Palace, a residence adjoining the cathedral. Clad in a white, gold-trimmed robe, the hooded figure was accompanied through the corridors by a retinue of álfar.

"There is news for you, Your Holiness," one of the álfar said.

"Ah, Cardinal Snorri. Speak."

“Word has come from the north. The Grantzian Empire is on the verge of retaking Faerzen.”

“I see.” The Holy Emperor nodded. “As we anticipated.”

Cardinal Snorri continued, his manner businesslike. “The rulers of Tigris, Vulpes, and Scorpius have written to us repeatedly for reinforcements. What would you have us do?”

“We have nothing to gain from aiding them but debt. Six Kingdoms’ life is a candle in the wind. Still, let them believe help is coming until they have served their purpose. People cannot live without hope.” The Holy Emperor’s mouth pressed into a solemn line. “They were never more than a lure in the first place. If affairs proceed as we have planned, you may ignore their letters.”

“As you command, Your Holiness. We have also received a report from the Free Folk. They say all is ready.”

“Tell them to wait a little longer. Allow the empire to carve deeper into the west. We have no shortage of time.” As the party turned into the hallway connecting Galta Palace to Vana Vis, the Holy Emperor stopped. “Ah, yes. I ought to ask. How fares the north?”

“It is quiet, Your Holiness. Albeit in the manner that comes before a storm.”

Cardinal Snorri’s answer seemed agreeable. The robed figure smiled beneath their hood and resumed walking. “They await their chance, just as we do.”

“The nations of Soleil feign disinterest in the ongoing conflict, but the moment the lion displays weakness, they will pounce. The balance of power will tip in an instant.”

“Then we must act with great care or history will leave us behind.”

Cardinal Snorri nodded in understanding. Turning, he pushed open the double doors that led to the balcony. Warm wind rushed into the hallway, carrying with it a thunderous cheer.

The Holy Emperor stepped forward. The courtyard was filled with people as far as the eye could see. They looked up to the balcony as one, shouting and waving. The Holy Emperor raised a hand and waved, smiling. The cheering only intensified.

Cardinal Snorri’s voice issued from behind. “I believe that is enough, Your Holiness.”

The Holy Emperor nodded. It was prudent to limit the length of these balcony appearances. Any longer and they would lose

their luster. Restricting their presence to special occasions was how a leader won the people's love and turned subjects into believers. Fervor spread as fast and unstoppably as a contagious disease, making its victims more ardent, more zealous, and more fanatical. When the people were sick, they called for medicine, and the Holy Emperor was a cooling draft. The religious leader's magnetism held the Vanir Triumvirate together with iron bonds.

The Holy Emperor returned to the hallway. The door closed, and all at once, the heated passion of the crowd was gone. Outside, their cheering continued unabated, but the interior of the cathedral was cool. The cardinals bowed their heads as one.

"Thank you for accompanying us," Cardinal Snorri said. "Please, return to your rest."

With a final appreciative gesture, the Holy Emperor began to walk away. Unseen, the mouth beneath the hood twisted sourly.

Upon returning to Galta Palace, the Holy Emperor looked around to see if anyone was nearby. The palace was deserted.

"Believers in a false idol... What fools they are." A scowl beneath the hood. "How my gorge rises to look at them."

The Holy Emperor raised a hand, drawing it back as if pulling on something unseen. The air rang with the chime of bells. Space warped, swirling inward. A bell staff settled into their palm, clinking softly.

"But no more foolish than those who still cling to the old gods. So hatefully blind, they cannot even conceive of thinking for themselves."

The Holy Emperor stopped before an ornately decorated door. Beyond lay a place that no one else was permitted to enter: the Great Baldachin where the Faerie King dwelled. Opening the door with a familiar hand, the white-and-gold figure walked in without hesitation.

"All must be purified. A mindless slaughter for the right to live."

Shafts of light descended from the vaulted ceiling, falling on the bookshelves lining the walls, illuminating works of art gathered from all across Aletia. In the center of the chamber was an intricately carved wooden altar. Fresh water trickled in the trench around it. Yet the altar seemed amiss to anyone's eyes. The statue atop it was headless, and the flowers at its feet were dead.

The Holy Emperor seemed to think nothing of it, advancing

before the statue. “Chaos is precisely what the world needs, don’t you think?”

A sharp kick sent the bronze head on the ground rolling across the room with a clatter. It struck a bookcase and came to a stop.

“Tell me, Faerie King, how does it feel to see the world prepare to turn anew?” The Holy Emperor prodded the statue with the tip of the bell staff. “Who knows? Perhaps the age of the álfar you hoped for is finally upon us.”

There was no reply. Scowling in distaste, the Holy Emperor struck the bell staff against the floor and, with one last lingering chime, vanished into thin air.

* * * * *

The twelfth day of the tenth month of Imperial Year 1026

Once the imperial army had finished reorganizing its forces, it renamed itself the Six Kingdoms Incursion Force. In effect, it had declared to all of Soleil that it intended to march on into Esel.

“How uncharacteristically bold of Lady Celia Estrella,” Ludurr murmured. A young man in the service of Beto von Muzuk, he looked too frail to have any place on the battlefield, but he carried himself with distinction. Although very pale, if not sickly pallid, he retained an aura of authority. The overall impression he left was a curious one, faintly unsettling but also undeniably charismatic.

He gazed at the chief strategist’s message, stroking his chin in what might have been admiration. “Or perhaps a sign that her heart is behind this cause.”

A nearby aide seemed to overhear. He laid down the reports he was compiling and turned to Ludurr. “Do you mean to say it was not before, sir?”

“She was not enthusiastic about the Faerzen campaign. Unsurprising, perhaps. She has matured impressively over the past three years, but it takes longer than that to harden one’s heart. The prospect of trampling her friend’s homeland underfoot no doubt gave her pause.”

Personally, Ludurr saw no reason to show mercy to a mortally wounded nation. If anything, putting it out of its misery was the kinder thing to do. Let the name of Faerzen vanish from the world. It would hardly be the first. History was littered with

nations that had suffered the same fate, as numerous as the stars in the sky.

"So she is much like Emperor Greiheit, sir?" the aide asked tentatively.

Caught off guard, Ludurr burst out laughing. Few figures in imperial history had a more checkered past than Greiheit. Longstanding rumor held that he had secured the throne by slaying his own father and assassinating his brothers, and his reign had been marked by endless warfare and incessant expansion. He had executed the entire bloodlines of rulers who opposed him. Anyone who defied him was put to the sword, commonfolk or nobleborn. By all accounts, he had been the cruelest of despots. Yet even he had possessed another side.

"Ah, yes," Ludurr said once his laughter had subsided. "Never did an emperor dote more on his children."

In a sense, he had been the most naive kind of emperor. Even comparing them seemed absurd.

Ludurr rose from his chair and headed outside the tent. "He never hesitated to dirty his hands if it would bring about his heart's desire. For that alone, I will praise him. But it was unwise to defy fate. If only he had accepted his lot with grace, he might have lived a little longer."

Greiheit's attempts had been admirable but futile. They had only led to tragedy, and much that had gone awry in the present could be traced back to his actions.

Ludurr stepped outside the tent, narrowing his eyes against the sun's glare. At that moment, a cry went up from afar, and a loud bang shuddered through his body. The air itself seemed to shake. He turned to regard the city in the distance, from which a cloud of black smoke was now rising.

"They're putting up less of a fight than anticipated," he mused.

San Dinalle, the new royal capital of Faerzen, marked the final objective of the imperial campaign. It was now surrounded by the imperial forces and virtually helpless against their assault. Flaming arrows rained down on it without pause, as brutal and merciless as ants swarming a scrap of food.

"I had not expected the city to fall so easily. Not when it is the last line of defense before Six Kingdoms' own soil."

The imperial army was formidable, numbering over a hundred thousand, but even so, San Dinalle did not seem like it

was going to last two days. The defenders were making such a poor showing, Ludurr was starting to suspect some kind of trap. Given the city's size, the height of its walls, and the stockpiles of food it no doubt possessed, it should have been able to hunker down for months. Surely its defenders could have sent for reinforcements from their homelands to break the siege.

"I feel like a fool for being worried about this battle."

The imperial command had held strategy meeting after strategy meeting in the preceding days, endlessly debating the best ways to minimize their losses. All those discussions seemed pointless now, as did the preparations they had made to storm the walls. As far as Ludurr was concerned, his time had been wasted, and he reserved the right to complain about it.

"Perhaps the sight of our numbers broke their morale?" he wondered aloud.

His thoughts were interrupted as a rider cantered up to him. The soldier wore light armor, and the bright-red flag on his back identified him as a messenger of the Crimson Princess.

"Word! I bear word for Lord von Ingunar!"

"I'm here." Ludurr raised a hand. "What's this about?"

The messenger skillfully brought his horse to a stop, dismounted, and dropped to one knee. "I bear a message from Lady Celia Estrella."

"I'll hear it."

"Her Highness means to attack Esel. She will ride with twenty thousand men. You are ordered to consolidate control of San Dinalle in her absence."

Lady Celia Estrella's instructions were clear and concise. He was to wait there while she won herself glory. Refusal would embarrass not only him, but also his master, Beto. Compliance would deprive him of any further opportunities to distinguish himself, but it would improve Beto's standing. Naturally, his only choice was the latter.

"Very good. Tell Her Highness that I will see it done."

"Of course, my lord."

The messenger moved to mount his horse again, but Ludurr stopped him. "Before you leave, may I ask something?"

"Anything, my lord."

"The enemy seems to have put up a remarkably weak fight. Do you know why?"

"Six Kingdoms' commanding officers have evacuated the city,

my lord. The remaining soldiers are demoralized, and the chain of command is in disarray. They have just issued their surrender."

"Oh? Their leaders fled?" Ludurr folded his arms and looked up at the sky, gazing at the clouds drifting by.

The messenger looked perplexed, but he continued without remark. "Just before our siege closed, it seems. They left a handful of officials in charge, but that was all."

"How many soldiers remain to defend the city?"

"We estimate around twenty thousand, my lord."

"So few? I'd have expected thirty thousand at least."

"Reliable information is hard to come by at the moment, my lord. We expect to have a more accurate picture in the coming days."

"Very good. Please give Her Highness my regards."

"At once, my lord!" The messenger rode away, trailing a cloud of dust.

"Now, then. Who has painted us this pretty picture, I wonder..."

Cupping his chin in his hand, Ludurr turned and ducked back into his tent. His aides were inside, just as he had left them, compiling their reports. He brought his foot down with particular vigor to attract their attention. They laid down their pens and looked up at him.

"Lady Celia Estrella had left us in charge of San Dinalle," he announced. "But do not let yourselves believe the fighting is done. Pockets of enemy resistance remain throughout Faerzen, and they will likely attempt to retake the city. Be on your guard."

With a brisk acknowledgment, the aides returned to their duties. Ludurr threaded his way through them back to his chair. He sat back down with a sigh, brow furrowing.

"Her Highness has well and truly cut me loose, it would seem. Not that I mind, I suppose."

Lady Celia Estrella's decision had been a wise one. Certainly, she had no reason to trust him. He couldn't help but feel it would have been wiser to keep him under close watch than leave him behind, but that was by the by.

"The pressing question now is...who exactly is conspiring with Six Kingdoms?"

San Dinalle was the final bulwark before Six Kingdoms' own soil. By all rights, they ought to be defending it tooth and nail. There was only one reason they would relinquish it so easily:

they had come to some agreement with the empire behind closed doors.

There were other reasons Ludurr had come to that conclusion. For one, everything was too conveniently timed. Events were proceeding as though both sides were working in concert. Six Kingdoms' leadership escaping unharmed precisely before the imperial encirclement had snapped shut. The leaderless defenders being left with no choice but to surrender, allowing the empire to seize the city with minimal losses.

"No string of coincidences is that convenient."

That said, it was hard to believe Liz had made contact with Six Kingdoms undetected. Ludurr had kept a close eye on her—or had others do it for him—ever since the imperial army had moved into Faerzen, but she had done nothing especially suspect.

At that moment, a shadow fell across his desk. A voice addressed him. "My lord? My lord, we are ready to enter the city."

Ludurr looked up. A soldier stared back at him, looking faintly perplexed. For a moment, he wondered why the man seemed so hesitant, but a look around the tent revealed that his advisors were staring in similar concern. Apparently, he had been so deep in thought that he had not noticed them trying to get his attention.

He stood up in an attempt to hide his embarrassment. "Very good. Bring me my horse."

"At once, my lord."

Ludurr followed the soldier out of the tent. For a moment he gazed at the black smoke still rising from San Dinalle. "Did Nameless plan even this, I wonder?"

With a heavy sigh, he squinted at the city. The rumble of a collapsing wall rang out, followed swiftly by echoing screams. Those who refused to surrender would hold out to the death—and, as ever, the commonfolk would be caught in the cross fire. As a soldier of the empire, the conqueror of Soleil, he had seen similar massacres play out many times. There was a lesson to be learned there, he thought. Someday, the empire would reckon with the same destruction it wreaked on others. Its nobles knew that well, and they were constantly searching for a way to survive. They schemed, betrayed, and sold their allegiances, smiling and shaking hands with their peers so as not to be left behind, yet readying blades in their other hands for the day

blood would need to be spilled.

"Your horse, my lord," a soldier said.

"Thank you." Ludurr mounted his steed. "Well, then. Off we go on our tour of hell."

He turned his horse about and fell in behind the soldiers leading the way. A snort escaped him as he gazed up at the sun-drenched sky.

"The way before you is dark, Your Highness. As obscure as the smoke that hangs over the city you have won. And those who wait for you on that path were once nigh unto gods. Underestimate them and they will swallow you whole."

He clutched his chest with a pained grimace before turning to stare into the distance. Beyond lay Liz's position.

"No matter how valiantly you struggle, you cannot change the future. The empire is destined to fall."

At last, he turned his gaze south toward his own homeland.

"Soon, Lord Beto. Soon, the age of von Grantz will end, and the age of House Muzuk will begin."

* * * * *

Sunspear was the largest city in the southern territories. To its north lay the imperial capital, to the south the slaver nation of the Duchy of Lichtein and the melting pot that was the Republic of Steissen, to the west the third imperial city, and to the east Baldickgarten and the Eagle's Roost. Its central location made it a waypoint for merchants traveling in all directions, and it did such roaring trade in foreign goods that it was often called an inland port. Thanks to that good fortune, it rivaled the imperial capital for prosperity.

Although most would have said Sunspear's success was derived from trade, it was also the empire's greatest producer of gold. As such, it attracted the wealthy and well-to-do, who ensured its affairs were well funded. The cityscape was constantly expanding and renovating. On top of that, the free-spirited and broad-minded character of its people meant there was little discrimination. It was not uncommon for travelers of other races to be so taken by its charms that they ended up settling there for good.

Sunspear was ruled by House Muzuk, one of the empire's five great houses. They resided in the palace of Glitnir in the center

of the city. So much gold had been used in the building's construction that it was dubbed the Golden Hall, and while it arguably made for a symbol of the city's prosperity, many called it gaudy and in poor taste. Nonetheless, Sunspear's architecture did make use of a great deal of gold, so the palace complemented the surrounding buildings, one with the city rather than apart from it. Its appeal—or lack thereof—lay in the eye of the beholder.

It was certainly true that many came to Sunspear hoping to strike it rich. Such people invariably looked up to the city's ruler, Beto Lueger von Muzuk. He had assumed leadership of House Muzuk at the young age of twenty-seven after the previous patriarch passed away from illness, and in the four years since, he had purged the city of corrupt nobles and actively attracted foreign merchants in an attempt to secure new trade routes. Sunspear had flourished under his rule. Despite his youth, he had proven something of a prodigy, and with such skilled retainers as Ludurr at his side, he now wielded influence in the empire second only to that of House Kelheit.

The day found Beto cooped up in his chambers, brow furrowed as he gazed at a scroll. The door opened and his wife, Selvia Sephone von Muzuk, entered.

"My," she exclaimed. "Is that a letter from Ludurr?"

Her clothing was so sheer that her underwear showed through beneath, but between the tropical climes of the city and the way it complimented her figure, the effect was not obscene. If anything, it was closer to an artistic depiction of the human form.

Beto cleared his throat and nodded. "It is. He reports that the Faerzen campaign proceeds apace."

"That's a relief to hear."

"May I ask what you are doing here? It's rare for you to come to my quarters."

"I only thought you might appreciate some refreshments. Is that so strange?" Selvia laid a tray on the desk. It was piled high with baked treats and a steaming cup of tea.

Beto picked up the cup, took a sip, and nodded in approval. He looked back at his wife. "So? Did you have some business with me?"

"Not as such, but the palace has gotten so dreadfully noisy. I thought here I might finally find some peace." Selvia walked to

the window and gazed out. The outskirts of the city were a sea of tents, but the banners flying above them did not belong to any of the southern houses. “I swear, nothing but eastern noble soldiers as far as the eye can see.”

With Ludurr leading so many soldiers east, House Kelheit had stepped in to reinforce the south with its private troops.

“Their concerns are a pretense, no doubt,” Beto said. “They’re here to keep an eye on us.”

He could have turned down the offer, but it had been wiser to accept. Chancellor Rosa no doubt shared his concerns. With unrest in the north, the empire could not afford for the south to fall. Nonetheless, once a stack of bricks had begun to topple, propping it up was difficult work.

“The bulk of the empire’s strength has ridden west,” he continued. “We will not be able to rely on it in a crisis. We will have to make do with what remains.”

The western territories were still recovering from their wounds of three years prior. They were in no position to send any soldiers. The central territories, too, had fallen into decline following the downfall of House Krone. Upon becoming chancellor, Rosa had weeded out corruption among the central nobles, confiscating their assets, seizing their lands, and stripping them of their ranks. Her policies had won great acclaim among the people and swollen her faction’s influence, but at the price of a weakened noble class.

“She barely gave the heartlands time to recover before launching this Faerzen campaign. Soldiers are not a limitless resource. Nothing is. It seems she has forgotten that.”

Selvia raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Never in history has the empire fought so many wars in such short order. Even Greiheit had his Fifth Spring. We are living in unprecedented times.”

“Concerning indeed,” Selvia said. “Do you know, I hear the most curious rumors. The commonfolk whisper that all of this can be traced back to Lichtein. Do you suppose they’re right?”

Beto found himself swallowing hard. Selvia looked down at him, her expression faintly frosty. As he met her lightless eyes, he gave a small sigh.

“Why do you say that?”

“A good friend of mine tells me that Hiro, Liz, and Stovell were all present when Lichtein first crossed the border.”

“I’ve heard as much. It did happen in my territories, after all. Lady Celia Estrella and Stovell were feuding over the throne at the time.”

That said, their contest had hardly been equal enough to call a feud. Stovell had possessed the backing of the largest faction at court, while Liz had been isolated with no support from anyone. Their brief clash had ended with Liz being banished to a backwater province.

“She was on her way to her uncle’s lands in Gurinda, I believe.”

Fearing that one of her rivals for the throne would try to waylay her on the road, Liz had taken a longer route to Gurinda, crossing Mount Himmel and passing through Baum. On the way, she and her forces had encountered an invading force from Lichtein and engaged them in combat.

“Stovell arrived after that, as I recall. He went to lend his aid, but by the time he got there, the fighting was done. I see nothing strange about that.”

“But why did Stovell go so far out of his way? He was on campaign with Emperor Greiheit in Faerzen, was he not? That’s a terribly long way to travel.”

“As I said, he rode to lend his aid—”

“But how did he know the south was in peril?” Selvia interrupted insistently.

“Margrave von Gurinda sent out messengers. He might have heard from one of them, or from the refugees. There are any number of ways he might have gotten the news.”

“So he returned from the campaign immediately after Liz was sent to Gurinda, just in time to receive this message, assembled the Fourth Legion in exceptionally short order, and rode directly to the battlefield? That is your understanding?”

Beto sighed, his brow furrowing. “What exactly are you getting at?”

“Nothing. It simply seems to me that events conspired very conveniently.”

“Are you suggesting that Stovell anticipated the current crisis?”

“Of course not. But one did hear the strangest rumors about him. Don’t you think it’s odd that he’s been missing for so long?”

“You are being absurd. Many nations have had a hand in creating the ongoing situation. It is not something one man could orchestrate alone. Anyone who could do that would not

stop at Soleil. He would have the whole world in his grasp." Beto gave his wife a forbidding look as if to say he would hear no more.

"You are correct, of course. I should not have mentioned it. Please forget I ever said anything."

Seeing Selvia's contrition made Beto embarrassed he had grown so heated. He eased himself down into his chair, his manner softening. "No, it's quite all right. It was an enlightening conversation." He cracked a smile. "Perhaps you would like to serve as my strategist one of these days."

Selvia giggled, bringing the back of her hand to her mouth. "While that sounds delightful, I can hardly be charging around battlefields with a daughter to take care of."

Beto let his shoulders slump exaggeratedly. "A shame, to be certain." He finished the rest of his tea, which was now quite cold, and laid the cup back on his desk.

Selvia moved to tidy it away, but as she did, something caught her attention. "Oh?"

Beto looked up at her dubiously. "Is something the matter?"

"This is a map of the north. Are affairs up there truly so dire?"

On the desk were the documents that Beto had been poring over: a map of the west and a map of the north, with stacks of parchment around them.

"My spies tell me that House Brommel is rising to prominence at House Scharm's expense. The previous head was nobody of note, but his son seems to be quite capable."

Selvia leaned closer, laying a hand on Beto's shoulder. "He sounds a lot like you." Her tone seemed oddly heavy with implication.

Beto's brow furrowed a little, but he suppressed his misgivings and nodded. "Perhaps he is. In circumstance, at least."

"Well," Selvia said, "I do believe I will excuse myself. I will be in the next room if you need me."

She moved to retrieve her tray. Even after her hand lifted from his shoulder, its sensation remained, lingering like a heated object pressed against his skin. He rubbed his throat and gave a small cough, trying to dispel his unease.

"Hm... Perhaps..."

Selvia stopped just before the door, turning. "Perhaps what?"

"Nothing, nothing." He cocked his head, thinking. "Our

conversation just made me realize something."

Selvia's eyes glinted with a beguiling light as she raised a hand to her mouth. "Whatever do you mean?"

"There may be many interests in the game, but if they all wanted the same thing, manipulating them might not be so difficult after all."

She raised a finger, amusement dancing in her eyes. "Indeed...if they all sought to destroy the empire. To make all one." With that final remark, she left the room.

Beto stared for a long while at the closed door. At last, he shrugged, smiling ruefully. "She certainly has her finger on the pulse. And her wits are fearsomely sharp." With a sigh, he turned his gaze to the wall, where the portrait of House Muzuk's previous head hung. "Your blood must indeed run thick in her veins."

Chapter 3: Creeping Shadow

House Heimdall ruled over a broad swath of land in the west of the northern territories. They had faithfully served House Scharm for many years, through good and ill, and had been rewarded for their loyalty by becoming one of the three most powerful houses in the north. Yet that was not the only reason for their fame. The rest of Soleil knew them as the keepers of Friedhof, the great wall that divided the empire from the untamed lands of the Sanctuarium beyond.

The house's seat of power was located in Malaren, only a stone's throw from the wall. It was a medium-sized settlement, perhaps the sixth largest in the north, and had been built to dispatch reinforcements at a moment's notice. With the threat of the Wild Races so close, it was far from an economic hub, but its residents maintained good cheer. The frigid climate lent itself to drinking, and Malaren boasted so many taverns with such a wide collection of liquor that it had earned itself the nickname "Flagon's Last Stop." It had its rougher sides, with daytime drinkers in the streets and a few rowdy drunks, but it broadly maintained a semblance of order.

Hermes von Heimdall was known far and wide not only as a high general but also as a great lover of liquor. He preferred to stay in his chambers inside Friedhof rather than at his mansion in the city. That was where he was at present, accompanied by a man who would have very much preferred to be anywhere else: Muninn, lieutenant to King Surtr of Baum.

Muninn sat rigidly on the floor, his mouth hanging open. He didn't know what to say. The sheer volume of bottles lying there left him in shock.

Hermes peered at him. The old man was stripped to the waist, revealing bulging muscles. "Cat got your tongue, son?"

"It ain't like that, it's just... Old ma— I mean, High General von Heimdall, sir..."

Muninn had expected death after being exposed as a spy, but Hermes had made no move to apprehend him. The old man had simply escorted him back to his chambers and set to drinking. Muninn could only watch aghast as bottle after bottle had

emptied before his eyes.

"Get some drink in you, son. You must be freezing." Hermes thrust a goblet into his hand and filled it to the brim.

"Um...if you don't mind me asking," Muninn began, "what's going to happen to me?"

"What's going to happen? You'll drink up and then you'll go on home, that's what." Hermes took another hearty swig. "Bah. S'pose you'd best have a gander at the wall first."

Muninn took a gulp of his own goblet, cocking his head. "That's it? I just get to look around and go?"

"Be my guest, son. You seem like a good sort."

Muninn pinched the skin between his eyebrows, only more perplexed.

Hermes grinned at his confusion. "You'll understand once you see for yourself. Come on, lad. Grab yourself a bottle and we can drink on the way."

He stood up and made for the door, bottle in hand. Muninn hurriedly followed.

"Five hundred years ago now this wall went up," Hermes grunted.

Muninn knew that well enough. It was impossible to open an imperial history book without learning something about the subject. The wall had been erected after the twenty-second emperor had driven the Wild Races from the northern territories.

"Some say it's made out of spirits. That it only looks like ice from a distance, and if you look real close, you'll see it's more like a great hunk of spirit stone."

Muninn reached out to touch the wall for himself. It was certainly cold, but not more so than ice—although now that he thought about it, freezing crystal would feel much the same...

"Watch this, son." Hermes drew his sword and swung it against the wall. With a loud clang, the blade fell to the ground, having snapped off at the hilt. "Fearsome strong stuff. You could swing full strength without leaving a mark. Might manage a scratch with a spirit weapon, but you'd just as easily break an arm."

"Huh..."

Muninn was so taken aback that he couldn't muster a proper reply. Hermes tossed the broken hilt away and set off down the corridor.

"So how'd they build this place, then?" Muninn's interest had

been piqued. If even a spirit weapon could only scratch the wall, what kind of craftsmanship had the humans of the past used to carve out habitable living quarters?

Hermes grunted. “Beats me. Ask someone who was around five hundred years ago. Some of the books say the dwarves up on the northern continent had a hand in its construction, but there’s nothing about their techniques.”

“Sounds like the stonecutters from back then could teach the ones we have now a thing or two.”

Muninn grinned. He had intended that jokingly, but Hermes only nodded. There was no amusement in the man’s eyes.

“Aye, you could say that. There’s a lot of knowledge been lost since those days. Tell me, have you heard of the imperial assassination three hundred years ago?”

“I’ve heard of it. I’m no historian, but I remember Orcus was behind it.”

Thanks to Hiro’s instruction, Muninn knew the broad strokes of the history of Soleil. Three hundred years ago, the empire had been stricken by the worst famine it had ever faced. The nobles had resorted to disreputable means to survive, levying heavy taxes on the commonfolk and finding excuses to attack their neighbors. Matters had only grown worse when the emperor was assassinated. Such an event had never happened before or since, and it had propelled the name of Orcus to the height of infamy.

“The Age of Strife, that time was called,” Hermes said. “All the bloodshed cost us a lot of knowledge and a lot of fine craftsmen.”

The pair climbed up a set of stairs. At the top was a sturdy iron door.

“So when you say they had it better back then, aye, they probably did. Had a much closer relationship with the spirit back then too.”

Hermes grasped the handle and shunted the door open. A biting wind blew in, carrying with it a flurry of snow. The cold set Muninn’s teeth chattering, and he wrapped his arms around himself.

“Go on, son. Take a look.” Hermes gestured through the door.

Muninn was practically frozen stiff. Despite all his furs, it felt like he had been thrown outside as naked as the day he was born. Still, Hermes did not look like he would take no for an

answer. He walked up to the doorway.

“Leave the goblet, son,” Hermes said. “The silver will stick in the cold—take your whole damned palm off.”

Muninn hurriedly laid the cup down. Hermes joined him, tossing his now-empty bottle to the ground. Muninn hadn’t even seen him finish it.

“Oh,” Hermes said, “before we head out, let me give you a piece of advice.”

The man’s eyes had grown flinty. Muninn swallowed hard.

“Don’t let your guard down, son. Not for a second.”

What should have been words of concern sounded oddly intimidating. Muninn was so taken aback that by the time he thought to ask what he was supposed to be so wary of, Hermes was already heading through the door. He followed suit, stepping out into the biting wind…where the sight before him drove all thoughts of the cold from his head.

“Bugger me…” he whispered.

“Everyone’s jaw drops first time.” Hermes clapped a reassuring hand on Muninn’s shoulder, prompting him with a thrust of the chin to look again.

“Are they training?” Muninn asked.

All along the wall, soldiers were launching arrows from the battlements into the lands of the Sanctuarium. Their battle cries rode heavy on the wind, and their arrows flew straight and true into the dark in defiance of the gale. Bonfires burned to stave off the cold, helping the soldiers bring numbing fingers back to bowstrings as they fired for all they were worth. It looked for all the world like a real battle. The soldiers seemed to be fighting for their lives.

As Muninn stood dumbly, the hand squeezed his shoulder, prompting him to look back at Hermes. The man’s face was grim.

“No, son. We’re at war.”

“We’re what?”

No sooner had the question slipped from Muninn’s lips than Hermes’s enormous paw rushed toward his face. He let out a yelp as the hand stopped a hair’s breadth from his nose.

“I told you not to let your guard down, son.”

An arrow shaft protruded from Hermes’s closed fingers. He squeezed his fist, snapping it in half, before grabbing Muninn by the head and ushering him into the cover of the battlements.

“Figured it’d be faster to show you than tell you.”

Hermes's hand forced Muninn to a gap in the crenellations where he could look down at the ground. His eyes went wide. The night was dark, and the ever-present blizzard impeded most of the meager moonlight, but he could just about make out movement below.

"What in the world...?"

"Archons. Or yaldabaoth. One of the two."

"I thought they were stories..."

"They're as real as you or me, son. What did you think we were out here defending the empire from?"

"Aye, fair's fair," Muninn said sheepishly. "I just... I never thought I'd get to see 'em for myself, that's all."

Certainly, he had never pictured them so close. He had always imagined them dwelling quietly in the depths of the Sanctuarium, not within spitting distance of Friedhof.

"Spend a while here and you'll see 'em plenty. Give it a few decades, you'll be better acquainted with them than with monsters."

At last, reality sank in. The soldiers were not conducting some kind of realistic training exercise; they were fighting a genuine battle against archons and yaldabaoth massing beneath the wall.

"We ain't fighting humans here, son. Give 'em half a chance and they'll swarm over this wall like ants. I've had to bare steel against 'em myself more than once."

Hermes stopped and began to wipe the snow from the ground at their feet. The hard, spirit-forged surface was stained a gory red. It was all too clear why. It was a bloodstain, and not just one. Blood had been spilled here time and time again, drying on the ground and growing black.

"Lots of men figured they were safe all the way up here. Lots of men died. Keep your wits about you or you won't have time to regret it."

"So that's why..."

The soldiers had been fighting for their lives. There had been real fear on their faces as they loosed their arrows, and no wonder. Every shadow moving in the half-light was a creature capable of climbing the wall. If the enemy reached the top, the battlements would run red with blood. They were desperate to drive them back before it reached that point.

"We're lucky they're so few. That's the only reason we've held

the line for this long. But sometimes they bring monsters to try and smash their way through. They've minds as sharp as any man's—can even speak human tongues, if you can believe it. Hardy bastards and no mistake."

That was why a high general was required to man Friedhof. Given the catastrophe that would follow if the wall was breached and the fact that few common soldiers could cross blades with their foe, the empire had no choice but to commit one of their greatest warriors.

"The capital sends us spirit weapons from time to time, but there's precious few to go around, and without a worthy wielder, they can end up lost. Damned rare, they are. We can't hand 'em out to all the men." Hermes grasped Muninn's shoulder once more. "If you want to do me a favor, son, go back and tell your master we could use a few more."

Muninn grew flustered. "Me? I don't know what help I can—"

Hermes's grip only tightened. "I know what you are, son. You're an agent of Baum."

"I'm not—" Muninn tried to deny it, but he stopped when he saw the look in Hermes's eyes. They bore the fearful glint of a man with his back to the wall. He was all but pleading. A high general of the empire, one of the mightiest warriors in the land, was begging for help. Rather than seeming pitiful, it spoke to the magnitude of the threat he faced.

Muninn had never been one for thinking, but he racked his brains for all he was worth. In the end, he decided to give up the pretense. "How'd you figure me out?"

The decision came after a careful consideration of the risks. If he lied and was imprisoned, he would not be able to return to Baum with the information he had gathered. After coming so far, he did not want to fail now. More to the point, however, Hermes's sincerity had struck a chord with him. The high general had known he was spying for another nation, but instead of taking him captive, he had shared liquor with him before personally escorting him around one of the most secretive places in the empire. The man likely had his own goals, of course, but his hospitality seemed to have been genuine enough. Besides, Muninn told himself, his job was simply to return alive. The hard decisions would be for Hiro to make once he got back to Baum. He smiled wryly. It was at times like these that he wondered if he was really cut out for reconnaissance work.

Relief washed over Hermes's face, and he lifted his hand from Muninn's shoulder. At that, Muninn knew he had made the right choice.

"I've got a good nose, son," the old soldier said. "See enough folks pass through here, you start to get an eye for shady customers."

No doubt that was why he had permitted Muninn to see what was really happening at Friedhof rather than taking him prisoner. Anyone could imagine how grueling it must be to fight an endless war in this boreal cold, but imagination didn't hold a candle to experiencing the reality in person.

"If it were me up here," Muninn said, "I'd have turned tail and run by now."

"Many do. Every day, feels like. Mostly the outsiders, though. Folks without family in this part of the north."

If the Wild Races spilled over Friedhof, the casualties would be immense, all the more so if they reached civilization. For those with family nearby, manning the wall was the only way to ensure the safety of their homes and the people they held dear. If not for that, many of them would surely have long since fled as well.

"Unfortunately for everyone," Hermes continued, "the archons and the yaldabaoth have been getting uppity recently. Shifts are getting shorter, and the men are dead on their feet. I've written to other houses for help replenishing the ranks, but our new recruits keep turning into deserters." He stroked his snow-crusted beard and sighed. The white puff scattered on the wind. "If we had more spirit weapons, the men might stay around a little longer. Not that I'd hand those out to recruits, of course. I'd be a bit more discerning than that."

"So you want me to tell it how it is, then? Warts and all?"

"It's the warts I need help with, son." Hermes gave a firm nod. "I'm not looking to keep any secrets. Anything your master wants to know, I'll tell him as best I can."

As far as Muninn could see, the man's offer was sincere. The north seemed to be in a more precarious state than Hiro had appreciated.

"'Course, the biggest problem is that House Scharm's falling apart at the seams. Folks who used to give us soldiers are starting to renege on their commitments. We're close to breaking point, son. It's only love for the empire and the north that's keeping us going."

Hermes's position seemed to be that a few more spirit weapons would grant the remaining garrison some relief, but Muninn had his doubts. Fighting an endless battle in such inhospitable climes was grueling enough, no matter how many spirit weapons they had on hand.

The general seemed to read his mind and cracked a rueful grin. "Sometimes a little motivation's all it takes to turn a man into a warrior. I've spent long enough up here to know it never hurts."

It seemed there was no choice but to tell the unvarnished truth. What Hiro would make of that remained to be seen, but whatever he decided, Muninn would follow.

"All right. You have my word. I'll tell the chief everything that's going on up here."

"Appreciate that, son. Now we just have to hope that House Scharm and Second Prince Selene can get back on their feet."

Hermes's troubles seemed never-ending. Even if he managed to secure more spirit weapons, they would be useless without anybody to wield them—and the only person capable of resolving Friedhof's lack of manpower was the wounded Second Prince Selene.

* * * * *

House Scharm ruled from Riesenriller in the center of the northern territories. It had until recently been led by one Byzan Graeci von Scharm, who had also served as the chancellor to the empire. Publicly, it was believed he had been slain three years prior when a group of intruders broke into Venezyne. Privately, the facts were less certain. Second Prince Selene had come to suspect he had already been replaced by an impostor by the time of his alleged death. Regardless of the truth, however, his passing was now public, and it had dealt a heavy blow to House Scharm's authority.

Had Selene been in good health, he might have been able to rally his faction, but he too had been wounded in the attack on the palace. Ever since that day, he had been recovering in private. With the rise of Sixth Princess Celia Estrella, the dominance of House Kelheit and their eastern nobles, and Lebering's new prosperity added to the mix, the northern nobles felt beset on all sides. The world seemed to be moving faster

than they could keep up with. Should they switch allegiances or try to ride out the storm? Both of the leaders they would have looked to for directions were now absent.

The nobles' unease was further exacerbated by House Brommel. They were moving fast and hard, trying to tip the balance of power in their favor while House Scharm lay immobilized. The remaining members of House Scharm had no intention of lying down while their faction fragmented and were trying to address the issue in Selene's absence, but they were hard-pressed to turn the tide. Before they knew it, most of their allies had sided with the enemy. It was only recently that House Brommel's plans seemed to have slowed.

"There are ominous movements in Lebering, Your Highness," the woman said, head bowed. "They appear to be mustering for war. If we show the slightest weakness, they will surely strike."

She was one of Second Prince Selene's two renowned Twinfang Generals, Phroditus von Heimdall. The young man kneeling beside her was her elder brother and the other Twinfang General, Herma von Heimdall. The pair had gathered in the throne room of Riesenriller to report to Selene.

Herma pulled a chagrined expression. "The same is true of House Brommel, Your Highness. They have been drawing troops from across the land. Whether they are working with Lebering, I cannot say, but they are surely plotting something."

"Indeed." Selene nodded. "Fortunately, I doubt Lebering is with them. We won't have to worry about that, at the very least."

Once word had spread that Lebering was massing its forces, House Brommel had slowed its pace. The traitorous nobles, too, had suddenly become very quiet. It had been a fortuitous turn of events for House Scharm. The stay of execution had allowed Selene time to recover from his injuries.

"I'm sure Lebering is plotting something of its own, but we still owe them a debt. And now that I am healed, I mean to put House Brommel in its place." Selene sat back in his throne, raising a hand to the large eyepatch that covered the right side of his face. "My body feels like lead, I regret to say, but it seems I am not too late."

"How fares your eye, Your Highness?" Herma asked.

Selene gave a nonchalant shrug. "It's been a novel experience, certainly."



The second prince had lost much during the attack on Venezyne. Vang, the cadre of spies Chancellor Graeci had spent his life developing, had been wiped out, and Selene himself had forfeited his right eye in battle.

"I still struggle a little with judging distance, but otherwise, I'm in the best shape I'll ever be."

"What of Móralltach and Beagalltach? Can they not heal you?"

"They've done enough already. I wouldn't ask for more. If not for them, I would have been bedridden for several months yet."

He smiled faintly, and the twin blades flared into being in his hands. Herma and Phroditus did not react to their sudden appearance. They were well used to their liege's strange armaments.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting," the prince said. "Will you lend me your strength again?"

The blades glowed with ripples of light, pulsing like a heartbeat in reply.

Selene nodded, pleased, but his face grew grave once more as he turned to Herma. "How fare our preparations?"

"Finished in all senses but one, Your Highness. House Brommel is yet to reply."

"I suppose that means they aren't in a mood to talk."

"So it would seem. More nobles are visiting Logue than ever. It appears they no longer consider House Scharm to be their masters."

"Give me ten thousand men," Phroditus interjected, "and I will reduce House Brommel to a smoking ruin."

Selene could only crack a rueful smile. He well understood where Phroditus's confidence came from. She was strong, even more so than her brother, and she had a tremendous aptitude for spirit weapons. Even so, he was doubtful she would succeed.

"I'd prefer you to remain here," he said. "I would have you fight by my side."

"Of course, Your Highness!" Phroditus's head plunged down in a vigorous bow, her cheeks flushed faintly pink.

Selene smiled again and turned to Herma, who was visibly relieved that someone had headed his sister off. "What of House Heimdall?"

"Malaren promises to send troops to our aid if House Brommel moves against us. I only fear..." Herma trailed off awkwardly.

“You only fear what?” Selene pressed.

“The archons and the yaldabaoth have been causing more and more trouble of late. House Heimdall may not have soldiers to spare.”

“Then I will not force them. I would sooner see the end of House Scharm than the end of Friedhof. If the Spirit Wall were to fall, none of our victories would amount to anything.”

Phroditus butted in again. “Then it sounds like we have no choice but to take Lady Celia Estrella up on her offer.”

Herma grimaced a little, but he could not deny the truth of his sister’s words. It was hard to blame her for thinking they should swallow their pride. The north was teetering on a razor’s edge.

“That, I fear, I cannot do,” Selene said.

“Why not?” Phroditus was not willing to back down. “No one seems to have a bad word to say about her. I know I haven’t met her myself, but I don’t think she’d ask for anything in return.”

Selene smiled wryly. “Most of the empire’s strength is in Faerzen. Over a hundred thousand men, or so I hear. With that many, they likely mean to march on to Six Kingdoms. Send to them for help and we’ll slow their momentum when they need it most.”

The empire had been left with a sparse guard, but its troops were spread too thin to send assistance to the north. What was more, Liz had taken most of the commanders of repute on her campaign, leaving nobody of note in the central, western, or eastern territories. A high general might have helped to turn the tide, but von Hass the prodigy had perished in battle with Six Kingdoms, von Loeing the warmonger had fallen upon the sword of his own failed revolt, and now Strongarm von Cain had died on the western front. The empire’s forces were lacking for leadership.

“I will not take Hermes away from Friedhof,” Selene continued. “That only leaves the Warden of the East, but with the empire so thinly guarded, I doubt Rosa can spare her. She probably can’t spare any troops at all.”

The south stank of unrest. If it erupted into violence, Rosa would need everything she had.

“But then…” Phroditus fell silent, grinding her teeth.

Herma laid a consolatory hand on his sister’s shoulder. “Do you believe the Vanir Triumvirate will join the fray, Your Highness?”

“It wouldn’t surprise me. The álfar are long-lived, and I’m sure they still remember the persecution they endured at human hands. I doubt they will have forgiven us. Now that the empire’s guard is down, they have the perfect opportunity to seek revenge. They’re probably overjoyed to hear about trouble in the north.”

That said, Rosa surely had plans of her own. Selene had already heard that she had sent eastern noble troops down to the southern territories, presumably to fend off any coming invasion. Fortunately, the south’s best commanders had not joined the Faerzen campaign. With their strength in the mix, the Vanir Triumvirate would not pose a problem.

“I doubt Steissen or Lichtein would be willing to aid them. My only concern is Draal. It’s still recovering from the old grand duke’s death, and it borders a lot more nations than either Steissen or Lichtein. Its regions are more like their neighbors than each other.”

“Do you expect it to fracture, Your Highness?”

“I fear it might. Even here in the empire, we hear about the feuds between the faerie worshippers in the south and the spirit worshippers in the north. If the south has answered the Triumvirate’s call, the north will have to look the other way or risk a schism.”

It was widely whispered that Draal’s current grand duke was not respected among his nobles. While his father and elder brother had both been charismatic figures, he was a retiring man who did more or less what his retainers said.

“I can say this for certain, though,” Selene said. “If the Vanir Triumvirate does try something, the Free Folk will join them.”

Between Steissen and the Vanir Triumvirate lay the land of the Free Folk, a nation rooted in a history of persecution. Half-blooded álfar had fled oppression in their homelands and come to the Vanir Triumvirate, which had taken pity upon their plight and granted them a land of their own. They would fight to repay that ancient debt.

“The Free Folk…” Herma scratched his chin. “It’s like the dark history of the empire’s come back to haunt us.”

“Another product of the third emperor’s legacy of oppression. The same could be said of Six Kingdoms. Not exactly the fruit of our own failings, but close enough.”

Selene paused and took out a book. Any imperial citizen

would recognize the Black Chronicle. Despite its unknown authorship, it had sold widely when it was published, although copies were now hard to come by.

"There's a curious passage in here," Selene said, opening the book and flicking back to a well-thumbed page. He began to read aloud. "'When the war with the zlosta approached its zenith, Emperor Artheus thought to raze the lands that had refused to join his cause, for they had been false brethren. But his brother Mars counseled him thus: would one man use his authority to birth countless misfortunes for the sake of one grievance? And so one triumphed over countless, and countless triumphed over one, and Mars's one remark was as countless words from other men.'"

"Brothers indeed," Phroditus remarked.

Selene chuckled. "They were certainly fast friends, weren't they? Mars's counsel was nothing special. Hardly words to sway the people. But it seemed to work on Artheus well enough."

Powerful enough authority could make anyone bend the knee. Opposition would melt away, and others would cease to disagree for fear of punishment. No doubt Artheus had been pleased to have someone in his service willing to contradict him. Certainly, the Black Chronicle suggested he had been grateful rather than irate.

No amount of power could conquer solitude, and Artheus seemed to have been no exception. It may well have been an intimate concern for him, even if those whose nations he burned would have little sympathy. He had only been able to manage it thanks to his closeness with Mars, and if the War God had put a foot wrong, the empire could have been split in two.

"It seems the third emperor did not learn the same lesson," Phroditus remarked. There was a certain amount of frustration in her voice, and small wonder. The third emperor's actions still haunted the empire a thousand years later, and the people of the modern day were paying the price for his sins.

"He was said to have been a paranoid man," Selene said. "I suppose he looked around and saw enemies on all sides. He certainly didn't hesitate to quash them."

The third emperor's purges had wrought a great deal of misery. All across Soleil, humans had taken to persecuting other races, leading to an age of oppression not so different from that of the zlosta. Still, some humans had stood up in defiance of his

tyranny: his younger brother and the still-living descendants of Mars's Black Hand.

"The rebellion failed, and the emperor's brother fled west, swearing to return. The descendants of the Black Hand went with him, branded renegades. That much, any child knows."

The third emperor had grown increasingly consumed by remorse, to the point of eventually taking his own life. Time passed, the ages turned, and when the fifth emperor took the throne, he officially pardoned the Black Hand and reined in discrimination against other races. By then, however, the seeds of resentment against humans had already been sown.

"Everything comes back to that history of oppression," Selene murmured. "Not least the founding of Six Kingdoms."

* * * * *

The thirteenth day of the tenth month of Imperial Year 1026

The sun went down, the moon showed its face, and the night wind took on a chill. Firelight flickered in the breeze, footsteps drowned out insect cries, and the air trembled with voices. The road to Licht, the capital of Esel, was a sea of lights. Upon closer inspection they revealed themselves to be a veritable city of tents. Lion banners fluttered in the wind, dancing with shadows in the light of the bonfires.

The imperial army's march into Esel had come to a stop just before the town of Carlen. They had not encountered any particular obstruction; they had simply stopped to rest with the setting of the sun, intending to resume their advance the following day.

The Crow Legion had claimed a portion of the campsite for themselves. They were a disciplined force, and typically, their encampment would have been quiet. Tonight, however, the opposite was true. Outsiders had joined them, bringing chaos in their wake.

A horned man danced with a flagon of ale in his hand, grinning broadly. He proffered his drink to the Crow Legion soldiers on guard. Eventually, three of his drunken fellows came and dragged him away. Similar scenes played out all across the encampment. The merry troupe of newcomers were dressed like bandits, but while their rowdiness was drawing some disapproving frowns, there was no alarm in the air. They were

allies, not enemies. They were soldiers despite their garb, ones affiliated with the next encampment over. Yet while they were working together, the Crow Legion had no authority over them, leaving the black-clad soldiers at a loss for what to do.

There were other traits that put the newcomers at odds with the Crow Legion. For one, their cheerful dispositions compelled them to squeeze all the joy they could out of every second, and for another, they possessed inhuman strength. In short, they were the race commonly known as beastfolk.

The Crow Legion soldiers were not the only ones fighting off the beastfolk's attentions. Hiro, too, was suffering a similar plight inside his own tent.

"So when do you intend to return to Steissen?" he asked the beastwoman before him.

She glared up at him as she bit into a large hunk of meat, still on the bone. "Eh? Once the next battle's over, probably. Shouldn't be long."

She sat cross-legged on the ground in front of him. Her underwear was clearly visible, but she didn't seem to care. Her typical garb was little better than underwear anyway. At one point, he had asked why she showed so much skin, and he vaguely recalled her saying it made for easier movement. In any case, she was undeniably beautiful. The skimpy tribal garb was almost vulgar, but a modest scattering of jewels lent an edge of elegance that kept it in check, making her look like she had stepped out of a painting. Her taut muscles seemed more artistic than sensual, accentuating her allure. Her name was Skadi Bestla Mikhael, and she was the high consul of Steissen.

"Now, Huginn, you mustn't waste a morsel. This meat is positively divine."

"Erm...Miss Luka? I can eat on my own..."

Hiro glanced behind Skadi, where Luka was feeding portions of sliced meat to an unwilling Huginn. He downed his wine and turned his attention back to the beastwoman. Better to leave the pair to their own devices.

"I'm glad to hear it," he said. "I was worried you might keep going until you got bored."

"Give me half the chance and I would, but I figured you'd rather we went home." She took a long gulp of wine, exhaled in satisfaction, and wiped her lips. Crimson droplets splattered on the ground. No small amount of liquid spilled from her mouth

and trickled down between her breasts.

"That's true, I suppose. And I'm sure you must want to keep an eye on the Free Folk."

"Them? Bah. I've left my best back in Steissen. Free Folk act up, they'll sort it. No need for me."

"You don't sound very concerned."

"We beastfolk like to look on the bright side. No point moping your way through life, eh?" Skadi downed her umpteenth goblet of wine and grinned widely. She truly was carefree to the core. "But before that, I want to go a round with you one last time. One-on-one. You wouldn't turn me down, would you?"

"No, thank you," Hiro said flatly. "I don't think I have the energy."

Skadi tossed her goblet to the ground, undeterred. "Don't be like that. Every woman's got needs. I've been itching for a good scrap ever since I got here, but these Six Kingdoms soldiers ain't up to much. I need someone who'll really get my blood pumping." She slipped an overly familiar arm through his. She seemed to be a pushy drunk.

Hiro sighed. "Six Kingdoms has several Dharmic Blade wielders. Can't you find one of them to entertain you?"

Then again, Lucia had returned to Anguis, while Nameless hadn't been seen since their last battle. There was a chance the latter would try to intervene in Esel, but if not, Skadi would be starved of opponents.

"The Dharmic Blades, eh? Bah. Don't like how the wielders fight. No warrior's spirit."

"Have you fought one?"

"Once. One of the Free Folk's got one with a funny Graal."

"Funny how?"

"Eh, how to put it... You could say it senses you. The wielder never even looked at me. Just stood there with her eyes closed and waited for me to swing, then countered." Skadi's brow creased as she struggled to remember through her drunkenness. She began to nod as more memories returned. "It was sharp, with heavy strikes, and I couldn't land a blow. She was damned good at dodging for someone with their eyes closed. Wasn't much of a fight, though. It's hard to have fun when you're the only one attacking."

"That sounds like an interesting fighting style," Hiro said. The conversation genuinely intrigued him. He didn't know much

about the Free Folk aside from what was common knowledge: Their nation had been founded by refugees from imperial persecution, and they had close ties with the Vanir Triumvirate. Reputedly, they were on bad terms with Steissen, with whom they were constantly skirmishing.

"Who won?" he asked.

"Turned out a draw, in the end. She was just trying to keep me occupied. Scarpered once she'd bought enough time. Left me itching for a good fight, so afterward I went out and mopped up a bunch of bandits."

She began to nuzzle him with her cheek. The drink really did seem to be getting to her. Her breath tickled his ear. She seemed more in tune with her animal instincts than even other beastfolk, leading to some very bestial gestures that he did not quite know how to respond to.

"Could you tell me more about the wielder of this Dharmic Blade?" he asked. The more information he gathered about the users of the Noble Blades, the better.

"She was all pale and willowy." Skadi paused, thinking. "Verona, I think her name was."

Hiro was not familiar with the name. He would have expected someone strong enough to go toe to toe with Skadi to feature in a rumor or two, but he had never heard of this Verona before.

"You probably wouldn't know her," Skadi added, seeing his confusion. "Keeps herself to herself, that one."

"But you fought her?"

"Aye, a while back. The Nidavellirites invaded the Free Folk's lands. Burned a village."

The Nidavellirites were a group in Steissen primarily composed of dwarves. As the largest faction in the senate, they had established a despotic regime under which they had wielded their authority with abandon. With Liz's assistance, Skadi and her Jötunheimites had put an end to their age of glory.

"Once Verona learned what had happened, she walked right on into the Nidavellirite camp. Just her, no one else." Skadi lifted her goblet, discovered it was empty, and set about pouring more wine. As she watched the burgundy liquid flow, she spoke again. "Odds were in her favor, though. With a Dharmic Blade on her side, it was a bloodbath."

The Nidavellirites had lost two thousand soldiers to a single warrior, but even that had not been enough to quell the Free

Folk's anger. They had marched on Steissen in vengeance, and Skadi and her Jötunheimites had needed to join the fray to repel them.

"Verona showed up to help the stragglers retreat, and I was at the front, so we fought. Like I said, she was only trying to keep me occupied. Scarpered as soon as the rest were out of there. Ain't heard nothing of her since. Hard to tell what she was thinking, that one."

Nonetheless, if this Verona had been chosen by a Dharmic Blade, she must have possessed some conviction, belief, philosophy, or other driving force that it found compelling. If possible, Hiro would have preferred to leave her to her own devices, but he couldn't afford to disregard her. Whether she would ultimately prove an ally or an enemy, she merited investigating.

"But enough of that," Skadi said, bringing her lips to his ear. Her gaze took on a passionate intensity, and although her speech was not yet slurred, her eyes adopted a drunken, unfocused look. "Tell me, do you really mean to follow through on your plans?"

She spoke in a whisper so that Luka and Huginn could not hear. Her voice was filled with anticipation, but there was something foreboding in it too.

"I think you've had too much to drink," he said.

"Don't worry about me. I can hold my liquor." She wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her chest against him. "I've felt eyes on me, you know. Ever since I came here. More than I can count."

"Watching us, you mean?"

"Watching you. Seems like they're *very* interested in you." Skadi lowered herself down in front of where Hiro sat cross-legged and entwined her legs around his waist. "So what's the plan, Your Majesty? Far as I'm concerned, I like what you're thinking. I'd throw my lot in with you...although if you messed it all up, maybe I'd have to rethink where my loyalties lay."

"I won't mess up." Hiro's brow wrinkled at the whiff of wine, but he looked Skadi dead in the eyes, gaze unflappable despite the nearness of her sweat-slicked warmth. "Everything is going according to plan. All will be one."

"Now that's what I wanted to hear." Skadi nodded, pleased, and then pushed him backward onto the floor. She leered down

at him, coldly composed despite her pressing body heat. “I like the look of your face. That’s a man’s face. A man I can trust.”

She leaned down to lick his cheek, face glowing with delight. Now that the wine was getting to her in earnest, it only seemed to accentuate her sensuality.

“But turn on me and I’ll show you no mercy, king or no.” Her voice took on a note of warning. “Remember that.”

“Of course. I’ll give you the chance to satisfy your desires.”

“I like the sound of that. I’ll be looking forward to it.”

At that moment, a shadow fell over both of them. They looked up to see Luka glaring down, Vajra hefted over one shoulder.

“I see a rutting beast has sneaked in,” she said coldly. “Shall I exterminate her?”

Knowing her, she meant it. Still, a beastwoman was not so easily intimidated.

“Who’s this, then?” Skadi asked, rising to her feet and staring Luka down. “Looks like a corpse warmed up.”

So it had come to this. Hiro could only watch. A part of him had seen this coming. He couldn’t even muster the energy to try to hold them back.

“Cut it out, you two! What’s gotten into you?!” Huginn hurried to intercede, her face paling, but the pair didn’t even seem to register her.

“I see the rutting beast has a death wish,” Luka sneered. “I’ll be all too glad to squash her to pulp.”

“Go ahead and try.” Skadi grinned. “Maybe I’ll tear your guts out with my claws. See if I can’t squeeze some blood out of that corpse-heart of yours.”

They inched closer by the second, two powder kegs waiting for a spark. Violence could break out at any moment.

“That’s enough,” Hiro said. “Save your strength for the enemy.”

He was trying to avoid provoking them further, but they both swung around to glare at him.

“You are the cause of this,” Luka hissed. “You and your refusal to assert yourself. You let everything and everyone walk all over you. Perhaps that might be permitted in an age of peace, but in these times, only children have the luxury of indolence. Well, I suppose you *are* a child in some ways, but even that has its limits. You cannot afford to take in every stray kitten you find by the roadside.”

Hiro met her tirade with resignation, wondering how to head her off. He had hoped things wouldn't come to this, but it seemed unavoidable.

A scathing voice interrupted his thoughts. "And where do you get off acting so above it all, eh? You weren't complaining when you had your face in my bosom. Come on, let your wilder side out. Can't say I blame you. Our walking corpse over here ain't working with much." Skadi guffawed, rapping Luka's chest with the back of her knuckles like she was testing a rock.

Luka froze in place, deathly still. There was a soft smile on her face, of a kind that would have seemed perfectly natural to anyone who did not know her. Anyone who recognized how out of character it was, however, would have quivered in terror. When Luka lost her temper, blood tended to spill.

That was it, Hiro decided. The two needed to be separated.

At that moment, however, Huginn jumped in front of him. She stared both Luka and Skadi down with arms outstretched defensively. "Leave His Lordship alone!" she cried. "He's a good sort, that's all! He'd never leave a stray kitten out in the rain!"

Hiro sighed, cradling his head in his hands. It seemed there was to be no relief in sight.

"You see how Cerberus and his swiftdrake are around him!" Huginn continued. "And the boss, my brother, me, the whole Crow Legion... What are we but strays he took in? He's a friend to all animals! That's how you know he's got a good heart!"

There was a lot Hiro wanted to say to that, but he thought better of it. Better not to risk setting her off again.

Skadi rounded on Huginn with anger in her eyes, not at all pleased with the comparison. "Did you just call me a beast, girl?"

"Touch her," Luka said, "and I'll carve your head from your shoulders."

The air crackled with more tension than ever, but Hiro couldn't bring himself to maintain focus. He felt like he had just had the wind knocked out of him. For lack of anything better to do, he took a sip of cold tea.

"Good grief."

These moments of rowdiness were welcome in a sense. War was exhausting, both physically and mentally. With time, its accumulated strain hung heavy on the heart. That was all the more reason human connections mattered so much on the battlefield. Nobody could fight in solitude. It was through

drinking, talking, making merry, sharing burdens, and growing closer with their comrades that they found the strength to make it through. That was as true now as it had been a thousand years ago, and as it would be for the rest of time.

Hiro smiled as he watched the trio bicker, memories of his old comrades flitting through his mind.

* * * * *

The merriment was echoed in the imperial camp, where the soldiers had been permitted a little drink. Friends and comrades grinned over cups of liquor. Spirits were high for troops so deep into a grueling campaign, and the fear of death seemed far from anyone's mind. Perhaps it was the empire's string of victories that was fueling their confidence, or perhaps it was their faith in their commanders. Both likely had a part to play in keeping their hearts firm and their unease at bay.

Give or take a handful of rowdy beastfolk filtering in from the Crow Legion camp, the mood was generally carefree. Their commanders, however, had no time to rest. There were officers to brief and consult with, stockpiles to check, supplies to procure, and letters to the capital to be written. All of that would then be compiled into reports by aides and sent to the chief strategist, who would give the sixth princess final say on any decisions.

The command tent was full of aides dashing to and fro as they attended to various matters. At the head of the table sat Aura with a stack of reports before her. She and Liz were reviewing the day's batch.

"Hey." Aura's brow furrowed. Liz had drifted off again mid-conversation. "Are you listening?"

Liz had been acting oddly all day. Her mood seemed to change at the drop of a hat, from a cheerful grin to a pensive frown or from a creased brow to a compassionate smile. Presently, she was sighing sorrowfully.

Aura leaned closer, peering into her eyes. "Are you feeling all right?"

Liz recoiled exaggeratedly. Her surprise was obvious, but she tried to play it off with a laugh, making a show of rubbing her eyelid. "It's nothing. I had something in my eye, that's all."

Aura could tell she was being lied to. Under normal

circumstances, she would have shown tact and let it go, but she was feeling less patient today.

"You're annoyed, aren't you?" she asked with a hint of mirth.

Liz's eyes widened momentarily in surprise, but she soon forced a smile and brushed her hair back behind her ear. "Whatever do you mean?"

"You seem very—"

"Whatever do you mean?"

Aura glanced at Liz. There was a radiant smile on her lips, but it very definitely did not reach her eyes. A chill ran down her spine. "Nothing."

In a sense, it was an impressive expression. Still, it left Aura no less clueless as to what had earned Liz's annoyance.

The surrounding aides had been watching in silence, and more than a few sighed to see Liz smile so brilliantly. Aura, however, had seen the expression at close enough range to sense the murderous intent in its depths. Provoking her further would be unwise. With a polite cough, she returned to work, picking up a report from the stack.

"Esel is warning us to leave their lands," she said, scanning it.

"Of course," Liz said. "But we don't have to listen."

Aura nodded in agreement, privately breathing a sigh of relief. Her change of subject had succeeded. "No. But we can't push too hard."

The empire's plans would come to nothing if Esel fully collapsed. It needed to retain a baseline level of order if it was to be a bulwark against future aggression from Six Kingdoms.

"It's about time to force them to negotiate."

Liz gestured for one of the aides to unfurl a map on the table. Several marks had been drawn over Esel's towns, villages, and fortifications.

"Let's take some forts to start," she said, tracing the road with a finger. "And we'll write to the towns asking them to surrender. If they refuse… Well, it'll depend on our strength, but we'll have to take them if we don't want to risk being flanked."

It was difficult to judge exactly how many soldiers would be needed to take a town, but the empire's agents had been hard at work over the past three years surreptitiously gathering information on Six Kingdoms. The empire had access to vast numbers of reports stretching from the past all the way up to the present day, which Liz and Aura's aides had been hard at

work summarizing to aid the campaign planning.

"All right. I'll try to tailor my offers to the local nobles. If our spies are right, some of them should be easy to convince."

"I'll leave that to you," Liz said. "Accept any conditions they want as long as they aren't too ridiculous."

With so few troops left behind to guard the empire, getting bogged down in the west would be extremely dangerous—something Six Kingdoms no doubt knew. From here on out, the campaign would be a race against time. The imperial soldiers might have to endure intense fighting, but they would simply need to overcome it.

"Good thinking," Aura said. "But if anyone starts getting ideas, I won't hesitate. They'll make a good example for the rest."

Her leaden gray eyes flashed coldly. She was not joking. Naivete could be deadly in war. Anybody who aspired to seize victory or sought to avoid defeat had to harden their heart. More to the point, advancing their plans would require the willingness to put logic over compassion. Their decisions would be written in the blood of countless corpses, and they would have to assume that guilt, spending the rest of their lives asking themselves if they had made the right choice.

"Don't worry." Liz gave a resolute nod. "I knew what I was signing up for." She lowered her gaze to the map again. "What are the other kingdoms up to?"

"Vulpes, Scorpius, and Tigris had stationed troops in Esel, but they fell back across the border once we moved in. It looks like they're going back to their own lands."

"Do you think it's some kind of trap? If I were them, I'd pretend to retreat and stage an ambush."

"Our scouts haven't reported anything. Maybe they just don't think the human kingdoms are worth saving." Aura looked unconvinced even as she spoke. After a moment's thought, she looked back up at Liz with new determination in her eyes. "I'm not sure yet, but I want to check something. May I?"

"Go ahead," Liz said. "Just don't tie yourself in knots. For all we know, that's exactly what they want."

"I know. I'll report back once I have a better picture."

Overthinking was dangerous. If a commander grew too fixated on one thing, it would limit their ability to strategize. Still, Aura was well aware of that. When she said she would report back, she presumably meant she would entrust the final decision

to Liz. What was more, she did not seem tense or lacking in composure. Her youthful appearance made it easy to forget her age, but not only was she Liz's senior in years, she had also spent longer on the battlefield. She was sure to arrive at the right conclusion.

"I'll leave you in charge of that," Liz said. "What about Greif and Esel?"

"Greif's military was depleted after the battle in Faerzen. Esel is worse, though. It's one of the smallest kingdoms, and it fought hard in Faerzen. It doesn't have many soldiers left to draw from. We don't expect much resistance."

The empire had initially been prepared for a long, grueling battle to retake Faerzen, but in reality, only Greif and Esel had seriously committed to its defense. The conquest had concluded in surprisingly short order.

"Anguis, though..." Aura mused. "Anguis is the only one I don't understand."

Anguis had abandoned the new capital it had established in San Dinalle and brought its soldiers home, forsaking the Greif and Esel troops that had jointly garrisoned the city. Prisoners of war had testified that it had divided its forces into small units and sneaked them away piecemeal disguised as merchants. Its losses had been minimal. Indeed, Anguis was in the best shape of all six kingdoms. But if it was in such an advantageous position, why had it provided no support to Esel, opting instead to stay firmly within its own borders with no movement in sight? Its silence was disconcerting.

"Anguis is planning something. We can count on that."

The queen of Anguis had been responsible for ravaging the empire's western territories three years prior. She had cut down High General Vakish von Hass. Third Prince Brutahl had been executed on her command. She was more than clever enough to have realized the empire was looking to turn Esel into a buffer zone and split Six Kingdoms in two. Just because she wasn't doing anything overt didn't make it safe to take their eyes off her. She merited being watched like a hawk.

"Send more scouts north to keep an eye on Anguis," Liz said. "Aside from that, we'll continue as planned."

Aura nodded. "And then it'll be a race to bring Esel to the negotiating table."

"The sooner the better. Rosa's letters are starting to worry

me.”

Several letters had arrived from Rosa detailing a litany of concerns—mounting tensions in the north, strange rumblings in the Vanir Triumvirate, suspicious activity among House Muzuk and their southern nobles. Shifting the bulk of the empire’s strength west seemed to have unleashed a thousand years’ worth of accumulated strife.

“I knew it would happen,” Liz continued, “but there’s a lot depending on the battle with Esel.”

In the north, Lebering was massing soldiers. In the west, Draal’s grand duke was sending messengers all across his territories, making clear something was afoot. In the south, Steissen and Lichtein were little better; they had entered into a ceasefire agreement, but they had forged no alliance, and any sign of an impending imperial collapse would have them at each other’s throats once more.

“It feels like there are enemies on all sides.”

The empire’s vast size was also its greatest weakness. It could not attend to or keep watch over all of its lands at once. It teetered precariously atop a thousand years of twisted history, and now the stack was beginning to tip. What had taken a millennium to build up could come crashing down in a moment. In the blink of an eye, all would be gone. The age was turning with tremendous speed. It was like a dam had burst beneath the weight of a thousand years of stagnation, allowing time to flow once more.

Still, that was no reason to despair. The way ahead might have been shrouded in darkness, but Liz would forge on, believing that light lay ahead.

“We’ll carve a path through.”

Soon, she sensed, the curtain would rise on an age of chaos.

Chapter 4: Spinning Schemes

The seventeenth day of the tenth month of Imperial Year 1026

One thousand years before the present day, the humans, álfar, dwarves, and beastfolk cowered beneath the zlosta's reign of terror. Seeking release from their lives of hellish drudgery, the humans raised the banner of rebellion. Soon, they were joined by the other races, and a great war began—a war that ended with the zlosta's defeat and exile to the southern archipelago of Ambition.

Yet not all of the zlosta went south. Some chose to remain in Soleil to aid their kin who had been too slow to flee. The ones who stayed established the Kingdom of Lebering. However, as the ages passed and they mingled with the other peoples of Soleil, their blood grew so thin that most children in the present day possessed no mana at all. For all intents and purposes, they were almost human. Even the royal line was no longer pure.

The capital of Lebering was the fortress-city of Tiane, the Bastion of Violet Flakes. Surrounded by a deep moat, defended by two sturdy concentric walls, and accessible only by a retractable drawbridge, it was impervious to any assault. Atop a hill overlooking the town sat the Amethyst Hall of Tiare. Between the snow-dusted townscape and the shining white walls of the palace, the royal city filled visitors with solemn awe, and when the sun emerged and set it all aglitter, it struck them with such beauty that they were apt to weep.

Within the palace, the nexus of their admiration, dwelled Queen Claudia van Lebering. She was currently holding an audience with an unusual visitor. A lavish chandelier hung from the ceiling of the throne room, bathing the red carpet in a soft glow. A hooded figure dropped to one knee before the throne and bowed their head. The sides of the red carpet were thronged with nobles, but nobody spoke. There was only an unnerving silence.

Claudia, seated on her throne, was the first to move. A small shift of her head sent a shimmer through her violet hair, for which she had earned the name of Vernesse, the Princess of Amethyst. Her fringe fell across her beguiling eyes, and she

brushed it aside with a slender finger. With her ethereal features once more exposed, her snow-white skin glowed in the firelight. That pallor marked her as an auf: a changeling child born a zlosta but forced to live as one of the álfar.

Her thin pink lips parted, and an imposing voice came forth. “May I ask your name?”

Granted leave to speak, the hooded figure rose beneath the queen’s imperious gaze. “I am Nemea. One of the twelve primozlosta.”

Shocked gasps arose from the nobles. The twelve primozlosta were their ancestors, as pure of blood as Lebering’s founder, Lox. As the clamor grew louder, Claudia raised a hand. The motion was small, but the nobles immediately contained their excitement, eager to avoid drawing her ire.

Once silence had returned, she placed an elbow on the throne’s armrest and laid her chin in her hand. “A difficult claim to believe. Did the twelve primozlosta not perish at Mars’s hands?”

“We were defeated, yes. But we survived by the grace of our Lord. Even among the zlosta, he loves us especially dearly.”

Nemea’s hood made it hard to see his expression, but he spoke with such confidence that it was tempting to believe he was telling the truth. Still, his story was a difficult one to accept. He had provided no evidence, and who would believe that one of the forefathers of the zlosta race could still be alive a thousand years later?

“I have heard that the primozlosta had their Lord’s favor,” Claudia said. “And that it granted them deathlessness.”

This figure calling himself Nemea had only just made himself known, striding boldly into the throne room in the middle of proceedings. Uncertain what to do with this man who called himself a primozlosta and clearly possessed mana, the guards had let him in. No doubt it had helped that he had lilac skin. Lebering may have called itself the land of the zlosta, but its blood grew thinner every year; nowadays, lilac skin was rare and confined to the privileged classes, and tended to afford a great deal of respect.

“Nemea, you call yourself. No doubt the truth, if the rest of your story is to be believed.” Claudia sighed. She knew that was a noncommittal response, but in truth, Nemea’s presence was unwelcome whether or not he was what he claimed. If she cast

him out as a liar, her political opponents would no doubt seize on him as the perfect candidate to depose her, but he was too overtly suspicious to accept as the real thing. Her rivals might use him to sway popular opinion against her.

"It is the truth. For centuries, we have concealed ourselves in darkness, but now our Lord's revelation has led us back out into the light."

"Even so, you must realize that I have no way of telling you from a wandering zealot. How can you prove what you claim?"

Nemea cast back his hood. The nobles gasped. Some clapped their hands to their mouths, while others visibly fought back the urge to vomit. Even Claudia's brows knitted in surprise. He had no eyes, and there was a horrid scar in the middle of his forehead where something had been torn free.

Nemea looked unruffled even as his audience reeled in shock. He traced his forehead scar with a finger, his dry lips curving into a smile. "I bear the marks of my torture at the War God's hands."

"I can see that you have been cruelly wounded," Claudia said, "but how does this help your case?"

"Every primozlosta had their eyes and manastones plucked from their heads by the War God."

Again, it was difficult to know what to make of his claim. If he was trying to impugn the name of the War God, it would not be welcomed in the human-dominated Soleil. Lebering was not only the empire's neighbor, it was also a longtime ally. Giving credence to such volatile notions would only bring needless strife.

Claudia laid a hand on her forehead, shaking her head slowly. "Clearly, some tragedy has befallen you, but I remain unconvinced."

The gears of her mind were turning. This man was too dangerous to keep close, but held at arm's length, he could make a convenient pawn. Her lips began to tremble in barely suppressed anticipation. Yes, she could make very good use of him indeed.

Her delight lasted only moments—until Nemea gestured to the royal blade of Lebering leaning against the throne. "I see you bear Hauteclaire, sword of your forefather, Lox…or perhaps I should call it Asura of the Archfiend's Fellblades? Would that prove who I am?"

The amusement fell from Claudia's face. Only she was

supposed to know that. All writings about Hauteclaire had been burned during the third emperor's purges, by which time Lox had already divided its power between three Relics. Until being reassembled by Claudia, it had been known only as a treasure of Lebering, and the name of Asura had been assumed by the kingdom's three mightiest generals who guarded its pieces.

"Asura, the Kinslaying Blade," Nemea continued. He spoke without hesitation, confident in his words. "It was reforged by Lox when he defected to the War God's service, and none but his bloodline can now wield it. Its Graal devours the manastones of his kin, amplifying its wielder's mana and granting them limitless strength."

Claudia watched him silently, her violet eyes dreadfully cold. "You know an awful lot of things you ought not to."

"But of course. It was once ours."

"Is that why you are here, Nemea of the primozlosta? To reclaim it?"

"I would like nothing better, but our Lord has seen fit to forgive your misguided ways."

"How very generous. Why, I may just cry."

"He asks only one thing in return."

"And what is that?"

"War is coming to the north, and soon. When it does, he asks that you join our cause. That is his price."

"I'm afraid I must ask for more specifics."

Claudia's confusion was feigned. She could guess what he meant. From what he was saying, the twelve primozlosta had a hand in the north's recent instability. It was likely they would ask for her aid in bringing about the downfall of House Scharm and the rest of the northern nobles.

"Lend your aid," Nemea continued, "and our Lord will grant you whatever lands you desire."

Claudia had expected that too. Her interest rapidly cooled. Nemea's self-importance stuck in her throat. Perhaps he had lived a thousand years; his presence certainly had enough weight. No doubt he possessed a primozlosta's strength as well. The nobles of Lebering were looking at him in awe. To men and women who dreamed of reclaiming the zlosta's former glory, his words were surely enticing. Yet they left Claudia's heart cold, and she could only wonder why.

Nemea's voice took on a passionate intensity. "Do you not also

stand to gain? Do you not wish for the zlosta to walk once more beneath the sun?”

“Why would I ally myself with the Lord who knew of our plight but did nothing to aid us?”

“He is not to blame. It took us many centuries to gather our strength, and the humans were shielded by the Spirit King.”

Long, long ago, the true god had shaped Aletia from nothingness. But lamenting its flaws, he had abandoned his creation, leaving five beings in his likeness to rule the world in his stead.

The Lord of Nature, Yog-Sothoth—the Spirit King.

The Lord of Impermanence, the Demiurgos—the Faceless King.

The Lord of Creation, Ogun—the Iron Monarch.

The Lord of War, Surtr—the Black-Winged Lord.

The Lord of Life, Shub-Niggurath—the Faerie King.

They were called the Five Lords of Heaven, and their birth signified the beginning of the Age of Gods. Of the five, the Spirit King was worshipped as a god by humans. By gifting Emperor Artheus the Five Spiritblade Sovereigns that brought an end to the age of the zlosta, he had ushered in an era of human rule and now enjoyed widespread veneration.

Nemea’s words struck a chord with Claudia. “Are you suggesting that the Spirit King’s protection is no more?” she asked.

“Indeed. The once proud deity has grown weak. Now, he hides himself away. Only his spirits remain, and they are a dying breed.”

“And you are certain of this? That he has lost his power?”

“Our Lord, the Faceless King, has testified to it. Sustaining a thousand years of human rule has sapped his strength.” Nemea gestured theatrically in the light of the chandelier, his words as much a performance for the nobles as for Claudia’s ears. “Magick will run thick in Soleil once more. The world will become a kinder place for zlosta. Lend our Father your strength and faith, and you shall reap the reward: a new golden age!”

“A tempting offer indeed,” Claudia said.

“Then may I assume…?”

She nodded, a beaming smile spreading across her face. “I respectfully decline.”



The nobles were almost as astonished as Nemea. A throne room full of shocked gazes converged on Claudia.

“Excuse me?” the primozlosta whispered.

“I said that I decline your offer.”

She had finally pinned down the source of her unease. She now knew why Nemea’s words rang hollow. He was a man of blind faith, trapped in the past without a care for the future. Revenge gave him a cause, but the absence of conviction had stripped away his identity, turning him into a pitiful puppet of the Demiurgos. There were certainly times when obedience was a virtue, but a man whose aspirations were merely a cloak for his own lack of purpose had no right to speak of ambition.

How utterly disappointing this conversation had proven. To think that a former ruler of the zlosta had allowed himself to become so diminished, all for the sake of such petty ideals… Claudia felt anger welling within her breast.

“None of your prattle interests me. It has become dreadfully clear that you have nothing of worth to say.”

“And that is your reply?”

She giggled. “Several years ago, a gentleman named Baal sat at this court. I recall he once said the notion of humans mingling with zlosta made him sick to his stomach.”

Baal von Bittenia had plotted with Claudia’s brother, Flaus, to usurp the throne of Lebering. Though he had fallen at Hiro’s hands, in life he had borne very similar disfigurements to Nemea.

“If missing eyes and manastones mark a primozlosta, then he must have been another of your number.”

But even Baal had possessed personal ambitions. He had been both more calculating than Nemea and more prideful, following his own goals with no need for the air or guidance of others. For all that he had schemed rebellion, Claudia still found him more appealing than the man before her now.

“Why would I throw in my lot with the likes of him?” she asked coldly.

“Then you would take up arms against our Lord?”

“You may interpret my answer as you wish.”

There was no longer anything to be gained from this conversation. Giving Nemea more leave to speak would not kindle her sympathy or help them broker some new understanding. She was grateful for the tidbit about the Spirit

King, but aside from that, her smile was wholly cruel.

“And besides,” she said, rising from her throne, “if Lox turned his back on you, why should I take pity on you?”

She raised her hand. Concealed soldiers stepped forward from the crowd of nobles. They advanced on Nemea, drawing their swords. The metal cast countless dull lights across the floor as it caught the glow of the chandelier.

As they closed in, the throne room doors crashed open. More soldiers poured through like an avalanche. In an instant, Nemea’s escape was cut off. They waited with blades in hand for Claudia’s orders.

Nemea looked around. He did not seem surprised. As he returned his attention to Claudia, his shoulders relaxed and his stance widened.

“Mongrel cur. You would defy your ancestors?”

Claudia tittered. “I believe that relics of the past ought to stay dead.”

Her hand dropped and the soldiers lunged forward. Blood arced high, pained cries filled the air, and a series of heavy thuds shook the room. Soon, Nemea was surrounded by bodies, evading strikes with the smallest possible movements as he cut down the soldiers of Lebering.

He fought with two daggers. They seemed to be nothing more than common metal; one of the blades chipped against a soldier’s armor, and seeing that the weapon was damaged, Nemea flung it away without hesitation. It thudded into a soldier’s forehead, killing the man instantly. The primozlosta didn’t even watch his prey fall. He had already produced another knife and pounced on his next target.

Every blur of motion sent blood spraying, adding to the pool that had begun to form on the floor. As perhaps ought to have been expected of a primozlosta, he fought with terrifying skill, and even Claudia’s trained soldiers could not land a blow on him.

“Stand back, if you would.”

Claudia stepped forward, Hauteclaire in hand. Her voice carried clear and true to her soldiers’ ears through the din of battle, and even if it had not, the magnitude of her mana would have commanded their attention. They fell back like a receding tide, revealing the bloodstained Nemea. The primozlosta looked slowly from side to side.

Claudia approached him, calmly but steadily. “Dear me, Lord

Nemea. You seem awfully out of breath."

"You...will be next... Ngh!"

No sooner had the words left his mouth than Claudia was upon him. He dodged Hauteclaire by the skin of his teeth, but he could not evade the kick that followed. It struck him in the cheek, knocking him off-balance. Before he could recover, Claudia thrust her sword through his flank, then angled the blade sideways and wrenched it back out.

"Gah! Curse you!"

Claudia giggled again. "Keep on talking and I fear there will be nothing left of you."

Face filled with rapturous intensity, she dealt him a wild barrage of blows, shearing off more flesh with every strike. Her blade hemmed him in from all sides, more like a whip than a sword, striking seemingly with a mind of its own. It was all he could do to fend it off. Oddly, however, he did not seem concerned. A smile formed on his cracked lips.

"What foolishness. I cannot allow a hand such as yours to wield Asura."

His mana abruptly swelled. Evidently, he had not been committing his full strength. He bore down on Claudia with a series of razor-sharp slashes. A mix of feints and nimble movements turned his twin daggers into an onslaught from all angles.

"I see the primozlosta can impress after all," Claudia murmured. "Even without their manastones."

She parried, deflected, dodged, bided her time, and kept her distance. Calmly, dispassionately, she analyzed his attacks and matched his speed. The daggers sprayed sparks as they skittered along Hauteclaire's blade, scorching her hair.

Both the soldiers and nobles watched in awe from a safe distance. Even if they had thought to lend their aid, they would not have known how. All they could do was await the duel's conclusion and pray for their queen's victory.

It was Claudia who broke the deadlock. Having grown accustomed to Nemea's speed, she had taken to leaning past his attacks rather than deflecting them with Hauteclaire. Then, all at once, she leaped back, gaining distance. As Nemea pitched forward, his rhythm disrupted, she thrust her blade squarely at his head. Yet what should have been a killing blow cut only empty air. Her eyes flicked down. Nemea had leaned beneath the

strike, sliding on the blood-slicked floor, and as she watched, he brought his dagger around with all his might in a spinning strike.

"Ngh!"

Claudia twisted out of the way, but she was too slow. Shrieks and dismayed cries rose from the onlookers. But the blade that should have taken her head stopped short of lethal injury. As relief spread through the crowd, Nemea's face filled with confusion.

"What?"

The primozlosta had not yet registered what was happening to him. He strained his arm, trying to drive the blade into her flesh, but to no avail. He could twitch the limb at best. It was like he was wading through mud.

Claudia raised a hand to her burning cheek. Her fingers came away red.

"It's been rather a while since I last saw my own blood," she said. Crimson trickled from a nick in her cheek. She had not quite managed to evade Nemea's dagger.

"What have you done?"

"At last you notice. It took you long enough."

Claudia flicked the blood from her fingers and turned her attention back to him. The entire right side of the primozlosta's body was encased in ice.

"That is Hauteclaire's power. The power of Devouring."

"You lie. Asura has no such…" He trailed off, suddenly uncertain. "Surely not… Did Lox…?"

"Oh, Lord Nemea. Did you not say it yourself?" Claudia tapped her foot against his frozen flesh. "After Lox betrayed his kin to serve the War God, he reforged his Fellblade. Do you not recall?"

Nemea said nothing. He only bit his lip.

Claudia smiled pleasantly. She picked up the primozlosta's fallen dagger, admiring its marbling. "And when he reforged Asura, he took inspiration from the Spiritblade Sovereigns."

"You cannot mean—"

In the blink of an eye, she thrust the dagger between his lips, telling him in no uncertain terms to be silent. Her violet eyes flashed as they watched him struggle helplessly.

"Fear not. I have no intention of cutting your throat. Where would be the fun in that?" She withdrew the dagger, slicing open the corner of the primozlosta's mouth. "But I ought to at least make us even."

As Nemea's face twisted in pain, she laid open his cheek. Satisfied that the blade was bloodied, she tossed the dagger aside. It skittered to the corner of the room with a clatter.

"Then what do you intend?"

"I was hoping you might answer a question of mine. If I were to kill you here, would the Demiurgos feel anger? Or would he feel nothing at all?"

"You... You would regret your choice. I am one of his twelve blessed primozlosta. If you were to cut me down, his wrath would be—"

Nemea never finished his sentence. His head soared clear from his body before he had the chance. It struck the ground with a dull thump, and Claudia planted her foot atop it.

"Did you take me for a woman given to regrets? You truly must have been blind. I shall look forward to your Faceless King's reply when he receives your head." Her face showed no emotion whatsoever as she gazed down at the corpse. A hard light glinted in her eyes, frigid to look upon. "In any case, it seems you were not as deathless as you claimed. Had you truly been immortal, you might have enjoyed a new life as my plaything."

The head gave no answer. She kicked it away and wiped the blood from her cheek with her thumb. The skin beneath was fresh and pink, with no wound to be seen.

A man stepped forth from the crowd—one of the soldiers who had been watching their duel. He fell to one knee before Claudia. "Are you hurt, Your Majesty?"

"Not at all. More to the point, how fare our armies?"

"We are ready to march at a moment's notice, Your Majesty."

"Wonderful." She smiled appreciatively. "Well, then. I daresay it is time to pay the empire another visit."

As she strode from the chamber, one of the nobles called out from the crowd. "Do you mean to put them in your debt again, Your Majesty?"

She looked back and smiled, putting a finger to her shapely chin. "Why, no. I don't mean to do anything at all."

"Pardon?" The noble's eyes went wide. He did not seem to have expected that.

His face was so amusing, Claudia had to hold back her laughter. "Did Lord Nemea not say himself that the north's downfall is nigh? Soon, the lion of Soleil shall face the lord of the primozlosta. Such a conflict will not stay confined to this frigid

corner of the world.” Her voice took on an edge of amusement. “A clash between two such titans will exhaust both, and it would not do to waste such an opportunity. We shall be the victors of their war.”

Claudia turned and made for the door, leaving the noble to his astonishment. For the briefest instant, she cast a glance outside the window, but the moment quickly passed. She returned her gaze to the fore, lowering her eyes.

“This is what you want, is it not?” A heated sigh escaped her lips as her thoughts turned to the future. “All will be one. Is that not so, Lord Surtr?”

* * * * *

Once upon a time, Esel had been among the most prosperous of Six Kingdoms’ constituent nations. Now, it was one of the least populated. As the bridge between Six Kingdoms and Faerzen, it had once served as something of a satellite city and flourished as a result, but that was a time now spoken of only in memory.

The reason was simple: it had no notable exports. It was devoid of strengths to call its own. Esel was often called the gateway to Six Kingdoms, but merchants did not sell their wares at the town gate. Traders from Faerzen preferred to go east to the Grantzian Empire or south to Draal, and the ones who went to Draal traveled to Six Kingdoms by boat. They might travel the various kingdoms while they were there, but many chose to return by sea rather than trek to a drab crossroads nation with nothing they could sell. In short, advances in shipbuilding had rendered Esel’s geographical position moot.

The conquest of Faerzen had promised a change in Esel’s fortunes. The relocation of the royal capital to San Dinalle had revitalized overland trade. Yet that had not lasted long either. San Dinalle had fallen back into the hands of the empire, whose armies had now crossed the border and were making for Licht. So many young lives had been lost to the war that only the elderly were now left, and the once-bustling Fareh High Road was now under control of the empire, which was using it to tighten the noose around the kingdom’s neck.

A black-clad force marched along the High Road beside the imperial forces. Among them trundled a decorated carriage, flying not the banners of the empire but those of its ally: the

scales of Baum and the black dragon of the War God. Beneath the fluttering cloth, Hiro gazed disinterestedly out of the window.

“Skadi will be furious,” he murmured.

None of the towns or villages had made any effort to resist the imperial advance. One particularly strategically located fort had tried to fight back, but low morale meant it had fallen immediately. With over eighty thousand soldiers to spare, the empire had an overwhelming numerical advantage, and it had taken the chance to deploy it—an all-out assault had taken the fort before the night was through, aptly demonstrating the strength of the empire to the rest of the nation. The governors of nearby regions had promptly accepted the imperial terms of surrender. In short, the empire was more than capable of taking care of its own affairs. It needed no assistance from the Crow Legion or the forces of Steissen, which had been relegated to watching the fort fall from the back lines.

“I would have appreciated something to do, at least,” Luka said. She, too, was watching the landscape pass by outside the window, although her vacant eyes didn’t seem to register any of it. “We have not fought any battles worthy of the name.”

The invasion was no doubt a matter of life and death to Esel, but as far as Hiro was concerned, it had been one long, dull carriage ride. Stifling a yawn, he clasped his hands behind his head and sat back in his seat. “If we’re lucky, it’ll stay that way. But my gut tells me this is just the calm before the storm.”

Esel would not sit quietly and allow itself to be invaded. It was bound to be plotting something. In that sense, it was concerning that the empire was making such easy progress. Would it be able to react in time if the situation suddenly changed? It might have had the numbers, but any history book could cite endless examples of overwhelming odds being overturned—and it always began with small mistakes brought on by overconfidence.

Luka looked at him suspiciously. “Surely you of all people do not need to guess.”

“Even I don’t know how this one will play out. Nobody can see the future.”

“See it? No. But predict it? That’s another matter.”

“Well, anyone can speculate, it’s true.”

The conversation didn’t quite connect. They looked at one another, but both of their faces were, as ever, unreadable. A long

silence fell.

All of a sudden, there was a loud knock on the window.

“Chief! Erm, I mean, Lord Surtr! Is now a good time?” The voice was pleasantly familiar, all the more relieving to hear for its long absence.

Hiro opened the window to see a grizzled man with a scarred face—Muninn, back from his reconnaissance mission in Friedhof. “Welcome back. How was the Spirit Wall?”

“Worse’n I expected, if I’m honest. Here, for you.” Muninn held out a letter. “From one High General Hermes.”

Hiro opened the letter, skimmed the contents, and nodded to himself. It read more or less as he had expected. His predictions seemed to have been on the mark.

“You’ll join us for a little while, Muninn,” he said.

“Got it, chief.”

“Huginn shouldn’t be too far away. Go and pay her a visit. She’s been worried about you.”

“Hah! Huginn worried about me? That’ll be the day!”

“But of course,” Luka chimed in. “Why should she care a whit about you?”

It was rare to hear Luka agree with Muninn on anything, but she veritably pounced on this. Muninn withdrew from the window with a scowl.

It was true that Huginn had not outwardly expressed any concern for him. She was still his sister, however, and no doubt cared for him more than she showed. It would only be fair to let her know that he was safe. All too often, people’s last words to their loved ones were something inconsequential, and by the time they realized they should have said more, they no longer had the chance. What was broken could never be truly restored. Time could not be rewound. And after losing something precious, all people could do was try to make sense of what remained.

Hiro had just been an ordinary boy when he had been summoned to Aletia from Earth. He could never have imagined that he would come to be revered as the War God or that now, a thousand years later, he would live the life of a king. He gazed at his hands—hands that dripped red with the blood of countless dead. A rueful smile spread across his face.

Where did I go wrong? Or was I mistaken from the very start?

The dreams he had inherited, the promises he had made, the

golden memories he had forged with his comrades—all were now stained black as ink.

He turned back to Muninn, his voice gently chiding. “One can triumph over countless, and countless can triumph over one. One word in the right place can be worth countless others. Don’t leave things too late. Huginn’s your sister. Take the chance while you have it.”

The air grew distinctly heavier as he spoke, and Muninn nodded gravely. “Got it, chief. Guess I’ll go give her a pat on the head, then.”

Hiro smiled at the parting quip. “Go and do that. And good work.”

“Nothin’ to it, chief. I had a grand old time up there. If you need me to scout again, just say the word.” With that, Muninn pulled away from the window.

Hiro stowed the letter away in his pocket. “We’ve made it this far,” he murmured. “Somehow.”

He shut the window and leaned back in his seat, deflating a little as he sighed in relief. All was proceeding as planned. Some revisions had been required, but they had been within the bounds of his predictions.

But I can’t afford to let my guard down. And I won’t be able to for a while, by the look of things.

As his mind turned to the future, Luka looked at him askance. “What do you mean to do now?”

“We can discuss that tonight. Too many eyes on us here.”

He could not afford a moment’s carelessness. Rushing was madness when one mistake could prove fatal. He had to advance step by step, slowly but surely, taking care every moment along the way.

Rey…Artheus…soon, your dream will become reality.

He looked out of the window once more. Farther down the column, the lion and the lily danced on the breeze.

* * * * *

The founding of Six Kingdoms dated back to the reign of the third emperor, when the emperor’s younger brother fled west after a failed revolt. Soundly defeated by his sibling, he had taken the existing rulers of the region as his subjects and established the nation of Greif. There he intended to bide his

time and gather his strength.

The emperor's brother gave the surviving descendants of the Black Hand lands of their own, along with the right to rule them as independent nations. Yet those nations insisted he was the only rightful monarch. As such, the six formed an alliance over which he ruled as the first High King. In the end, he died of illness before he could fulfill his vow to retake his homeland—in the same year that the third emperor perished by his own hand, by curious coincidence—but with Six Kingdoms insulated from imperial influence by Faerzen, his ambitions were passed down undiluted to future generations.

The capital of Greif, oldest of the six kingdoms, was the city of Fierte. On account of the circumstances of its founding, it was a welcoming city that opened its gates to people of all stripes. Due to its booming waterborne trade, a full half of its population was foreign-born. Word of the imperial attack on Esel had reached the city, but as yet, the fighting was too far away to be a concern. The people carried on with their lives as usual.

On a hill overlooking the port stood the magnificent Fierte Palace, the residence of the High King. Its master was bedridden with sickness and had not been seen in some time. Fortunately, the High King possessed excellent retainers, so matters of state continued without disruption. They were currently gathered in the throne room.

"What is the meaning of this, Chancellor?" one man asked. "The empire marches deeper into Esel as we speak."

The speaker was General Ramses du Maspero, commander of Greif's armies. He looked every bit his rank, and he carried himself with a dignified bearing despite his muscular build. He was popular with the people too, known far and wide as a warrior without peer.

His attention was directed at a spot next to the throne where Nameless stood, clad as ever in a brown hood. Nobody had ever seen the álf's face. As far as all present were concerned, their age and gender were a mystery.

Nameless had originally been an advisory commander to Vulpes but had subsequently managed to claim the throne. Now they were the chancellor of Greif. It was almost unprecedented for someone of such uncertain origin to advance to such a position of authority. While they undeniably had a talent for statecraft, it was only by earning the High King's special favor

that they had gained their rank.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Do you intend to stand by and watch as Esel is razed to the ground?” It was widely known that the High King was ill, but Ramses still found it frustrating to have to negotiate with Nameless in a time of need. His voice grew stern with ire. “What does His Majesty command? Do you expect us to believe he would let Esel burn?”

Nameless’s lips curled into a taunting smile. “His Majesty commands that we secure our own borders.”

“And leave Esel to perish? Forsake our thousand-year alliance?!” Ramses could not contain his outrage. He considered himself a soldier not just of Greif, but of Six Kingdoms as a whole.

“That is the only way Six Kingdoms might survive.” Nameless dismissed him with an irritable wave. “Besides, you speak of our history in such lofty terms, but is the reality quite so romantic?”

“What are you insinuating?”

“Have the royal lines of Vulpes, Scorpius, and Tigris not all been extinguished? They are but shadows of their former selves, thinking only of their own self-interest. Tell me, have any of them sent aid to Esel?”

“They have not, but…” Ramses scowled. “Be that as it may, His Majesty has the power to unite the kingdoms once more. All kings serve the High King. Such is our unspoken oath!” He shook his head, his voice growing more forceful. “And as foremost among the kingdoms, Greif has a duty to safeguard the rest! Has Esel not written to us for aid?! Is that not why we have gathered our forces?!”

“It is not.” Nameless’s voice was curt. “Our soldiers are here to defend our own lands, not to aid others.”

“Wha—” Ramses could only gasp.

“Ideals are fine things, but they have no place in the real world.” Nameless’s voice dripped with disappointment. “I fear you have spent a little too much time in your books.”

Ramses placed great value on history. As such, he had an unfortunate habit of thinking of Six Kingdoms as a collective. Given the circumstances of its founding, that was understandable, but Ramses had a particularly stubborn streak, and once he had arrived at an understanding, he would not change his mind. It ought to have been self-evident that each

kingdom's own affairs came first, but he refused to see it that way.

"Please return to your post, General. Your men will grow anxious if their commander is away for too long."

Nameless made to stride away, making it clear the conversation was over, but Ramses seized the álf by the shoulder as they passed.

"We are not done here! Has the proud Greif become so weak that it cowers in fear of aggressors?!"

"What a curious thing to say. Have you forgotten the sacrifice the High King once made for his own people?"

"I..." Ramses trailed off, lowering his eyes. Nameless's words had struck home. His shoulders slumped, his arguments thoroughly defanged.

Nameless continued past, making for the door. "It would be foolish to claim strength we no longer possess. Six Kingdoms no longer exists, General Ramses. It dissolved on the day His Majesty made his choice."

"I refuse to believe..." Ramses began, but his voice had grown frail.

Nameless's footsteps echoed in the throne room like mocking laughter. "We will speak no more of this. I ask you once more, General Ramses. Return to your post."

The álf cast open the doors and passed through, making for the High King's chambers. The corridors were bare—no sentries on watch, no conversing nobles. The weather outside was pleasantly warm, but the palace interior was chill and the air musty. There was no sign of life to be seen. Silence lay thick in the halls like the ocean floor, heightening the impression of stagnation.

Nameless passed by an ornate door and laid a hand against a bare section of wall. With a small click, a secret door revealed itself. The álf produced a key and, with a familiar hand, entered the room.

Inside was a bed, splendidly adorned, upon which lay a man. He was dreadfully emaciated, barely more than skin and bones. Anybody would have mistaken him for a corpse, but his appearance seemed to come as no shock to Nameless.

"How are you faring, Your Majesty?"

The man's eyelids opened slowly, as if struggling against a great weight. The eyes beneath were clouded gold. His

breathing was so light it might have ceased at any moment, but somehow, he found the strength to speak.

“Are…you…satisfied?”

The voice came out in a rasp. His gaze remained fixed on the ceiling as he spoke. Perhaps he had lost his sight, or perhaps he could no longer spare even the strength to move his eyes. Not that it mattered. With only the two of them in the room, they did not need to look at each other to converse.

“Quite. I have done all that needed to be done in this kingdom.”

Nameless produced a dagger from a sleeve. Its blade glinted in the candlelight.

At that, the High King finally turned his gaze to the álf, but there was no surprise in his face. He smiled softly. “Good… Good.”

“Do you have any last words?” Nameless raised the knife.

“Forgive…me…”

As the last syllable left his mouth, the álf brought the dagger down. The High King gasped sharply as the blade pierced his flesh, but he had no strength left to avoid it. There was no resistance. Indeed, he took hold of the álf’s shoulder with surprising strength and pulled closer, as if spurring on his own demise. His teeth gritted against the cry rising in his throat, and his eyes opened wide and piercing. Even as blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, he stared intently up at Nameless’s face. Gradually, the strength left his body. His hand slipped from Nameless’s shoulder, falling to the bed as softly as a leaf.

Seeing that he was dead, the álf withdrew the dagger and stepped away from the body.

“I have grown tired of your apologies.”

Nameless reached out to brush the High King’s sunken cheek with a gentle fingertip. For a while, the álf regarded the corpse. At last, the mouth beneath the hood formed a self-effacing smile.

“And so we part for the final time.” There was no hint of regret in the álf’s voice. “Farewell, father.”

With that, Nameless vanished.

For a moment, there was nothing but silence, and then darkness swelled in the corner of the room. The candle guttered out. A wind blew, though the chamber was windowless. Blighted air gathered beside the bed, finally condensing into humanoid

shapes. At last, two men stepped forth into the gloom.

“Humans can hate just as intensely as zlosta, it seems,” one remarked. “As much as it pains me to equate the two.”

“Keep your observations to yourself, Hydra. We have work to do.”

The pair wore hoods, rendering their faces invisible, but the mouth of the one named Hydra twisted into a distasteful scowl. “How much longer must this go on, Ladon?”

Once the terror of the continent, the primozlosta had been broken by the man named Mars. Yet their hatred had persevered, and a thousand years had done nothing to dull its edge. They continued to work in the shadows under the name of Orcus, guided by the revelations of the Demiurgos.

“Until the War God’s soul—the Usurper’s soul—is destroyed. Does that answer not satisfy you?”

“I am well aware.” Hydra relented, but he did not seem appeased.

“Then abandon whatever doubts you may have and commit yourself to serving our Lord.” Ladon shook his head with an exasperated sigh. “Or we shall never regain our former glory.”

“I know,” Hydra said. There was no point bickering in a place such as this. He snorted but argued no further. Instead, he reached out toward the High King, still open-eyed in death. “Slain by his own child. A pitiful end. Not that I have any sympathy for the likes of him. I am glad to see the world rid of one of his blood.”

He trailed his fingers up the corpse’s face and pressed them into its eye socket.

“How you and your kin hindered us. Sowing hatred, anger, and resentment… Oh, the confusion you caused us. Mere livestock such as you ought to have known your place.” Hydra withdrew his fingers. A golden eyeball lay in his grasp. “Let us hope this is genuine. At least then you will have had some value to offer us.”

He handed the eyeball to Ladon, taking care not to damage it.

“We cannot be the judges of that,” Ladon said, stowing the eyeball away carefully in a container. “We can only hope it will yield better than a defective article like Selene.”

“What now, Ladon?” Hydra said. “Will you take the eye back to our Lord?”

“I have been instructed to aid you a while longer.” A faint

warmth entered the chilly air.

"Indeed. In that case, I have a request."

"What would you have me procure?"

Hydra chuckled, low and guttural. "A dose of spirit elixir."

* * * * *

The twentieth day of the tenth month of Imperial Year 1026
Near Licht, the capital of Esel

The sun sank below the horizon, and the moon bathed the land in its soft glow. The hour was late, and the howls of wild dogs echoed in the distance. Still, there was one place brighter than the rest—brighter than a village, although it was no town. Bonfires burned in great numbers, and burly men clad in heavy armor patrolled the perimeter. The air was far more tense than any settlement, and nobody was dressed in peasant fabrics. They bore the arms and armor of the imperial army.

After the battles they had fought on the road, the soldiers' cheerful manner of earlier was nowhere to be seen. They were tense and alert. The guard was heavier now too. Not a mouse would have gotten past the sentries' watchful eyes.

The Crow Legion's encampment lay next to the main camp. In the tent in the middle, Hiro had gathered his inner circle for a discussion.

"I want you to listen carefully to what I'm about to say."

Huginn and Muninn nodded, immediately alert. They both sensed that something important was afoot. A short distance away, Luka sat cross-legged, muttering to herself as she gazed up at the ceiling. Hiro ignored her and turned to the siblings.

"I intend to leave the camp under cover of darkness."

"And go where?" Of all people, it was Luka who spoke first. She had emerged from her reverie and materialized at his side. "You truly are hopeless. You have hardly even given me time to pack."

She set about deciding what to bring. Apparently, she had already decided she was joining him.

Hiro hated to disappoint her, but he could not take her with him. Aside from anything else, he was going to be working with her sworn enemy, Lucia. He could not tell her that, however. It would only make her insist more forcefully.

"I want you to stay here," he said.

Her eyes flashed with anger. “You have chosen an early death, I see.”

Hiro stared back, not so much as blinking. He had expected the objection, and while it wasn’t certain how well it would work, he had prepared a countermeasure to convince her.

“If you’re gone,” he said, “who will protect Huginn?”

“Are you suggesting she will be in danger?” Luka took the bait, as he had known she would. She cared little for Garda or Muninn, but so long as she believed Huginn was her brother reborn, she would do anything to keep her safe. Knowing that, Hiro had arranged for Huginn to remain with the Crow Legion.

“Anything’s possible, especially in wartime. I just don’t want you to regret coming with me, that’s all. If anything happens, you wouldn’t be there to help.”

The imperial army had been making steady progress, taking most of the forts in its path. Almost all of the local governors had accepted its offer of surrender. That said, the fighting would only get fiercer, and it was likely that the Crow Legion would be called to the field. If Huginn were to die while Luka was away at Hiro’s side, she would not be able to bear the guilt.

Hiro glanced at her face. Her conflict was written in her eyes. She only needed one more push.

“Please. You’re the only one I can trust to keep her safe.”

He had known Luka for long enough to realize she was unexpectedly susceptible to pressure—residual scars from her childhood, perhaps. In any case, if given a firm shove in one direction while she was wavering over a decision, she would rarely refuse. Still, he had to observe her closely and choose his words with care. If he pushed her too far, she would grow hysterical and lash out.

“Once I’ve taken care of business, I’ll be right back with you.”

Luka heaved a sigh but finally nodded her assent.

Hiro turned to Muninn. “As for you, I need you to take my place while I’m away. Nobody can suspect my absence.”

Muninn looked nonplussed at first, but he steadily paled as understanding dawned. “That’ll never work, chief. I’m a head taller than you at least. I’ll be spotted before tomorrow’s out.”

That was a reasonable concern. Not only that—neither his eyes nor hair were the right color to pass as Hiro.

“You won’t have to keep the act up all the time. I haven’t attended any strategy meetings since we crossed into Faerzen.

I've barely even left my tent, in fact. Nobody will suspect anything if I disappear for a few days at a time. You just need to be seen enough to reassure everyone I'm still around."

"That's all well and good, but what if your officers need to talk to you? I don't sound a bit like you."

"That won't be a problem. Huginn has been the one in direct command of the Crow Legion. If anyone needs anything, they'll go to her first."

"Huh." Muninn scratched his chin. "In that case...it might just work."

"I don't like it one bit, Your Lordship. This oaf couldn't act to save his life!" Huginn protested.

"That's enough outta you!"

Smiling at the siblings' squabbling, Hiro produced three letters. After a moment's hesitation, he handed two to Muninn and returned the third to his pocket. "If word comes from Garda, reply with these."

Muninn blinked as he took the letters. "Uh...got it, chief. Send 'em to the boss. Understood."

Hiro couldn't blame him for being confused. It was odd for someone to write a reply in advance. "Exactly. Make sure they get to him."

"Will do, chief."

"And I want to take a few soldiers with me." Hiro did not mean as guards. He needed messengers in case he found himself needing to communicate with the Crow Legion.

"Got it." Muninn nodded. "I'll send you my most trusted men."

Hiro turned to Huginn. After hearing her brother assigned important duties, she looked equal parts uneasy and expectant.

"I'm leaving you in charge of the Crow Legion while I'm gone. Luka will be your aide. They're yours to do with as you see fit."

The soldiers of the Crow Legion had originally served in the Liberation Army of Lichtein. None would take issue with Huginn as their commander. She would have Muninn beside her, even if he was in disguise, and two thousand men was a small number. Hiro felt confident that the task was well within her capabilities, and if any problems arose, Luka would be there to help solve them.

"Luka, you are to support her however you can. Is that understood?"

"I do not need to be told. Worry not for her. I am more than

capable of taking care of her in your stead."

She sounded like she couldn't wait to see the back of him. He could only give a rueful smile. Still, she would support Huginn to the best of her ability. He had numerous concerns about the future, but the Crow Legion was not one of them. He could concentrate on fighting alongside Lucia knowing they were in safe hands.

"All right, then. I should be going." He reached the entrance, paused, and turned. "Oh, one more thing. Huginn, could you take care of my swiftdrake?"

"Ain't you taking her, Your Lordship?"

"She'd stand out, I'm afraid. Not to worry. My allies are planning to meet me on the road."

"Got it, Your Lordship. Take care."

The siblings bowed their heads. Luka had her back to him and did not seem inclined to turn around.

"I will. I'll be back before you know it."

With a parting wave, he left the tent. A chilly gust blew past as he stepped outside. The nearby bonfire flickered wildly, driving back the encroaching darkness and casting his mask into sharp relief. As the flames settled again, his golden eye glowed in the dark, and the light of the moon cast his shadow across the ground.

"Who's there?!" A Crow Legion soldier approached warily, sensing his presence. "Ah, Your Majesty! Forgive me. May I ask where you're going?"

Hiro could have told the soldier he was going on a walk, but the man would be duty bound to escort him, even if assured that no accompaniment was necessary. No, Hiro would have to get rid of him some other way. After a moment's thought, he brought a finger to his lips. The man leaned in, cocking his head. His gaze lifted, and their eyes met.

Hiro spoke first. "I'm just taking a walk. Don't worry about me. Return to your rounds."

"At once! Take care, Your Majesty. It's too cold a night to stay out for long."

The soldier turned away and went back to patrolling, suspecting nothing. Once he was out of sight, Hiro set off again, raising his hand to cover his right eye.

"I had my concerns, but it seems like it's working better now."

He lowered his hand to pat his breast pocket as he strode

through the camp.

“Almost time to awaken, Black Camellia. This time, we should be able to start at full strength.”

He looked up at the night sky, a thin smile forming on his lips.

“All will be one,” he murmured, reaching out as if to pluck the moon from its velvet curtain. “And now, chaos shall descend.”

* * * * *

Nearby, in the imperial camp, there were more soldiers than ever on watch. As the battlefront approached Licht, the odds that Esel would attempt a night raid grew higher. The imperial army was well prepared, but there was no way to know when the enemy might strike. Constant vigilance was essential. Every last one of the sentries was tense and alert as they scanned their surroundings.

The command tent in the center of the camp was under particularly heavy guard. The sixth princess was the most important person in the empire, and her life had to be protected at all costs. Not so long ago, the tent had been alive with aides, but now that the strategy meeting had concluded, they had returned to their tents to prepare for the next day’s march, leaving Liz and Aura alone in the quiet. The pair sat across the table from one another, sipping tea.

“How are the northern and southern territories faring?” Liz asked.

Aura shook her head. “No word from our agents. Which means we know nothing. Has Rosa said anything?”

“Nothing from her either. I just hope our fears are unfounded.”

“I think our chances are good.”

With the bulk of the imperial forces away from home, this was a moment of unprecedented vulnerability. Anyone with a grudge against the empire would see it as a golden opportunity. That said, deciding when and how to exploit it was easier said than done. The other nations of Soleil were likely locked in a stalemate, each paralyzed while they tried to outmaneuver the others. Who would be the first to reach into the lion’s jaws? Would the beast prove toothless, or would they lose a hand? No doubt they were looking for an appropriate sacrificial lamb at this very moment.

If those predictions were accurate, the empire would be in an advantageous position, having gained a great deal more time with which to conquer Esel. That said, optimism was dangerous. Anything was possible in war. They would have to keep one eye on their surroundings as the fighting in Esel continued, ready to respond to a change of situation at a moment's notice, or they might find themselves suddenly and unceremoniously shunted off a cliff.

"Well, we can't spend all day worrying about what the rest of Soleil is doing." Liz banished those particular concerns to the corner of her mind and turned her attention to the problem at hand. "Has there been any word from Esel?"

"We've sent messengers, but we haven't gotten anything back."

The empire had invited Esel's leadership to negotiate but, as Aura said, there had so far been no reply. Now the imperial forces were all but knocking on the gate of Licht, poised to encircle the city in the coming days.

Liz placed a finger on her chin and cocked her head as she looked at the map. "Do you think they're expecting reinforcements from the other kingdoms?"

"Our scouts haven't seen anything unusual on the border." Aura traced the line between Vulpes and Esel with a finger. She laid two pawns on the map, one on Greif, the other on Anguis. "And our spies say Greif and Anguis are strengthening their own defenses."

"It's really starting to look like they don't have any intention of helping."

"They mustn't, if Esel is panicking this early."

Esel had been sending messengers to all manner of nations and nobles, desperate for any soldiers they could find. They had even been recruiting commonfolk of fighting age from towns and villages, with some success until an imperial task force discovered their efforts and rooted out the new recruits. It was hard to see any path left for the kingdom now but surrender.

"I plan to ask the queen to negotiate one last time after we have Licht surrounded," Aura said. "If that doesn't work, we'll have to take the city."

"I'd prefer that to be a last resort, but if you think it's necessary, you're in charge."

It would not be in the empire's interests to raze Esel. The

kingdom would be far more useful alive and compliant. Ideally, it would form a buffer zone between Faerzen and Six Kingdoms, keeping the latter at bay while the former was rebuilt. Aside from anything else, the empire could not afford to have its forces tied down in the west for long. The other nations of Soleil were circling. Liz wanted to broker a deal as soon as possible so her armies could return home.

"Aside from that, all that's left is to wait for Scáthach to wake up."

Aura nodded. "Retaking Faerzen doesn't mean anything without her."

By most measures, the plan to recapture Faerzen had been a success. The imperial offensive had fallen into dire straits for a time after the loss of the first army, but they had rallied to claim a string of victories and now occupied San Dinalle. Remnants of Six Kingdoms' forces still needed to be mopped up, but with Esel blocking the way into Faerzen, they would grow demoralized and fall apart of their own accord. All that was left was for Scáthach to pronounce the campaign a success—and therein lay the problem. She had been unconscious ever since her hard-won battle with Stovell. The Faerzen Resistance was not yet aware of her condition, and there was no guarantee they would not be furious when they learned of it.

For lack of anything else to do, Liz and Aura had brought Scáthach to Esel. Ideally, she would have stayed in San Dinalle for treatment, but that would have meant leaving her in the hands of Beto von Muzuk's lackey, Ludurr. Besides, there were many who wished her harm, and she was not capable of defending herself. She needed to be somewhere her safety was assured.

"Not that this is exactly a safe place," Liz sighed.

There were few people she trusted, and just as few who were skilled enough to be called reliable. Endless years of warfare under Emperor Greiheit had claimed the lives of many of the empire's best commanders, and deep-rooted corruption among the nobility had dried up the well. The empire had once been a veritable treasure trove of talent, but now it was a military in decline.

"Well, there's no point complaining about it. We'll just have to do the best we can with what we have." Liz finished the last of her tea, which had grown quite cold, and forced herself to think

positively. As she did, she recalled what she had previously discussed with Aura. “Oh, that’s right. You were looking into something. Did you learn anything?”

“Was I?”

“Well, that’s what you said. Something about Tigris, Vulpes, and Scorpius.”

At that, Aura nodded and stood up. Her oversized sleeves flopped about as she fished a report from her desk and trotted back. “Read this. I’m confident it’s right.”

Liz scanned the report. Her brow furrowed deeper and deeper as she read. “That…would make sense, wouldn’t it? It would certainly explain why they’ve stayed out of this war.”

She couldn’t help but feel impressed anew by Aura’s tactical mind. Anybody else would have dismissed such a hunch, especially when the campaign was proceeding so smoothly. Then again, Aura had insisted from the start that the empire needed to win this war with minimal casualties, so no doubt she had checked her results time and time again. This parchment was the fruit of days of deliberation. To read it, there could be no doubting the intensity of her ambition: she sought to surpass Hiro just as earnestly as Liz did.

“I’m going to keep investigating. But I want you to bear the plan in mind.” For a moment, Aura positively radiated confidence, but she quickly patted her cheeks and shook her head as if to cool herself off. “Don’t worry. I won’t insist on it. I’m always ready to abandon my ideas. There’s nothing as dangerous as a plan you’re certain will work.”

“All right. We’ll try it. I’ll call a strategy meeting tomorrow morning, and we can all work out the details.”

“I’ll let you know what I learn.”

Aura nodded, visibly pleased. Liz had to restrain the urge to pat her on the head. Aura hated being treated like a child. It would only make her sulk. That could be charming in and of itself, of course, but Aura preferred being treated like a responsible older sister. Unfortunately, she had not been born with the physique to make that dream a reality.

In any case, Liz found herself with her arm extended awkwardly. To hide the motion, she laid her hand on the table and stood up. “I’d better go and check on Scáthach,” she said. “I don’t want to keep her waiting.”

“Good idea.” Aura held up her book as if showing off a prize.

“Luckily, I have this.”

“I’m sure Scáthach will be, um, very pleased.”

With a slightly strained smile, Liz opened the tent flap. The sentries bowed as the pair stepped outside. The camp was bright with bonfires, but the night had grown late and a chill had settled in. Nonetheless, the air was tense. The constant fighting had many of the soldiers hot-blooded. That, Liz mused, could develop into an issue if they grew fixated on taking Licht. Too much eagerness in the ranks could weaken the chain of command as surely as too little. The troops would lose sight of all but what was in front of them, ignoring their superior’s orders. There was nothing for it but to change some units around. She would have to convene with her aides the next morning and decide how best to go about the reorganization without disrupting their offensive.

She mulled over the dilemma as she walked, but it was not long before she arrived at Scáthach’s tent. It lay right next to the command center. Liz’s own tent was just on the other side.

“Hm?” Liz cocked her head, noticing something amiss. Aura glanced up at her; she had clearly noticed the same thing. A group of women stood by the entrance to the tent, blowing hot breath into their hands—the ladies-in-waiting whom Liz had brought along on the march. They had been instructed to watch over Scáthach at her bedside while Liz was in the strategy meeting.

“What are you doing out here?” she asked.

The ladies-in-waiting saw who had addressed them and immediately bowed their heads. “Ah! Good evening, Your Highness.”

Liz approached one of them and laid a hand on her shoulder. “No need for formalities. I thought I’d told you that you were to take care of Scáthach?”

“We were, Your Highness, but Lord Surtr came to visit her. He requested they be left alone—”

Before the woman could finish, Liz pushed past her and burst into the tent. Inside lay a bed, and next to it, a desk littered with a variety of pharmaceuticals. A pungent aroma hung in the air. Nonetheless, the tent was kept spotlessly clean.

There was nobody inside. For a moment, Liz feared Scáthach had been stolen away, but as she dashed to the bed, she found the woman lying under the covers, breathing peacefully as she

slept.

“Oh, Scáthach!” she cried. “Thank goodness you’re all right…”

She breathed a sigh of relief, but a moment later, her breath caught in her throat as a shocking realization struck her. It was then that Aura and the ladies-in-waiting caught up.

“Liz?” Aura called her name, but there was no reply. She stepped closer and looked down into the bed, furrowing her brow. “What’s the ma—” She too broke off. Just like Liz, her eyes widened in shock.

As Aura froze, Liz returned to her senses, turning on her heel to face the ladies-in-waiting. She advanced on them until they were only inches apart. One tried to pull away, but Liz grasped her by the shoulder and held her in place.

“Tell me what happened here.”

“Forgive me, Your Highness. Have I done something wrong?” The lady-in-waiting struggled to meet her gaze. She looked dreadfully confused.

“Why was I not informed that Surtr had visited?” Liz asked as gently as possible. She did not want to intimidate the woman.

“I meant to… I didn’t… Wait, did I not turn him away? That’s not right… Why didn’t I…?” The lady-in-waiting didn’t seem to understand what had happened herself. She clutched anxiously at her hair, pressing her hands to her forehead in clear distress. Sweat began to bead on her brow as it dawned on her that she did not have an answer.

Liz was just as perplexed. For all that Surtr might be Hiro in disguise, he did not have leave to access the imperial camp as he liked. If he had shown up this late at night, the guards should have been called. Even if he had been lucky enough to avoid the patrols, he should have been spotted by the ladies-in-waiting attending to Scáthach. Indeed, they had confessed to having seen him, which ought to have given them cause for alarm. Yet not only had they let him in, they had allowed him to be alone with Scáthach—a serious error of judgment. He could very well have been an assassin in disguise. It was the rule that they should seek Liz’s permission before making any such decisions. All of them were veteran servants of the imperial court. They should have known not to take matters into their own hands.

“A-Are we going to be punished, Your Highness?” The lady-in-waiting had gone pale, realizing the severity of what she and her colleagues had done.

Judging by their reactions, it was hard to believe they had invited Hiro inside the tent of their own free will. Liz felt oddly certain that he had done something to them. She stepped away from the quivering women and took a deep breath to calm herself. They had done nothing wrong. Her new eyes told her so.

"No," she said. "Scáthach wasn't hurt, so I'll turn a blind eye."

One question still nagged at her. Why hadn't she felt Hiro's presence? She had always vaguely been able to sense him, no matter where he was—she could feel him now, in fact. Why had that ability failed her here? She didn't know, and that was disconcerting.

In any case, the lady-in-waiting still looked terrified. Liz laid a hand on her shoulder and smiled. "But next time, I would like to be informed."

"Of course, Your Highness!" The woman's eyes widened as she looked back. Her cheeks flushed, and a heated breath escaped her throat.

Liz looked all the ladies-in-waiting over. "You should rest. All of you. I'll call for you if I need you."

"Thank you, Your Highness. Our humblest apologies."

They filed out of the tent, looking forlorn. Once they had left, Liz walked back to Scáthach's bed. Aura still looked a little shocked, and she raised a hand to her mouth to hide her trembling lips.

"Liz... I don't... What happened here?" Her speech was unusually halting. She seemed to be struggling to gather her thoughts. Her mouth opened and closed several times as she tried and failed to find the right words.

"I'd like to know that myself. But for now..."

Liz looked down at Scáthach's sleeping form. She didn't know whether to feel delighted or uneasy. Perhaps both, but even then, she didn't know what Hiro wanted from Scáthach, and that was most unsettling of all.

"For now, I think we should just be glad that she's recovered."

Not hours ago, Scáthach had been on the brink of death, but now there was not a scratch on her. Where her face had been painfully swollen, it now positively glowed with health. Even her broken arms seemed to have been mended. Her ragged breathing was now peaceful and serene.

"I'll call the physician," Aura said, moving for the exit.

Liz's gaze remained fixed on Scáthach, but her expression

took on a determined set. “Aura,” she said, raising her voice a little, “I need you to do something for me…”

* * * * *

With the imperial army fast approaching, the mood in Licht was grim. The streets were lifeless, and the townsfolk trembled in their homes. Esel had never had a large population, but with so many of its citizens fleeing to other kingdoms, it had grown noticeably emptier. Perhaps worst of all, there was little enthusiasm to be found among the soldiers lining the castle walls. Only a handful seemed inspired to defend their families, their queen, and their country. The rest looked to have given up, and the number of deserters grew by the day. The chain of command had utterly collapsed.

The court dignitaries those soldiers were assigned to defend were in the throne room of the castle, arguing.

“The empire approaches as we speak. They are taking fort after fort.”

“What of the other kingdoms?! Where are their reinforcements?!”

“We are sending all the messengers we can, but we hear no replies.”

“What of Her Majesty? Where is she while her nation is in crisis?”

“She is in her chambers, as is her wont.”

Disappointment spread among the nobles as an aged minister pronounced that last remark. The royal house of Esel tended toward retiring personalities that were ill-suited to war. Previous kings had often looked to their advisors to lead. It was because they were such pushovers that Scáthach had been foisted on them when tensions rose between Faerzen and the empire, and when Faerzen fell, they had tried to take her into captivity to appease the latter. Fortunately, by then she had sensed the peril she was in and made herself scarce.

In any case, the royal house of Esel seemed cursed with weakness. They wielded little influence with the other five kingdoms and often had to take on the burdens the others did not want. Still, its present queen was worse even by the standards of her predecessors.

“There is still time,” the minister insisted. “Let us petition the

other kingdoms again for aid.”

“That we will do, but I expect to see Her Majesty in the throne room by the time we are done.”

The rest of the nobles watched in dismay as the exchange unfolded. The uncertainty of the future had them anxious. Only a strong and decisive leader could reassure them. Unfortunately, Queen Jilbe Ogra du Esel did not have those qualities. She had been locked in her chambers for days, refusing to attend any of the running councils of war. She had not emerged since word had arrived of the imperial invasion.

“What news from the other kingdoms?” Jilbe asked, her face submerged in her pillow. “Has Miss Lucia said nothing?”

Her questions were directed to the hooded figure waiting at her bedside.

“We have sent many messengers to Queen Lucia, Your Majesty,” the figure replied, “but we have yet to receive a reply.”

The man had served the royal line of Esel since the reign of Jilbe’s father. Appointed on the recommendation of Chancellor Nameless of Greif, he had impressed the previous king with his talent for statecraft and quickly been appointed as the young princess’s tutor. He had been by her side through every trial, for which Jilbe was more than grateful. It was only because of him that she had successfully managed the kingdom’s affairs thus far.

“Th-Then what do we...? I know! Why don’t we surrender? They told us they would treat us well, wouldn’t they?”

“I fear that would be unwise, Your Majesty. Esel would be surrounded by enemies on all sides, and the other kingdoms would quickly tear it to shreds.”

Esel was dreadfully weak on a continental scale. It had only lasted as long as it had because it was a member of Six Kingdoms. It could not survive striking out on its own. The prospect of imperial protection might seem enticing, but that would be a perilous road to take. The empire only truly cared for Faerzen—it would not spare a second glance for a barren land like Esel. Jilbe and her subjects would be squeezed for reparations and cast out. The empire might offer reinforcements if they came under attack from the other kingdoms, but only enough to ensure Esel survived to serve as a buffer zone for Faerzen. Beyond that, they would not care if order collapsed or its people starved.

“But... But if we do nothing, the empire will kill us all!” Jilbe

protested.

If she did not surrender, Esel would burn. If she did, its destruction at the empire's hands would be more prolonged but just as certain. Both choices would be equally disastrous.

"Let us wait, Your Majesty," the hooded figure said, "until the final moment it is certain reinforcements will not come. Then you may decide whether to surrender to the empire."

"But we've ignored their requests so many times already! They must be furious with us. If we hold out any longer, they might not accept our surrender."

"That will not be a concern, Your Highness. They will be glad of the chance to spare us."

"Are you certain?"

"Of course. They mean to make Esel their wall to defend Faerzen. They would not let it fall before it was ever raised."

"You're right, of course." Jilbe nodded, but then she cocked her head. She did not seem to understand as well as she professed.

Her advisor laid a hand on her head, smiling beneath his hood. "In any case, I cannot advise showing yourself before your nobles before the time is right."

"Then what should I do?"

"Let us pretend you are ill. Nobody will complain about you staying in your chambers then. As for your matters of state, you may simply leave me in charge."

The man held out a hand. A small, round object like a boiled sweet lay in his palm. Jilbe looked up at him, tilting her head, but she could not make out his expression. His hood left all but his mouth covered in deep darkness.

"What is this?"

"You have complained of difficulty sleeping, Your Majesty. I have procured this specially."

"Oh…it's medicine? It looked so tasty…"

"It works very well, or so I hear. It comes from a land far to the east, where I hear wars were once fought over it."

"It's that valuable? Are you certain I should have it?"

"Quite certain, Your Majesty. Here, some water ought to help it go down easier."

As Jilbe regarded the bead with innocent curiosity, the man turned and poured a goblet of water. His smile broadened beneath his hood. Jilbe took the goblet gratefully before popping

the medicine into her mouth and washing it down.

“Wonderful, Your Majesty. I daresay you will sleep very well tonight.”

“Thank you so much. I think it’s working already!”

Jilbe lay down on her bed. The hooded man stood beside her, stroking her hair until she drifted off.

“When next you wake, you will have no more cares.”

She would fall far beyond sleep. Farther than she could ever return from.

“I hope so. Good night, Lord Hydra.” With warmth swelling in her breast, she descended into slumber.

“Good night, my dear,” Hydra murmured.

Chapter 5: Nameless

The twenty-fourth day of the tenth month of Imperial Year 1026

In the center of Natua, Baum's capital and only city, lay the square structure of Frieden, the sanctum of the Spirit King. In the days of old, the Spirit King had gifted humankind with the Five Spiritblade Sovereigns to free them from the dominion of the zlosta. The result had been the birth of the Grantzian Empire and, ultimately, Emperor Artheus proclaiming human dominion over Soleil. Humankind had worshipped the Spirit King as its god ever since. Almost every day, people arrived from all corners of the world to seek his blessing, which had turned Natua into a hub of prosperity.

Baum was often said to be small in breadth but great in stature. As the home of the Spirit King, it was respected and feared by the other nations of Soleil in equal measure. Its influence extended even to the Grantzian Empire, so when the rulers of other nations engaged in disputes with the empire, they often sought Baum's aid to broker peace. When they did, their nobles would inevitably come seeking an audience with the archpriestess, the mistress of Frieden and the only person capable of communing with the Spirit King.

The archpriestess stood in one of Frieden's many corridors. Before her towered an enormous door, covered in decorations wrought a thousand years ago by dwarven artisans. It swung open to reveal a cavernous space beyond.

The chamber was an underground storehouse piled high with Baum's most valuable treasures. Spirit weapons, spirit armor, spirit stones—riches the other nations of Soleil would have given almost anything to claim. Robbers had broken in more than a handful of times, but they had never escaped with their takings. The entire complex lay under the watchful gaze of the archpriestess and her Far Sight. Recently, however, the archpriestess had been preoccupied. Her visit to the empire had taken her from Baum, and she had spent the trip touring as many towns and villages as time would allow. She had not had the chance to visit the storehouse in several weeks.

She found the place empty. Nothing remained but the thin

echo of her footsteps. A smile formed on her face as she looked around. Someone had somehow managed to remove every last spirit armament.

A shard chipped from a spirit stone clinked against her foot. She bent down and picked it up, surveying the chamber again. No matter how hard she looked, her arcane eyes perceived only a white void.

“Of course.” Nodding in understanding, she turned about and left the storehouse.

As she walked up the stairs back to Frieden’s familiar marble halls, she caught the attention of a patrolling knight of the spirits.

“Might you know where I can find Lord Garda?”

“I last saw him in the northern corridor, Your Grace.”

“My thanks.”

With a small nod, she strode away, heels clacking on the stone. An observer particularly attuned to fluctuations in emotion might have sensed the anger in her stride, but the knight of the spirits only returned to her rounds, none the wiser.

The archpriestess walked in silence through dimly lit hallways. At last, she came to the sacred clearing at the heart of Frieden. The air was filled with trills of birdsong and the bubbling of a brook, and the wind rustled in the trees. The richness of nature reached out to calm her heart, but she shrugged off its embrace. Her gaze was fixed on the man before her.

He sat facing away from her, distinctive lilac skin on full display. His arms were as thick as tree trunks, strong enough that the pressure of their swing alone might send a man’s head flying. Yet as he was now, tearing chunks off a loaf of bread to feed to squirrels, it was hard to imagine he was kin to the zlosta of old.

“May I ask what you are doing here, Lord Garda?”

Garda set down the bread and got to his feet. Squirrels swarmed the loaf, squabbling among themselves for pieces.

“I’d hoped to speak with you, Your Grace.”

“What a happy accident. I had hoped to do the same.”

“Then you might as well go first.” Garda indicated for her to speak. “I’m in no hurry.”

“It appears my storehouse has been emptied of spirit weapons.” Her voice grew unmistakably firmer. “Would that happen to be the Crow Legion’s doing?”

Garda nodded without a hint of sheepishness. “We had need of them.”

The archpriestess’s brow furrowed skeptically. “May I take that to mean you intend to return them?”

Garda nodded again, folding his arms. “Of course. That’s why the One-Eyed Dragon set up his new foundry. Easy work it was not, but we managed to finish on time.”

In anticipation of battles to come, Hiro had constructed a weapons foundry in the east of Natua. After making use of the civil war in Steissen to secure labor and expertise, he had leveraged Baum’s relationship with Lichtein to acquire the leasehold rights to several mines. The chancellor of the empire had provided coin and additional manpower, while Lebering had sent ore under the guise of tea leaf shipments.

“I am aware. His Majesty explained his plans to me in person.”

“Good,” Garda grunted. “That’ll save me the trouble of filling you in.” He raised his arms in a lazy shrug. “We took your spirit stones to the foundry. Give us two or three years and we’ll return all the arms and armor we took.”

“I would not consider that to be repaying your debt.” The archpriestess raised an eyebrow, eyeing Garda distrustfully. “Aside from anything else, those spirit stones were the rightful property of Frieden to begin with.”

“As I said, pressing need.” Garda looked very much unrepentant. “The One-Eyed Dragon asked me to apologize on his behalf.”

“No, I need no apology. If the king of Baum has judged he has need of our weaponry, it is his to take.”

“Then why did you seek me out?”

“I was concerned it might have been the work of bandits. I would have had to start an investigation.” The note of regret in her voice turned to a reassuring smile. “But I appreciate your candor. I am glad not to have to turn Frieden upside down.”

“And I’m sorry for the fuss. If you won’t take an apology from the One-Eyed Dragon, perhaps you’ll take one from me.”

The words they traded were empty of all but provocation, a silent duel fought with implication alone. They poked and prodded at each other, each trying to discern the other’s intentions.

“Might I ask what you have done with so many spirit armaments?” the archpriestess asked.

No sooner had the question left her lips than Garda's demeanor shifted. His eyes grew hawkish, like those of a hunter that had snared his prey, and the corners of his mouth pulled back like a predator served a plate of meat.

"Do those eyes of yours not tell you?"

The archpriestess's eyes widened for a moment in incomprehension, but gradually, understanding dawned. She looked down, and her shoulders began to tremble with laughter.

"Aha…" She pressed the back of her hand to her mouth, no longer able to contain herself. "Ha ha ha… Yes, indeed. As you say. Whyever did I ask?"

Her laughter faded, and she regarded him with a radiant smile. The benevolence of Baum's beloved lady was alluring indeed. Yet the zlosta's brow only furrowed. He tensed, sinking a little into a guarded stance. The squirrels at his feet abandoned their gamboling and scattered for the cover of the undergrowth.

The archpriestess narrowed her eyes at the shift in his bearing. "Well," she said with a bow, "it would appear the mystery has been solved. If you would excuse me."

Garda raised a hand. "Not so fast, Your Grace. I had a question for you, you may recall."

"Of course." A flicker of irritation crossed her face as she cocked her head. "Do forgive me. By all means, speak."

"The One-Eyed Dragon revealed much to me during your trip to the empire."

The archpriestess said nothing to that.

"And what truths he had to tell. When first I heard, I could have laughed." The zlosta's voice grew haughty, almost mocking. "But then, so would any man if they were told they were speaking to the War God in the flesh."

"It almost sounds like you believe these tales."

"That I do. But not because of anything so sentimental as trust." In his mind's eye, Garda saw again his arrival in Soleil. He chose his words carefully, weighing her responses. "It is because I have experienced the same. In the time I wielded Bebensleif, the power of the Demiurgos brought me to these shores."

Encountering Mille, whom he had rescued from violent slavers, had taught him that humans could be kind. To repay that debt, he had formed the Liberation Army, taken the bandit leaders Huginn and Muninn as his lieutenants, and set about overthrowing the rulers of Lichtein. His rebellion had come to an

end at Hiro's hands. After his defeat, Bebensleif had abandoned him—or rather, the Fellblade had been stripped from him by the Demiurgos.

"An act different in scale, perhaps, but not in kind. The Spirit King is a Lord of Heaven. It is not so difficult to believe he could summon a boy from another world."

There was no way to know what had drawn the Spirit King to Hiro, but the deity had chosen well. Hiro had set the humans free from oppression and made them the most prosperous race in Aletia.

"The One-Eyed Dragon learned of me from the emperor's letter, it seems. But who was it that told the emperor?"

That individual was standing before Garda now: a person whom even the emperor could not disregard. Only one person in Soleil could exert authority over such an otherwise unassailable ruler.

The archpriestess inclined her head. "You are a pureblood zlosta, Lord Garda. With the Far Sight—Gaia, to call it by its name—it was a simple task to pick you out from the humans of Lichtein."

Garda had expected her to hide the truth or perhaps to try and deny it. Instead, she flatly admitted it.

"I was a pawn, was I not?" he continued warily. "A dog tossed into the ring to gauge the One-Eyed Dragon's strength."

"I am afraid I have not the slightest idea what you mean."

"Don't you now? He told me all about you, you know. How you assisted him in the early days."

It was the archpriestess who had helped Hiro recover his memories of his life as the War God, and it had been thanks to her intervention that he had regained the Black Camellia and achieved official recognition as the War God's heir. Because she had nudged the emperor to inform him about Garda, he had first begun to rise in status.

"But after he took the rank of fourth prince, your interventions ceased. Is that not so?"

"What are you insinuating, Lord Garda?"

"That you're his enemy, Your Grace." Garda drew his greatsword from his back and leveled it at her throat. "Or perhaps I should call you First Princess Freyr Straea von Grantz?"

As he spoke the name, raw malice blossomed from the archpriestess. Flower petals scattered on the wind, dispersed by

the force of her presence. Birds fluttered from the treetops in alarm. All around, terrified animals retreated to the undergrowth.

Cling. From thin air came the tinkle of bells. Garda glanced around for the source of the sound, but then the archpriestess stepped forward and he could no longer afford to look away.



“Where did you learn that name?” she asked.

“From the One-Eyed Dragon,” Garda said. “And by the looks of it, he had you dead to rights.”

All emotion had slipped from the archpriestess’s face. Until a few seconds ago, Garda had at least believed she possessed some humanity, but he had been dreadfully mistaken. She had nothing of the sort. Might enough to warp the air swirled around her. Power enough to bend space swelled within her. To stand against her was to face something so utterly alien, it was hard not to feel awe.

Yet Garda was a veteran of countless battlefields, and he refused to be intimidated. He stood nonchalantly, voice defiant, asserting by his bearing that he still held the upper hand. “Do you hate your own name that much?”

“Oh, yes. I quite despise it.” A shadow had crept over the archpriestess’s brow, and her expression was no longer visible.

Cling. Bells rang again, louder this time. Loud enough to shake the world.

“Then perhaps you would prefer another,” Garda said, raising his voice to drown out the din. He swept his greatsword out to the side and surged forward. “Perhaps I should call you Nameless!”

The greatsword swung down, cleaving the ground like a knife through butter. A plume of dirt rose into the air, turning the clearing into a murky haze. Garda strained his senses to find his foe. A shadow caught his eye, and he thrust out his blade with lightning speed, only to scowl as the sword cut through air.

He stalked through the murk, sliding his feet cautiously across the earth, alert for wherever his prey might be hiding. He swung at any hint of her presence. The glowing manastone in his forehead endowed his already muscular body with destructive strength. Mana radiated from his skin, withering the flowers around him.

“Accursed tricks,” he growled.

None of his swings found their mark. It did not take him long to realize there was something more than bad luck at work. He took one step, five, ten, exiting the cloud of dust with explosive speed. Several new pursuers followed close on his tail. They all felt like Nameless.

Garda came to a halt, counting the figures converging around him. He slammed an open hand down onto the ground. As the

manastone in his forehead began to glow, he balled his other hand into a fist and slammed it against the earth. His mana, formerly a diffuse aura, concentrated into a single point and exploded outward. Clods of earth flew high. As they came apart in midair, raining down dirt, a gust of wind swept the haze away, whipping through the trees before returning to the sky. The forest came back into view.

"Now where have you gone?" Garda muttered.

He sensed no one about, but he knew his foe was not dead. There was no sign of a body. He peered about suspiciously, as if trying to see through a glamor. All of a sudden, an immense presence flared into being behind him. As soon as he sensed it, he spun, twisting his body with all his strength to bring his greatsword around in a horizontal sweep.

A melodic voice tickled his eardrums. "Too slow, I fear."

Cling. With a tinkle of bells, a sharp impact blasted through his torso.

"Ngh!"

Garda's body tumbled across the ground as though he had been caught in a wave. He crashed into the treeline and came to a stop, wreathed in grit and dirt.

"Curse you…"

He clenched his teeth against the pain, wiping a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth, and planted a fist on the ground. As he forced himself to his feet, he sensed countless enemies approaching from all around and took off into the forest.

"How disappointing. All that talk, only to run?"

One Nameless appeared before him, blocking his path. Another closed in from behind. He looked around. Copies of her surrounded him on all sides, radiating hostility. They cut off every avenue of escape.

"It's a strange Graal you use." He spat a gobbet of blood onto the ground and grinned. A sword stroke cut down the Nameless before him, but it was like cutting air. He gave a crooked smile. "Should've known ordinary steel would do little to a Dharmic Blade."

"Why did you choose this fight if you knew you could not win?"

Garda peered at the approaching Namelesses, trying to discern which was real, but the copies were so precise as to be

indistinguishable from the real thing.

"I suppose I wanted to see for myself the truth of the One-Eyed Dragon's words."

"You would throw away your life for that? You are more foolish than I gave you credit for."

"Perhaps. But I had to do it if we were to fight on the same side."

One could not build trust on a foundation of suspicion. Now that doubt had been sown in Garda's mind, his only recourse had been to prove it was unfounded. It was unfortunate that he had unearthed a formidable foe in the process, but he had known the risk he was taking.

"Besides," he continued, "someone had to keep you occupied."

"Indeed." Nameless gave a hopeless shrug. She understood immediately what he meant. "How very heroic of you to volunteer."

Many of Garda's men remained in Baum, and he had needed to buy them time to run. No doubt they were fleeing Natua even now. Admittedly, he had not accounted for Nameless's powers—she could sense them and pursue them to the ends of Aletia. Still, the odds that she would go after them were low. She would learn nothing from hunting down low-ranking soldiers. It would be more trouble than it was worth.

Garda clapped a hand to his neck. "Seems I've no more reason to stay."

His eyes darted rapidly between the Nameless clones. Each of them stood with a dagger in their right hand and a bell staff in their left. Their faces were identical, all equally emotionless, more doll than living being. They moved in eerie unison.

"So you mean to run?" The Namelesses grew closer, feet gliding across the ground.

Garda thrust his greatsword into the earth and spread his arms wide. "Hah. I mean to fight!"

Light spilled from the zlosta's forehead. Mana raged through the air. He focused it all in his hands, crouched low, and drove both palms down into the earth.

All at once, the world turned upside down. The ground bulged and erupted. Great fissures spread wide, swallowing the Namelesses. Those who managed to leap to safety were consumed by walls of earth that rose skyward. Even so, they kept coming. New clones spawned with every passing second.

Garda withdrew his greatsword from the ground and bounded forward with explosive speed, mowing them down with the weighty blade. Innumerable clones converged on him. Each was weak individually—perhaps a limitation of the Dharmic Blade, perhaps of Nameless herself—but the endless onslaught sapped his strength. His movements grew slower. Countless wounds opened up all across his body. Even so, he did not stop. He swung, twisted, spun, turned, spraying blood with every motion as he fended off the assault.

Yet he could not hold out forever. The Namelesses swarmed him like ants on fresh meat, intent on eating him alive. At last, his colossal body began to fail. He dug in his heels and kept standing, but he had little strength left to fight.

He grunted. “A formidable opponent indeed.”

His armor was crumpled and dented. Blood flowed from the gaps where Nameless’s daggers had pierced it, soaking the ground beneath his feet. His hair was bedraggled, his face was bloodless, and the manastone in his forehead was beginning to dim. He withdrew a dagger lodged in his armor and heaved a sigh, watching as the empty-eyed clones closed in.

“One I could not best, it seems.”

As Garda’s shoulders slumped in resignation, a slender leg caught him in the abdomen. He flew through the air with incredible force, trailing a cloud of dust, until finally he crashed into a tree trunk.

Nameless stepped closer, gazing coldly down at him. “Then your show of defiance is done?” Her face was expressionless as ever, and it showed no hint of exhaustion.

No getting the best of this one, Garda thought. He coughed up blood and grinned ruefully.

“Did Lord Surtr order you to throw your life away?” Nameless asked.

Garda’s men had already left Natua. Had he chosen to flee, he would have had a better chance of survival.

“Hah. He told me to run.”

Hiro had instructed him not to fight her under any circumstances. Even a pureblood zlosta would not stand a chance against a Noble Blade, he had said—at least, not without a Fellblade. Yet Garda had chosen to fight anyway.

Nameless’s brows knitted quizzically. “Then why, pray tell, did you not listen?”

The corners of Garda's eyes crinkled as he turned an empty gaze to the sky. The reason was simple, but not one she would ever understand. "As I said. I doubted him when I should not have."

When Hiro had revealed the truth, Garda had wondered if it was wise to believe him, and upon hearing what Hiro intended, he had been stricken with unease—a distrust that he had failed to shake.

"But he was no liar. Only a fool."

All along, Hiro had been nothing but maddeningly earnest, so much so that it was impossible not to feel affection. Even if nobody else understood him, even if nobody would ever sympathize with him, he would walk the path he believed was right. How wrong it had been, Garda thought, to doubt such purity of purpose.

The zlosta grinned. "This is my penance."

He had owed Hiro a great debt—both for saving Mille and for concealing his identity as a pureblood zlosta—and yet he had repaid that debt with disloyalty. If he died here, at least he would do so having wiped the slate clean.

"Is that so? Then allow me to mete out your sentence."

The clones stepped closer, their footsteps soft on the ground. A dull gleam ran the length of their daggers as the blades shifted in their hands. Garda closed his eyes and waited for death.

"Farewell, Lord Garda." There was not a hint of mercy in her voice. There was no emotion in it at all.

Blades descended on him from all sides. He had no means of fighting back. In that moment, both combatants understood the battle was over. And yet the end did not come. The daggers halted before they pierced his skin.

The clones had stopped. Surprise colored their faces. Where before nothing had stood between them and Garda, a sword now protruded from the earth.

"An intruder?"

The Namelesses leaped back in clear confusion, looking around. Their countless eyes converged on the same spot. Remnants of their fight littered the forest, but high above the battle-scarred clearing, the moon cast its light through a gap in the clouds—and there stood a proud wolf, white pelt gleaming in the silver glow.

Garda stared too, just as surprised. "Cerberus?" he whispered.

The wolf looked like the one he knew, but she felt like an entirely different beast.

Nameless's shock, however, soon faded into seeming comprehension. "Of course," she murmured. "I did wonder where you had hidden yourself. I confess, I never imagined you might reduce yourself to a lowly beast. Is your loyalty so great that you would cast aside your dignity?"

She narrowed her eyes, wary at the appearance of this new foe. She seemed far less at ease than while fighting Garda. Her words were still goading, but they had lost their edge. Distaste flickered in her eyes as she stared the wolf down.

"To think one of the War God's own Black Hand would sully their honor for the love of their master." She clutched her bell staff tight, making no attempt to disguise her scorn. Her voice took on a vicious edge. "A shame, is it not, Lady Meteia?"

The wolf stared back, unblinking.

* * * * *

A mounted host thundered along the roads of Greif, the drumming of their horseshoes ringing loud in the dark. The ill-omened rumble sent townsfolk scurrying from their beds to light up bonfires, but the armed force paid the settlements no mind, passing by as if scoffing at their fears. Their banners bore the serpent of Anguis.

A four-horse carriage led the column, wheels bouncing as it raced along the road at a remarkable speed. Hiro sat inside, accompanied by Lucia, who had come to meet him en route from the imperial camp. They faced each other, negotiating the cabin's violent shaking.

Lucia spoke first, frowning a little at the screaming of the wheels. "Greif has fortified itself, 'twould seem."

"Do they suspect what we're up to?"

"No. They are not aware we are here."

"Then they're just afraid of the empire?"

"Indeed. We crossed the border easily enough, did we not?"

Lucia and her two thousand soldiers had passed the checkpoint between Greif and Anguis without arousing any suspicion. That said, it hadn't been much of a checkpoint. With Grief and Anguis being such longtime allies, it had barely been manned.

“General Ramses takes the position that the other kingdoms may come and go as they please,” Lucia continued. “He will let most anyone in so long as he believes they are there to lend their aid.”

“Is he competent?”

“Very much so. He manages Greif’s military affairs by himself, more or less. A warrior among warriors, the people call him—a veritable paragon respected by soldiery and commonfolk alike. Yet he has his weaknesses.”

“What do you mean?”

Lucia gave a disinterested little yawn. “He may be competent — Eek!”

The carriage rocked wildly, launching her off her seat, and she struck the back of her head against the wall, letting out an uncharacteristically startled yelp. She resumed speaking with an irritable scowl, rubbing her head.

“As I said, he may be competent, but he is old-fashioned and set in his ways. He is not a man given to compromise.” She tapped her fan against her cheek. “In any case, all has gone according to plan so far. We shall arrive at the capital, fight our way up the hill to the palace, and that shall be that.”

The palace of Fierte stood apart from the rest of the city. It was built on top of a hill with a gate at the bottom, separating it from the port. As far as Hiro was concerned, that was a stroke of luck—it would ensure that no innocent townsfolk were hurt tonight. The problem was the hill road. It made the palace easy to defend. Greif’s armies might have been depleted by their battles with the empire in Faerzen, but they would still outnumber Lucia’s two thousand.

“Are you sure it’ll be that easy? You said yourself that they’re fortifying their defenses. It’ll be a lot more heavily guarded than that checkpoint.”

“Fear not. Soldiers from every kingdom are stationed in Fierte. The Anguis contingent is small, but they shall be more than enough to open the gate.”

It seemed Lucia had left her aide Seleucus in charge of her forces in the city.

“Assuming our treachery does not come to light, we shall be able to approach the hill without difficulty. Once we are there, we need only fight our way up, assume positions around the palace entrance, and take the High King hostage.”

“So we’re racing against time.”

“Hence the need for haste.”

Hiro was not fully satisfied. Even if Lucia’s scheme succeeded, she would be branded a traitor. How did she plan to quell the uproar after securing the High King? Not that he would be disappointed to see her fail—the empire only stood to gain from strife between Greif and Anguis, after all—but he was curious.

“And I’m supposed to take care of Nameless in the meantime?”

“Precisely. If I am correct, she ought to be attending to the defense of the palace.”

Lucia sounded certain, but Hiro had his doubts. If Nameless was watching them, their plans would be ruined, but so far, she had not stirred. That suggested she was not in Greif at all—but in that case, where was she?

If my suspicions are correct, she’ll abandon Greif entirely.

In any case, this was a chance well worth taking, as well as an ideal opportunity to ingratiate himself with Lucia. His plans were coming to fruition. Coming this far had been a delicate dance that had required pulling on many unlikely threads, but soon, all would be one.

The archpriestess, Nameless, whatever she calls herself… Let her keep scheming if she wants.

People lived as pawns, using and being used by others, unwittingly serving higher purposes even as they acted of their own wills. All their joy, their delight, their anger, and their sorrow would one day become one more thread in the tapestry of history. Even Hiro himself was just another piece on the board. Generals, rich men, and kings alike were nothing more than playthings to the gods.

But not for long. Soon, the world will be made anew…

Hiro cut the thought off. Lucia was speaking.

“Do you know,” she said, “I never did ask. Why is it that you do not ride?”

For a moment, he wondered how to wriggle out of the question, but then he recalled that she already knew anything he might want to hide. As he pondered that, the carriage jolted, and Lucia cracked her head against the wall a second time. Tears beaded in her eyes. She clearly wasn’t used to carriage rides.

Doing his best not to chuckle, Hiro brought a hand to his chest. “It’s the Black Camellia. Horses sense her.”

Lucia tapped her fan against her cheek, nodding in understanding. “Indeed. Horses can read minds, ’tis said, and they sense peril just as easily. Few would have the nerve to bear the ruler of all living beasts.”

“No.” Hiro nodded. “They wouldn’t.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a letter—the one he had not given to Muninn. Perhaps he should have done, but he had eventually decided against it.

“And what is this?”

“Something I no longer need. Its recipient can stand well enough on their own two feet. They all can.”

“And what, pray tell, do you mean by that?”

“I mean that people grow.” Hiro tore the letter in two, then four, then eight. He tossed the scraps from the window and let the wind carry them away. They fluttered behind the carriage like flower petals. He smiled as he watched them vanish into the night.

Walk your own path, Aura. You don’t need my help anymore.

Lucia looked at him askance for a while before directing her fan to the Black Camellia. “’Tis a belated question, perhaps, but why white? Did you not wear black when first we met?”

“My scent—the Black Camellia’s scent—is quite distinctive. I’m using a dharmastone to disguise it.”

Soon, there would be no more need for that either. Hiro cast one more glance out of the window, picturing in his mind’s eye the woman who was no doubt flying across the plain.

I’ll be waiting. I do hope you’ll join me.

* * * * *

The twenty-seventh day of the tenth month of Imperial Year 1026

The eighty thousand soldiers of the imperial army had come within sight of Licht. Despite repeated requests for surrender, Esel had refused to negotiate, maintaining a stony silence. The imperial command had judged that they could not afford to waste any more time and moved on the capital in earnest. Their formations were assigned, their siege weapons were in place, and their forces were ready for battle. Yet, curiously, they seemed to have stopped just shy of the town.

Huginn, the commander of the Crow Legion, shaded her eyes with a hand as she watched from the back lines. “Why aren’t they

circling the city?" she mused, cocking her head as she glanced at Luka.

The woman looked up at the sky, her empty sleeve flapping lazily in the breeze. "They may be leaving Esel a way out. Or perhaps something has gone awry."

"Looks like they're hanging back a little far," Huginn replied.

"Fighting may break out if they advance too close. It may be that they still hope Esel will see reason."

The imperial forces were arrayed in a first cohort of thirty thousand, a second cohort of twenty thousand, and a third cohort of another twenty thousand, but they had left oddly large gaps between their formations.

"I don't like how they're laid out," Huginn said. "Seems like they'd shatter if they took a hit in the wrong place."

"They need not fear any ambush. The bulk of Esel's forces are defending the city, and it seems the other kingdoms have sent no reinforcements."

Muninn stood awkwardly behind them in his Hiro disguise. Eventually, perhaps growing restless or simply bored, he stepped forward to join their conversation. "They want to show off how many men we've got, I'll bet. Scare 'em into laying down their swords."

"Do you think we'll end up fighting, Miss Luka?" Huginn asked, ignoring him.

"I don't believe so. I have met the queen of Esel. She does not have the spine to defy any army of this size, much less the empire."

"Erm... You two? Never mind..." Seeing that neither of them spared him so much as a glance, Muninn shrugged and took a seat in his chair, staring sourly at the ground.

"Then they'll probably surrender soon," Huginn said.

"I don't doubt the empire has given them the option."

Luka frowned at that. It was only the slightest movement of her eyebrows but enough of a change of mood for someone who had known her for long enough to detect.

Huginn turned to peer at her. "Miss Luka? Is something wrong?"

"Not as such. I was just thinking...it's hard to believe the queen of Esel would be so slow to make her decision."

"Slow? How d'you mean?"

"As I say, she is a timid sort. I would have expected her to

surrender the moment the empire crossed the border.”

It was possible Jilbe had changed over the past three years, but she had never struck Luka as having that capacity. She had perpetually hidden behind Luka’s back, terrified of something or other and seeking comfort from a fellow human.

“For her to have held her nerve until the empire was knocking at her door seems almost miraculous. And to refuse to reply after the empire has asked her so many times to negotiate… It seems rather out of character.”

It was possible she had angered some faction of warmongering nobles and hidden herself away while they took control of the kingdom’s affairs. Still, that seemed unlikely. Surely nobody in Esel was itching for conflict with the empire. The villages and towns on the way to Licht had been all too happy to acquiesce to imperial demands. If Jilbe had made herself unavailable, her nobles would have surrendered in her place. They would not have maintained this strange silence.

“Could it be that she fears to decide her nation’s future?”

But Jilbe was nobody so dutiful. She had inherited the throne in a flurry of ceremonies after the death of her father, long before she could learn what it meant to be a ruler. Luka suspected she resented having been made queen.

“A curious matter indeed. But musing will do us no good. It is for the empire to find the answers, not us. All we can do is wait for them to act.”

Luka looked at the imperial lines, and Huginn followed her gaze. The sky was clear. If not for the oppressive atmosphere of battle, it would have been a pleasant morning. Dewdrops slipped from the ends of leaves and grasses to seep into the earth. There was a warmth in the air, born from the breath of tens of thousands of throats. The imperial soldiers awaited the order to advance. Their souls burned silently as they gazed at the walls, imagining the moment they would swarm into the town beyond and seize ultimate victory.

Leading them was the chief strategist of the empire, Treya Verdan Aura von Bunadala. As the imperial corps milled with anxious aides, she alone was still, watching and waiting for the moment to strike. A rider came before her, dressed in the sable plate of the Knights of the Royal Black.

He leaped down from his horse and fell to one knee. “The Knights of the Golden Lion, the Knights of the Royal Black, and

the Knights of the Rose are all in position, my lady!" he bellowed with somewhat inappropriate gusto.

Aura raised a hand. "You are the captain of a knight company now, Sir Spitz. Don't be so excitable."

"Of course, my lady!"

Despite the warning, von Spitz sounded pleased. It was hard to blame him—he had served as Aura's aide for many years, gradually winning himself renown with the Knights of the Royal Black, but the two had parted ways after Aura was stripped of command following her failed offensive on the Faerzen Resistance. Von Spitz still dreamed of returning to her service, however, so much so that he had taken the place of a messenger just to see her again.

"Why aren't you with your unit?" Aura asked.

"The Knights of the Royal Black are well capable of taking care of themselves in my absence, my lady. It was you who trained them, after all!"

Aura fell silent for a long moment. "Of course."

Von Spitz's praise was flattering, but a captain leaving his unit was a flagrant breach of military regulations. He would have to be disciplined after the fighting was done.

"Go back to your command, Sir Spitz. I will deal with you later."

"Yes, my lady!" Strangely, he still sounded thankful. He mounted his horse and left the core with a battle cry. The shout caught on. Soon, the whole army was roaring. Morale soared as the air shook and armored boots struck the ground like drum beats.

Aura nodded, pleased by what she saw. Professional conduct aside, von Spitz knew how to raise his men's spirits. He was regrettably hard to dislike.

As Aura furrowed her brow, one of her aides approached her. "All units have been given their orders, my lady. Morale is high. We await your command."

She closed her eyes, taking a moment to collect herself. Her battle plan unfolded inside her mind. She checked and rechecked it, following the steps they had decided in their strategy meetings. At last, she opened her eyes once more and looked over her aides, who had gathered around her.

"What do the lookouts say?"

"A large number of figures are visible on the ramparts. It seems Esel means to fight."

That was regrettable. Aura had wanted to avoid battle if she could help it. If Esel would not back down, however, there was nothing for it. She would face them with all her might.

She raised her right arm to the side. “As we planned. Sound the horns. For the glory of the empire!”

“Yes, my lady!” the aides replied as one before scattering to their tasks.

Aura bowed to the banner of the lion, the sigil of the empire. “I dedicate this victory to the house of von Grantz.”

Horn blasts split the air. A roar went up from the ranks, raising a gigantic plume of dust. The thirty thousand soldiers of the first cohort ground into motion. Aura sat back in her chair and watched them go, heaving a sigh.

“So it begins.”

All that remained was to wait for the battle to play out. Perhaps it would conform to her predictions, or perhaps it would defy them. Anything could happen in war.

There was nothing so terrifying as a battle that seemed easily winnable. Aura had learned that all too well four years ago in Faerzen. She had advanced to confront the Faerzen Resistance, confident in her superior numbers, only to be outmaneuvered by Draali forces and fall straight into Six Kingdoms’ trap. Hiro had departed not long afterward, and the years since had been far from easy. Yet she had thrown herself into studying tactics to better support the Crimson Princess, crafting a plan for victory over the course of many sleepless nights.

“My strategy has to be flawless. If it fails, we’ll lose everything we hold dear.”

Conviction burned in her leaden eyes as she scanned the battlefield, smoldering with quiet fervor. She felt neither anxiety nor doubt. Her heart looked to the future. No doubt her soldiers felt the same.

The first cohort began to encircle Licht. Countless tiny figures dashed to and fro on the ramparts. Esel had fewer than ten thousand men left—they might have had the advantage of fortifications, but with such numbers, they could not hold out more than three days. The empire had Steissen’s siege weaponry, and most tellingly of all, Licht did not have high walls. If all went to plan, it would fall with ease.

A roar went up from the imperial troops as they reached their positions. The battle was beginning in earnest. Flaming arrows

rained down over the walls, and battering rams advanced on the gates. Before long, the city's entrances would be smoldering rubble, and the town beyond would be shrouded in black smoke.

"So far, so good. Now..."

As Aura spoke, a messenger hurtled into view. He tumbled off his horse and fell to one knee. "Enemies to our rear, my lady!" he declared.

A wave of shock ran through the aides, but Aura stayed calm. She rose from her chair and turned to look into the distance. A plume of dust was approaching on the horizon.

She thrust her right arm out to the side. "Raise a smoke signal. Send the Knights of the Golden Lion, the Knights of the Royal Black, and the Knights of the Rose to meet the enemy. And send word to Steissen. Tell them to charge as soon as they see the signal from our banners."

"Yes, my lady!"

Aura's instructions went out to the standard-bearers. A smoke signal began to rise.

"Tell the rest of the army not to look back. They are to forge on and seize victory."

"At once!"

As the messenger departed, Aura closed one hand into a fist and nodded firmly. "It's starting."

She had thought it was strange that Esel's notoriously timid queen had refused to negotiate, and that nagging sense of wrongness had developed into a suspicion once it became clear that Vulpes, Tigris, and Scorpius did not intend to intervene in the conflict. She had gathered all the information she could, working with the empire's agents in the three kingdoms, investigating possibilities one by one. Her predictions had proven correct, and now they had come to pass.

No matter how much contempt the álfar might have had for humans, they would not stand idly by while a threat encroached on their own borders. Yet the empire had eighty thousand men —far too many to face head-on. Fighting fair would not avail them. They would have to come up with some manner of underhanded strategy.

"It was clever of them!" an aide exclaimed to Aura. "Trying to flank us by sea."

Aside from Esel, all of Six Kingdoms maintained a thriving maritime trade. It would be easy for them to move their forces

by boat. Aura's first instinct had been to suspect an ambush by sea, so she had kept the imperial army alert for night raids. Nonetheless, she had not been confident she was right. The plan she suspected would have called for an enormous loss of life. It would have to be predicated on abandoning Esel, and it would have proven that Vulpes, Scorpius, and Tigris were no allies, only conquerors looking for opportunity in their compatriot's misfortune. Given Six Kingdoms' history, Aura had been unwilling to believe they would make that choice. It was difficult not to feel sorry for Esel now, knowing that they had.

"Esel was a necessary sacrifice to them," Aura replied. "To keep our forces in the west."

No doubt Vulpes, Tigris, and Scorpius had hoped to strike the imperial army from behind as it closed in on Licht, dealing it a severe blow if not wiping it out entirely. Yet left to their own devices, they might not have intervened at all. Álfar would not help humans out of the goodness of their hearts. Only one force could have coaxed them to action: the Vanir Triumvirate.

"The coming days will decide if the empire lives or dies."

If the Vanir Triumvirate was moving against the empire, the rest of Soleil would also see its chance—and unrest fomenting in the northern and southern territories would no doubt spill out to join it.

"Our enemies will move against us, from outside and within."

Aura had to bring the war against Six Kingdoms to an end, and soon, but haste would lead to defeat. It was an exasperating situation. Still, she could not afford to give in.

"Rosa will just have to hold the fort until we get back."

They had made what preparations they could. The question now was who would rise and who would fall. So far, events had proceeded as expected, but here Aura's predictions ended. The gears of fate were turning, and the survival of the empire hung in the balance.

* * * * *

"Well, would you look at that. They really showed."

Skadi regarded the enemy troops who had appeared at the rear with anticipation in her eyes. She stood upright on the back of her horse, balancing nimbly as she shielded her eyes from the sun.

“Guess the little runt knows what she’s talking about.”

Skadi had been skeptical when Aura warned of a surprise attack. Everybody had thought the rest of Six Kingdoms had abandoned Esel. Still, she wasn’t complaining about a chance to satisfy her bloodlust.

“Damn well cried myself to sleep after she told me I was stuck on the back lines.” Her smile broadened as she took in the size of the approaching dust cloud. “Shows what I know, eh?”

At that moment, an aide rode up to her. He was grinning too, like a child who had just been gifted a new plaything. “Ready to go when you are, chief!”

Skadi waved him off. “Not yet, not yet. The runt’s not given us the go-ahead.”

“You’re gonna make us wait, chief? They’re right there! Give us the word and we’ll scatter those scrawny álfar like wheat!”

The aide was getting a little too excitable. Skadi grasped him by the head and lifted him up. The brawny beastman was pulled off his horse.

“Enough back talk. Show some respect.”

The aide’s horse looked around in confusion, unsure why its burden had suddenly gotten lighter. Skadi grinned, giving a large yawn.

“Normally I’d be right with you, but the runt says timing’s key, so we hold off until she says go. We’re here to help, remember. We do as we’re told.”

The aide’s horse began to wander away in search of its missing master. Seeing it move away, Skadi released her grip. Without his mount to catch him, the beastman landed squarely on his rump.

“Argh!”

Skadi spared him only a glance as he writhed in pain before returning her attention to the enemy. “Big dust cloud. I’d put ’em at twenty thousand?”

Steissen’s forces numbered only five thousand. If she was right, they would be up against steep odds. Baum’s Crow Legion were the only other troops stationed behind the imperial core, and Aura had expressed at the last strategy meeting that they were not to move from their position under any circumstances. Skadi could only assume she didn’t want to leave the core bare.

“She’s taking her damned time, though…”

Skadi wanted to taste battle, and soon. She cast a resentful

glance at the imperial lines. As she did, she noticed a rider cantering toward her, dressed in the armor of the imperial military. Her eyes gleamed.

"Word! I bring word! Is Lady Skadi present?"

"Aye, over here." She waved him over.

The messenger approached. "I bring word from the chief strategist. As soon as the banners go up, you are to charge and annihilate the foe."

Aura's commands were simple and easily understood. There was only one problem.

Skadi's eyes flashed. "She still wants us to wait?"

The messenger gulped as the air temperature dropped several degrees. Her naked hostility was more than he could stand. He turned his horse about, but Skadi's hand reached out to grab him before he could leave. He shut his eyes, preparing to breathe his last.

"Chief!" an aide called out. "I see banners going up!"

The messenger let out a sigh of relief. He had been saved. He opened his eyes to see Skadi already forging ahead into the distance. His eyes widened—not only at her speed, but at the way she rode, standing on horseback with arms spread wide to greet their foe. Her core strength must have been extraordinary.

"All right, you layabouts!" she yelled. "I know you've all gotten tired of waiting for a good fight! Well, now there's fresh meat just ready for the taking! Go and eat your fill!"

Her voice carried clear and true across the Steissen lines. Her soldiers may have been dressed like bandits, but the sight of them raising their weapons high to sound a battle cry was fearsome enough to chill the blood.

"After the chief, you louts!"

The cry of the beastfolk spread across the field. With a drumming of hooves, the Steissen forces shuddered after Skadi. The warmth of their fervor whipped around her with the wind.

"Ha ha ha! Now this...*this* is what I've been waiting for!"

She hadn't gotten to take part in a single battle since crossing the Esel border. It had begun to seem like Six Kingdoms would never show any spine. Yet now, they had given her exactly what she had asked for. It would only be polite to return the favor. She would hold nothing back, hunting her foes to the last man, staining the land red as she granted them glorious deaths.

She slipped her claws onto the backs of her hands. As she

plunged into the enemy vanguard, she leaped from the back of her horse.

"What in the—?!" Below her, a soldier's eyes widened in surprise, and then three parallel cuts shredded his face.

Blood sprayed, but Skadi was already pouncing on her next target. Corpse after corpse crashed to the ground, felled by her nimble advance. Those she spared only had seconds to enjoy their good fortune before the Steissen charge crashed into them.

"You missed one! Don't let him get away!"

The beastfolk tore across the battlefield with abandon, hunting down any stragglers like starving wolves.

As Skadi returned to her horse, one of her aides pulled in alongside her, laughing. "Not bad, chief! Finally, a fight worthy of the beastfolk!"

"Aye, but don't let your guard down. You gotta keep your eyes on álfar or they'll have you dead before you know it."

The aide raised his spear high. "Don't worry, chief! I'm more than a match for—"

Abruptly, he pitched sideways. Skadi caught him by the collar before he fell from his horse, but he was already dead, an arrow lodged in his skull.

"What'd I tell you? Don't worry, I'll avenge you. Rest easy on the other side." She let him fall. He toppled from the back of his horse and vanished into the dust cloud behind them. "But as for the rest of you…I'll show you what happens to anyone who lays a finger on my cubs."

Arrows rained down from above. There were still Six Kingdoms cavalry on the field, but the álfar did not hesitate to sacrifice their allies in order to cut down their enemies. That only inflamed Skadi's rage.

"This is why I hate you long-eared bastards. Oh, you pretty it up, talking about how proud you are of your iron wills, but where's the honor in slaying your kin?!"

She scattered the arrows with a swing of her arm and leaped from her horse, plunging into the heart of the enemy archers. Her claws slashed, tore, and gouged. She cleaved through her enemies until they were no more, cutting short their cries and grunts with single, decisive blows. A trail of bodies lay scattered in her wake.

Her troops showed no fear in the face of the deluge either.

They swung their swords with arrows through their arms and launched kicks with shafts lodged in their thighs, hell-bent on slaying their enemies for as long as there was breath in their lungs. They fought like demons, grinning through their foes' blood. The sight struck even the famously composed álfar with terror.

At that moment, screams rang out from the back of the enemy lines.

"Huh?"

Skadi could not see what was happening from where she was, but that was easily rectified. She returned to the slaughter, carving a path to her destination.

"Chief!" one of her soldiers cried. "The Knights of the Royal Black, the Knights of the Golden Lion, and the Knights of the Rose have gotten behind the enemy! They've pulled off an ambush!"

Skadi nodded, grinning, as she broke an álfar's neck. "So that's what all the noise is about." She gored an approaching soldier through the chest and glanced back at the imperial core. "The runt knows her strategy, I'll give her that much."

Not only was she impressed, she felt a newfound respect. Now it was clear why Aura had asked her to wait—to draw Six Kingdoms' troops closer. Only once the enemy flooded in, eager to overwhelm Steissen's forces, did the empire's elite knights spring the trap. The chief strategist had pulled off a magnificent coup…and it did not escape Skadi that she had employed the same trick Scorpius, Tigris, and Vulpes had tried to use against the empire.

"A taste of their own medicine, eh? The perfect ploy for those sneaky long-ears. It's almost a shame to leave her with the humans."

Aura's plan had been so ingenious that Skadi had half a mind to take her back to Steissen. At the very least, she could repay the favor by slaughtering hordes of álfar. Deeper and deeper she carved into the enemy lines. Yet the farther she got, the more she sensed something amiss.

"More and more… Someone's cutting down my cubs."

The number of beastfolk bodies on the ground was beginning to eclipse the number of álfar. The problem was not with the Steissen troops' morale. That was high and soaring higher. Was it possible they were simply being overwhelmed? But no—the

imperial knights' ambush ought to have evened the odds. So why were there so many corpses? A broad grin spread across Skadi's face. That could only mean the presence of a powerful foe, one formidable enough to slaughter beastfolk by the score.

"Hah! Looks like we'll have some sport today after all! Now, where are you? Show yourself!"

She cut down anyone and everyone in her way, bounding across the battlefield in search of a worthy challenge. At last, she came across a curious knot of beastfolk. Joy surged through her to see they were hard-pressed.

"Out of the way!" she cried, leaping high.

As she soared skyward, she saw an álf beneath her. He projected peerless skill and overflowing might. A chill went up her spine. He was truly strong.

"I'll take you on!"

She spread her arms as wide as her joints would allow, concentrating all her strength in her back before unleashing it in an explosion of force. Muscles bulging, she closed her arms around him as if in an embrace. Any ordinary man would have been turned to a bloody pulp. This one, however...

"Not bad," she growled, licking her own blood from her cheek. Delight radiated from her every pore. At last, she had found a worthy foe.

The beastfolk around her drew back, leaving space for her to fight. They fell instead upon the álfen soldiers nearby.

"You reek like a wild animal," the álfar drawled. "How very repulsive."

He held a chakram in his right hand. Skadi glanced at it, making certain not to lower her guard. Immediately, she could tell it was no ordinary weapon.

The álfar saw where she was looking and narrowed his eyes. "Begone from my sight, beastwoman."

His arm became a blur, and the chakram vanished from his grasp. As the threat bore down on her, Skadi rolled her shoulders in anticipation and surged forward.

"You charge in like a wild boar without even taking your foe's measure?" Her opponent sneered. "You mistake recklessness for valor."

Skadi ignored him, batting the chakram aside, but it split into two halves. She twisted her head to avoid one and smacked the other out of the air with her full strength. "Two in one, hm? You

nearly got me.”

“Close, but not close enough.”

All of a sudden, Skadi sensed danger approaching from behind her. She dove sideways, but not fast enough. Agonizing pain lanced up her leg, sending her sprawling across the ground.

“What in the hell…?”

She looked down to see that her thigh had been laid open. Her brows knitted. She thought she had dodged the attack.

The álfar laughed. “Impressive. Few could evade Brionac of the Dharmic Blades upon their first sighting.”

“One of the Noble Blades, eh? Maybe I underestimated you.”

This would be no easy fight, Skadi realized. She would have to prepare herself accordingly. She rose to her feet, her injured leg dangling beneath her.

“You fight well for a beast. But you shall not escape the next one.” The álfar hurled his chakram again. It flew slower than the last time, almost painfully so. “My name is Maram Inar. Surely even you wish to know who slew you?”

“Thank you kindly. I haven’t faced a foe like you in quite a while. I was just thinking I ought to ask before I killed you.”

With a bark of laughter, Skadi dodged the chakram again. The dance of blood and flesh, a battle to the death that only one would survive, a worthy opponent after long, long weeks of waiting—there was no greater thrill. She no longer even registered her injury. The only thought in her mind was devouring the dish before her. She smiled as broadly as a lovestruck maiden, closing the distance between them with blinding speed.

“No need to know my name, but remember this one: the Claws of Madness—Tyrfing!”

She raised her claws high and swept them down. The edges of their blades were already crusted black.

“My pride and joy!”

* * * * *

Fierte, the capital of Greif

Between its thriving waterborne trade and its position as the High King’s seat, Greif was among the wealthiest nations of Six Kingdoms. The palace of Fierte stood atop a small hill apart from the port town. Around twenty thousand soldiers were encamped

at the base. White smoke arose from scattered cookfires, hinting that it was dinnertime.

The crisis in Esel seemed not to have spoiled the soldiers' mood. None seemed anxious. Nonetheless, news from the south was on everybody's lips. They were not disinterested—far from it; they were sympathetic—but as long as their superiors mandated that Greif's security mattered more, they were obliged to discuss the subject from a distance. Besides, word had come that the empire would not attack Greif, so they had the luxury of security.

With the mood so light, no one paid any mind to the two thousand soldiers riding through their midst. A few men scrambled out of their tents in surprise at the noise, but they lost interest and fell to chatting with their peers as soon as they saw the Anguis flags.

Lucia's nose wrinkled as she watched them from inside the carriage. "After a thousand years of alliance, they hardly even suspect. Foolish, don't you think?"

"Very," Hiro replied. "That's no reason to let your guard down. I never like to see soldiers being too trusting. Even if it works to our advantage."

Perhaps the soldiers weren't particularly alert to potential threats, or perhaps they simply trusted Anguis. Either way, Lucia's forces had made it inexcusably far into the palace grounds. Not that they were complaining about that, of course.

"Quite. Vulpes, Scorpius, and Tigris were just as trusting, and now they are ruled by álfar." There was more of a note of resentment in Lucia's voice as she tapped her fan irritably against her chair. "And Greif is just the same. Ever since the High King was stricken by illness, it has been ruled by its álfar chancellor."

Several of Six Nations' rulers had abdicated their thrones at once, paving the way for álfar to rule while the old royal families took the blame for various failures and collapsed. Its misfortunes had compounded when the High King took ill. Many suspected he had been poisoned, but no investigation had ever been conducted, and Greif, the founding kingdom, had fallen into the hands of Nameless.

"It reeks of the Vanir Triumvirate's meddling," Hiro remarked.

"Indeed. And now, of all the descendants of the Black Hand, 'twould seem only Luka and I remain."

“You’re descended from the Venerable Master, if I remember correctly?”

The Venerable Master had assumed the role of Hiro’s tutor after Hiro first arrived in Aletia. He had beaten the basics of strategy into Hiro and taught him about military conduct, politics, and human relations. Hiro owed much to his kindness.

“Indeed I am. ’Tis because of his memoirs that I learned who you were. I shall have to show them to you someday.”

“I’d rather not look. He would have been furious if he knew I was peeking at his diary.”

Hiro had to confess, he was curious. The Venerable Master had been one of the few people who knew he had come from another world. How much had he committed to writing? What had happened after Hiro’s departure? A part of him would have loved to know.

“Come to think of it,” he continued, “who is Luka descended from?”

“Amphibia of the Black Hand—via the royal bloodline of Scorpius.”

It seemed Scorpius and Vulpes had intermarried some two generations prior. Luka’s blood connection was so tenuous that under other circumstances it would be ignored, but with the royal house of Scorpius fully displaced by the álfar, she was now Amphibia’s only living descendant.

“She and Igel were fortunate, in a sense,” Luka continued. “At least they were not slain like their peers.”

That said, they had lived little better than livestock. They had kept their lives, but the hardship had broken Luka’s spirit for good.

“But enough talk. We have work to do.”

Lucia turned her attention to the window. The gate at the base of the hill had come into sight. The carriage lowered its speed and sent a signal to the sentries looking down from the battlements.

“It’s almost too easy,” Hiro remarked as the sturdy gate ground open.

A mounted soldier trotted forth—Seleucus, Lucia’s handsome young aide. He fell in alongside the carriage and rapped on the window.

Lucia opened the window, letting a gust of hot air escape to mingle with the warmth outside. “Apprise me of the situation.”

Seleucus peered inside the carriage. He spotted Hiro and bobbed his head. “You should be able to ride up to the front doors uninterrupted. However”—and his mouth twisted a little—“General Ramses has taken charge of palace security. I’m sure he’ll stand down once we surround the place, but I thought you ought to be aware.”

“Fine work,” Lucia said. “Well, then. I daresay we ought to pay General Ramses a visit.”

She ordered the coachman to go faster. The carriage and the two thousand men behind it raced up the hill at full speed, raising a cloud of dust. Alarm spread through the Greif camp, but they were already too late to do anything but watch.

General Ramses emerged from the gate at the head of the two hundred soldiers of the palace garrison, a wary glint in his eyes. He glared at Lucia and Hiro as they stepped out of the carriage before casting his eyes over their troops. True to his rank, he did not seem perturbed by their presence.

“What are you doing here, Your Majesty?” His voice was deep and dignified. He laid a hand on the pommel of his sword, his eyes boring into Lucia as she stepped closer.

Lucia gestured theatrically. “I have come to liberate Six Kingdoms from the álfar!”

“An absurd justification for a common revolt. You would level your blade at the High King.”

“If the High King asks me to desist, then so I shall.” Lucia glared back, tapping her fan on her shoulder. “But you know as well as I that since his convalescence, Nameless has occupied the throne in all but name.”

“This is no solution.” General Ramses brought a hand to his forehead and lowered his eyes before shooing her away as he might a dog. “Return to Anguis, Your Majesty, and I will turn a blind eye to this foolishness.”

He turned his back and began to walk away. While he might overlook her actions, he would clearly not forgive them.

Lucia narrowed her eyes, opening her fan and raising it to cover her mouth. “Just as you have turned a blind eye to Esel?”

Ramses flinched. His feet came to a stop. Lucia’s eyes filled with delight, and watching from beside her, Hiro realized he had just caught a glimpse of her true fearsomeness. She was immeasurably shrewd and endlessly persistent, and she would stop at nothing to snare her prey. She would use any tool at her

disposal, even her longtime allies if need be. Like the serpent of her house, she wound her coils around her victims and slowly but surely crushed the life from their bodies.

"Have you forsaken our thousand-year bond?" she continued. "Is now not the moment for Greif to assume its rightful place and fight?!"

"Enough," Ramses growled. "The High King has spoken. We are to defend our own lands."

Lucia licked her lips behind her fan as he turned around to face her. Her eyes danced for joy to see her prey take the bait. "And instead of reminding him of his duty, you obey thoughtlessly? Are these the actions of a loyal subject, General Ramses? Is this your idea of justice?"

She taunted him with outright glee, taking pleasure in every moment as her maw yawned wide to swallow him whole.

"Does Greif's general so easily abandon its thousand-year bond? Did you not once tell me your post is only for the most noble? That it comes with a sacred duty to defend all of Six Kingdoms?"

She poked and prodded at his pride, striving to make him question himself.

"And yet you will not even ride to Esel's aid. 'Twould seem all that talk of nobility amounted to little in the end!"



Eventually, General Ramses could take the provocation no longer. He lifted his head to face her, biting his lower lip so hard that blood trickled down his chin. “Very well, then. Have your audience with His Majesty. But I will insist on accompanying you.”

He raised a hand to his soldiers. The gate lifted ponderously, its iron chains grating so fiercely one could feel it. Once the way was open, General Ramses took the lead, and Hiro followed him in at Lucia’s side.

With a thunderous crash, the gate fell shut behind them. Screams rose into the air as a cloud of dust rolled out, turning the air into a brown haze. The soldiers milled anxiously in the murk, uncertain what to do.

“What is the meaning of this?!” General Ramses’s voice rang out, but the uproar showed no sign of subsiding.

Hiro glanced around, then raised his hand high. Wind swirled around his palm. In the blink of an eye, it turned to a violent squall that snatched the dust skyward. Lucia shot him a curious look as their vision cleared, but he only shrugged. She raised her fan over her mouth, her shoulders trembling with suppressed laughter.

“I gave no order to close the gate!” Ramses bellowed to the battlements, arms crossed to shield his face.

Several unfortunate soldiers had been beneath the gate when it shut. It had killed them instantly, evidencing its weight. Blood oozed from their crushed bodies. Shouts of confusion rose from beyond the wall. The palace garrison had been shut out too.

“Well, well.” Hiro sensed something ominous in the chaos and raised a hand to his mask.

A figure appeared on the battlements, silhouetted against the sun, and alighted softly on the ground. Their face was concealed by a hood, but their nonchalance in the confusion was unsettling.

General Ramses drew his sword as the intruder approached. “Identify yourself.”

“I am Ladon of the primozlosta.” The hooded figure’s voice was inflectionless, and his attention never wavered from Hiro. Bodies rained down behind him—the rampart guards, most likely. None were breathing, but their armor was pristine. Blood seeped from the seams. They had been slain without a fight.

Ladon spread his arms wide. “I will brook no interference. The

masses must quit the stage.”

Hiro stared back in silence. His eyes flicked back up. Another figure had appeared on the ramparts. They leaped high without hesitation, touching down with a soft noise. As they rose from their crouch, they turned to regard him.

“I am Hydra, also of the primozlosta.”

His presence was overwhelming. Hatred radiated from him. Yet more than anything else, his mana was so potent that it warped the very air. The two primozlosta remained nonchalant, but their opponents stiffened.

“Orcus!” Lucia exclaimed, assuming a battle stance. Ramses leveled his sword. Yet neither Ladon nor Hydra showed any interest in them. From beginning to end, their eyes were only for Hiro.

“These two seem to have business with me,” Hiro said. “You go on ahead and secure the high king.” Testing the ground underfoot, he drew Dáinsleif from its sheath, and his smile broadened.

Lucia blinked for an instant, but she quickly spun about and dashed away toward the palace entrance. “Very well. Come, General Ramses!”

“Your Majesty?”

Bewilderment filled Ramses’s face, but he glanced several times between Hiro and Lucia, and that seemed to be enough to convince him. He too set off running for the palace and quickly caught up to Lucia.

“Is the High King safe, Your Majesty?!” After the appearance of the intruders, he feared the worst.

“I cannot say. Where is Nameless, may I ask?”

As the question left Lucia’s lips, she pushed open the palace door. Her face crinkled in distaste at what she found.

“No survivors, ’twould seem.”

The inhabitants had been slaughtered—the young, the old, the men, and the women alike. Blood flowed through the halls like a river. Lucia scowled as she bounded over corpses. Beside her, General Ramses bit his lip as he stepped between the bodies of his own troops.

“What brutality…” he whispered, bitter tears flowing down his cheeks. “These were not soldiers!”

Lucia shot him a cold glance. “Is Nameless in the throne room?”

“That I can’t tell you. We haven’t met for some time.”

“Then first, we ought to ensure the High King is safe.”

Lucia dashed past the entrance to the throne room and into the corridor that led to the royal chambers. This hallway was filled with hidden doors to foil assassins. There was one visible door, but it was a trap. The true entrance was elsewhere.

“Here.” She stopped in front of a bare patch of wall and struck it with her fist. A low rumbling came from inside, and a door emerged from the stone.

“How do you know of this place?” Ramses asked.

“Anguis is as storied a house as any of the rest. We have secret knowledge of our own, passed down from generation to generation. Is it such a surprise that some of it should concern the High King?” She grasped the handle and the door fell open. Her brow creased. “Already unlocked, hm?”

Puzzling over that now would be a waste of time. She stepped inside. Ramses followed. Both froze at what they saw, their breath caught in their throats.

“’Twould seem we are too late,” Lucia said finally.

“His Majesty… It cannot be…”

One clapped a hand over her mouth, frowning. The other slumped to the floor. Upon the bed in the center of the chamber lay the corpse of the High King, blood streaming from his eyes and a dagger protruding from his chest. A foul stench filled the air.

To fall to one’s knees and weep like Ramses was a natural reaction to such a horrific sight. No doubt anyone with normal sensibilities would have done the same. But Lucia’s face filled with a fierce delight.

“A fine opportunity.”

She stared down for a moment at the High King’s unmoving corpse, then closed her fingers around the handle of the dagger.

“Have you lost your mind?! You would defile your king’s body?!”

“Have you lost yours, General Ramses? Would you leave your king with a murder weapon lodged in his chest?”

“I…suppose I would not…”

Sensing Ramses drawing closer, Lucia wrenched the dagger free—then turned it sideways and spun with fearsome speed. The blade flashed in the gloom.

“Agh!”

She felt it bite and then tear free. Ramses stared at her goggle-eyed, hands clasped to his neck. Blood flowed from between his fingers to spatter on the floor. He staggered backward one step, two steps, then collapsed on his rump.

Lucia approached him, her eyes gleaming wickedly. A heated breath spilled from her throat as she exulted in the stench of blood, like a serpent staring down its weakening prey.

“I fear, General, you have become an inconvenience.”

“Why…? You…” Ramses’s face turned red, but he could not speak through his slashed throat, and he was struggling to breathe.

“The High King fell victim to Nameless’s machinations, while you fell in his defense. I shall ensure the people remember you as a model general.”

Ramses began to thrash but eventually lost his strength and curled up, face to the floor.

“I shall see this through. Rest assured, I shall reclaim Six Kingdoms for humankind. This I swear.”

Lucia flicked open her fan and looked up at the ceiling. The general’s head struck the floor as the last drop of strength left his body. With one last cold glance at his lifeless form, she snapped her fan shut again.

“How long I have waited…but at last, the hour has come.”

Her tongue snaked out to wet her lips as she gazed up at the wooden sky.

* * * * *

The air grew foul and stagnant, and not because of any change in weather. The stench of death created an eerie otherworld around the palace gate. Three men faced each other in silence, two hooded figures staring down a masked boy. He met their gaze, white mantle billowing as he gripped his black blade.

Hydra was the first to speak. “It has been far too long, Mars. Or should I call you Surtr?”

Every syllable dripped with loathing. The air around him was a curdled miasma. Yet Hiro addressed him as nonchalantly as he might an old friend.

“Call me whichever one you like. I have to say, though, I’m impressed you found me.”

“You hid your scent for a long time. But at long last, we caught it again.”

It had been healing Scáthach that gave him away, no doubt. He had made use of both Gandiva’s and the Black Camellia’s powers. For as long as they were unveiled, those who knew what to look for could have sensed the War God.

“A skillful deception you achieved when you fought Six Kingdoms.”

“Anything less wouldn’t have lured you out. And I’d gotten tired of you scurrying about behind the scenes.”

That was the truth of Hiro’s ploy. He had used Igel’s dharmastone to suppress the Black Camellia’s power, throwing his enemies off the scent. Once Orcus believed he was dead, they felt secure in emerging into the light. His plan had succeeded, and they had revealed themselves with their raid on the imperial palace.

“And yet you concealed yourself just the same,” Hydra remarked.

“Don’t worry. I’m nowhere near as underhanded as you.” With a goading smile, Hiro rested his black blade on his shoulder and pointed at the primozlosta. “Still, no eyes to see with, no manastone to sense with… How awful it must have been to know I was alive but have no idea where I was.”

The earth cracked beneath Hydra’s feet, but he suppressed the urge to pounce. With ragged breaths and trembling hands, the primozlosta cast back his hood. His dry lips split in a ghastly smile, revealing his teeth.

“Do you recall the marks you left on us? These scars that will never heal?” He pressed a finger into a gaping eye socket, gnashing his teeth in loathing.

“Of course. And those holes in your forehead too. All my handiwork.” Hiro showed no sign of remorse. If anything, he scoffed. The dismissive sound carried to his foes on the wind.

Hydra began to tremble with rage. “At long last, we will have our vengeance. Have you made your peace?”

With those words and the mistaken meaning they implied, something changed in the air. The smile slid from Hiro’s face.

“I’m the one who deserves vengeance.”

His expression froze over, revealing an empty void. Power swelled around him. The air thrummed, crying out in terror. The wind fled his presence, and the plants at his feet began to wilt.

“So let me ask you…have you made *your* peace?”

A gust blew over them. Hydra stared, momentarily uncomprehending, but his rage swelled as understanding dawned. “You dare?!” he howled. “Pretender!”

Fury began to cloud his reason as he stared Hiro down, but Ladon held him in check.

“Calm, Hydra. You permit your enemy to lead you by the nose.”

“I know… Oh, I know! But look at him!” Hydra’s outrage would not be denied. Mana surged within him as he stamped his feet in fury, filling him with power that begged for release.

Hiro crooked his finger in provocation. “Hydra, did you say? I look forward to making you beg for death a second time.”

“You cur!”

“Bark all you like. I promise you, this time will be worse than the last.”

No sooner did the words leave Hiro’s mouth than he vanished in a burst of speed. Ladon jumped back, sensing danger, but Hydra let his rage carry him into a forward sprint.

Hiro reappeared in front of him, stance low. “You’re letting anger blind you. Don’t forget…I’ve already beaten you once.”

The heel of a palm sank into Hydra’s stomach with devastating force. As he grunted and doubled over, Hiro grasped him by the lapels and pulled him closer.

“I’ll deal with you later.”

He swung Hydra over his back and slammed him into the earth. The breath exploded from the primozlosta’s lungs. Hiro followed up with a heel to the sternum, then cast his gaze about for Ladon. Spotting his foe, he surged forward.

Seeing Hiro close in, Ladon drew a dagger and slashed. The blade whistled as it cut the air, but he had anticipated that the attack would miss and shifted a half step to the side, harnessing his own momentum to twist around and catch Hiro’s attempt to evade. Hiro caught his elbow, and the second strike did not hit home either. As the two combatants came to a standstill, Hiro produced a clouded dharmastone.

“Let me try something.”

He plunged his hand into Ladon’s chest, wielding his fingers like a blade. A fountain of blood sprayed forth as he pulled his arm free, his hand dyed crimson and the dharmastone nowhere to be seen.

“Gah!”

Ladon slumped to his knees, confusion written across his face. He tried to force himself to his feet again, only to collapse back down onto his rump.

“You… What did you do?!”

“Infused a dharmastone with magick. And it seems to be having the intended effect.” Hiro wiped the blood from his arm with Ladon’s hood. “Now, sit quietly and watch while I deal with your comrade.”

Indifferent to Ladon’s spiteful glare, Hiro reached out into empty air. Space split apart, disgorging a blade that shone with a brilliant light.

There had once been a time when the blade was renowned as the sword of a hero. No matter how many men it slaughtered, no flesh would dull its edge nor blood sully its brilliance. It was the weapon of a king who saved his nation from ruin and brought the surrounding lands to heel. A thousand years of history had turned it to myth; even its name lay buried beneath the sands of time, leaving only the legend of a sword long lost. Yet in the legend of Held Rey Schwartz von Grantz, second emperor of the Grantzian Empire, it was written: “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.”

Its hilt and crossguard were purest white; they might have been dusted with powder snow, so pure and unblemished was their shine. Its blade trailed a thousand dazzling stars as its razor edge parted the air. It was the most beautiful of the Spiritblade Sovereigns: the Heavenly Sovereign, Excalibur.

For three years, it had lain neglected. Now, its searing light sang for joy at finding use again. Power surged forth, racing across the ground before soaring skyward, proclaiming its return to all of creation. A change came over Hiro’s garb too. With the dharmastone extracted, the Black Camellia began to revert to its original color.

With Excalibur in his right hand and Dáinsleif in his left, Hiro looked solemnly down at Ladon. “Hate me all you like. Wish me dead if you want. But let me be your enemy. Come for me and only me.”

He looked sideways. Hydra was watching, astounded. Hiro stepped forward. Another step, and Hydra backed away, unable

to bear the weight of his might. The strength he exuded scorched the air.

“We have quite an audience today, and I wouldn’t want to disappoint. So allow me to demonstrate the true power of the Spiritblade Sovereigns.”

Hydra said nothing. It was all he could do to look on, slack-jawed.

“Legend tells that the Spiritblade Sovereigns are five, yet one.” Hiro took another step forward. Innumerable rents appeared in the air behind him. “Excalibur, the Blade of the Beginning, forms the vessel.”

Forth from the tears came weapons, each and every one suffused with the power of the spirits. Their forging required a vanishingly rare ore that only spirits could produce. Spirits were drawn to the banks of pure water sources, where they sometimes left behind crystals imbued with their own essence. These crystals, which shone with a luster to rival any gemstone, were called spirit stones. They were exceedingly rare; even the imperial territories, vast as they were, only harvested somewhere between three and seven per year. As such, they commanded a high price, and their value only increased by the year. No one but the royal family and their closest allies were likely to ever see one in their lifetimes—and yet countless such armaments now hovered in the air behind Hiro. Anybody would have taken the sight for a dream.

“Mjölnir, the Blade of Might, lends its strength.”

A loud thrum set the air vibrating. The two blades in Hiro’s hands began to shudder, shining with fierce glory. Vast quantities of power poured into the spirit weapons hanging in the air. Several shattered under the strain. Their shards scattered like snow, swirling around Hiro to paint the world silver as they glinted in the sun.

“Gandiva, the Blade of Vitality, amplifies their power.”

A gale raged, catching the swords in its grip. Hydra dove for his life as spirit weapons rained down around him.

“Curse you!” he cried. “What sorcery is this?!”

The blades laid open his arm, his leg, his cheek. Still, he managed to fend off severe injury. His dagger licked out prudently to deflect lethal blows. Yet before spirit weapons imbued with the power of the Spiritblade Sovereigns, it was little better than a child’s toy, and it soon snapped at the hilt.

The storm of tyranny was unrelenting. Blades rained down, seeking to snuff out Hydra's life. The primozlosta darted through the merciless assault, dodging for all he was worth. He jackknifed out of the way with bursts of mana or summoned walls of earth to shield him, but the threat pursued him still.

"Gáe Bolg, the Blade of Forbearance, levies the seal."

A biting chill spilled from the spirit weapons embedded in the ground, sheathing the earth in ice. Everywhere they fell was Hiro's domain; as long as his foe remained in sight, his arsenal would hound its prey relentlessly. And in time, that prey understood his fate. His desperate flight ended in a standstill, and he realized it had all been for nothing. Such was the true terror of the Spiritblade Sovereigns. A single moment of hesitation would claim his life.

Gáe Bolg's chill snared Hydra's feet. In a heartbeat, he was encased in ice below the waist. He struggled to free his legs, but he would not have the time.

Hiro leaped high. "And Lævateinn, the Blade of the End, lays all to waste."

He crossed his arms before Hydra, the Heavenly Sovereign in one, the Abyssal Sovereign in the other. The blades swept apart with blinding speed.

"Pretender!" Hydra growled. "My spawn will avenge me!"

"I look forward to it."

Two razor edges parted Hydra's head from his body. It flew high, trailing a ribbon of blood through the air. Hiro narrowed his eyes as he watched it go.

"Just like I thought. They can't unveil their true power unless they're all present."

The Spiritblade Sovereigns only revealed their true power when all five were assembled. One, two, three, or even four were worthless in isolation. So Artheus had taught him one thousand years ago. The spirits had loved no one more than he, but even so, four Spiritblades had not been enough to slay a god.

"You were a worthy foe, Hydra."

He snatched the head out of the air as it fell. Blood sprayed across the ground, dyeing the flowers red.

"And as for you… I see you've run away with my dharmastone."

He turned to where Ladon had lain. Only a pool of blood remained where the primozlosta had once been. Hiro nodded to

himself and looked skyward again. It was a fine day. A flock of birds swam lazily across the blue.

“Now, then,” he murmured. “I do hope you were watching.”

At that moment, the gate of Fierte Palace blasted off its hinges. The partially melted metal bounced across the ground, plowing up clods of earth, before crashing clean through the palace wall. White smoke rose from the rubble. A charred stench pricked at Hiro’s nostrils as the temperature began to rise.

The Greif troops were in uproar. Wails and cries of surprise filled the air. The Black Camellia, now fully restored to its former hue, rustled warily. Hiro thrust Dáinsleif into the earth, removed his mask with his free left hand, and turned his eyes—now both fully gold—to the ruined gate. There stood a crimson-haired girl, wreathed in blue flame, radiating divine might.

“It’s been too long, Liz.”



* * * * *

The Vanaheim Theocracy, principal state of the Vanir Triumvirate

This day would mark the start of a new chapter in Vanaheim's history. Crowds lined the streets, waving national flags with zealous fervor. All of their eyes were on the ranks of marching soldiers clad in gleaming silver armor. The troops advanced through the gate in perfect lockstep. Today, heroes would depart for distant battlefields.

The álfar soldiers' stern faces were filled with pride. The townsfolk watched them go with delight and celebration. The streets were filled with plenty who wept—mothers, wives, brothers, sisters, other family members—but their sorrow went unnoticed in the crowd's ardor, mistaken for tears of joy. Had an outsider been present, they might perhaps have sensed something strange in the air. The people's excitement was too heightened to be natural. Yet there were no outsiders, and so the peculiarity went unremarked upon, mistaken for normal, natural, expected.

Up the street from the marching troops rose the cathedral of Vana Vis, the keystone of faerie worship. Plenty of soldiers remained on its grounds—so many that their body heat warmed the air despite the breadth of its premises. Guarded by their proud shields were the cardinals, the highest administrators of the faith. They watched their troops depart from the safety of their balcony, dreaming of the day they would become the new rulers of Soleil.

Cardinal Snorri left his peers and returned indoors, making for the adjoining structure of Galta Palace. His footsteps took on an edge of irritation as he passed through the corridor between the two. The occasion was a historic one, and yet the Holy Emperor had made no appearance.

"What is he thinking?" he muttered. "There has scarcely been such an important day since our nation's founding."

His pace slowed as he came into view of the sentries. Finally, he halted before the door to the Great Baldachin, the holy sanctum wherein the Holy Emperor and the Faerie King Shub-Niggurath dwelled. He knocked lightly—his exasperation was not worth risking the Faerie King's ire. There was no response. He knocked again, and then again.

“Your Holiness? Your Holiness? Are you there?”

The Holy Emperor could not possibly be absent. The Faerie King’s most faithful servant could not simply up and leave. A departure from the palace grounds would require permission, to say nothing of a sizable escort, yet Cardinal Snorri had heard of nothing of the sort—not on this most important of days. No, it was unthinkable. There was only one possible explanation. While the Holy Emperor could not have left the palace grounds, there was nothing stopping him from wandering freely inside them.

Snorri’s shoulders slumped as the notion struck him. “Surely not. Where has he gotten to? Hm…?”

As he laid a hand absentmindedly on the handle, the door creaked open. The grounds of Galta Palace were forbidden to all but the Holy Emperor, the Faerie King’s chosen, on pain of divine punishment. Yet Snorri could not help his curiosity.

“What if something ill has befallen His Holiness?”

If the Holy Emperor had collapsed, it would be a serious matter. Snorri raised his eye to the gap in the door.

“What in the world?”

An álfen woman lay in the Holy Emperor’s chambers. She was grievously wounded, sitting with her back to an altar with a broken statue. She gasped in pain as she pressed a glowing hand to her injuries. She was healing herself, Snorri realized.

“I was too hasty, it seems,” she muttered. “Yet how could I have known that relic of the past would choose now to return?”

At last, Snorri found the nerve to enter the chamber. He pushed the door open and looked around. “Your Holiness? Are you there?!”

There was no reply. Only the wounded woman responded. “Yes?” she croaked.

“Hm? Ah, you. Wench. Where is His Holiness? He was supposed to make an appearance at the ceremony.” Snorri cocked his head and crossed his arms, looking around, but again, there was no sign of the Holy Emperor.

Only the woman responded. “Don’t be ridiculous. I am the Holy Emperor.”

“You? Preposterous. I have never seen you before in my life. Bringing women into a sacred place… His Holiness must have taken leave of his senses.” It was no business of Snorri’s what the Holy Emperor got up to in the Grand Baldachin, but he was shocked that the Faerie King had permitted it.

The woman's eyes widened for a moment, but then she lifted a hand and pulled a hood down over her head. "I suppose I cannot blame you for not recognizing me. I never did show you my face, did I?"

Snorri backed away, staring. "Impossible," he snorted. "His Holiness is a man, not some slattern like you."

The Holy Emperor might have been slender enough to be mistaken for a woman at a glance, but he was most certainly a man. He had soft features but great wisdom, beloved by his people and respected by his faithful. A more natural emperor there had never been. It was disappointing that he had brought prostitutes into Galta Palace, but he was still the Faerie King's chosen and commanded the highest respect.

"So you happened to know him by sight," the woman murmured. "Well, that is unfortunate."

She rose to her feet and approached Snorri. Her former frailty was nowhere to be seen, replaced now by a fearsome strength. He sensed at once that she was no common harlot.

"Who are you?" He glanced behind him as he backed away. The door was still open. He could escape into the corridor and call for help. He began to inch toward it, slowly and smoothly so as not to be noticed.

"You may call me Nameless." As she spoke, the door slammed shut.

Snorri's face flooded with confusion. "What?"

"And I slew your Holy Emperor long ago."

"What is this nonsense—"

Nameless swung her bell staff, knocking Snorri to the floor. The cardinal groaned. He hadn't even seen her draw the weapon.

Nameless advanced on him, a faint smile playing on her lips. "And your Faerie King besides."

Epilogue

“Long, long ago,” Hiro said flatly, “there was a very ordinary boy.”

Liz listened in silence.

“His only talent was that he knew things other people didn’t.” He tapped a finger to his head. “But they were valuable things. Useful things. Useful enough that the people started to call him their savior.”

His voice was sorrowful, wistful, each word matter-of-fact yet seeming to cause him pain.

“But the longer he spent with them, the less remarkable his knowledge became. Humans are born with the ability to learn, and the things that made him special ceased to belong to him.”

In time, the boy became paranoid that he would lose his worth and be cast aside. So he sought power, desperately, ardently. Yet his search proved fruitless. Every day brought only new disappointments. Despite his best efforts, he remained stubbornly ordinary, even as the world changed around him.

“And then one day, his chance came. A Lord appeared before him.”

The Lord asked the boy if he desired power. The forbidden fruit dangled before his eyes, and in his desperation, he took a bite. His newfound strength grew to possess him. On that day, the age began to turn, and on that day, all went awry.

“He became what would later be known as a Fallen. A reviled name for those foolish enough to take the bargain.”

Over a thousand years ago, there had been a king afflicted with insatiable curiosity. He took to experimenting with spirit stones, crushing them to powder and synthesizing them into a concoction he called a spirit elixir. This he fed to a young soldier—a boy captured from a foreign nation—only to be disappointed when it failed to have any effect. Yet later that night, when all were abed, the soldier became afflicted by terrible agonies before transforming into a horrifying monstrosity that lived only to slay. The first to fall victim to his bloodlust was a sentry drawn by the noise. The second was the king. Thereafter, the boy fell upon the rest of the castle, devouring all he encountered in an

orgy of slaughter.

"As the nation fell into disarray, it was conquered by one of its neighbors, and the boy joined the battle as the monster he had become."

After that, he had been retrieved by his blood-brother, but all attempts to return him to normal had failed.

"So he used his newfound power to accomplish great things. He fought on, possessed all the while by fear of the curse burrowing into his flesh."

After witnessing his strength, many others had been inspired to take the same bargain. Kings imbibed magick as their nations fell, hoping to spit in the eyes of their conquerors. Some even used it to assassinate others in what became known as elixir poisonings. That age had been a dark one indeed.

"At last, after a string of victories, the people came to revere him as the War God, Mars."

Yet not all who fell succumbed to madness. A handful withstood the corrosive effects of the bane they had drunk, gaining bodies far mightier than any human while their minds remained intact. The people called these fell creations of the spirits' magick "fiends."

"But some knew him by another name:"

The Fell Divinity—Loki.

"You don't have to do everything yourself anymore, Liz. I'll finish this myself."

He squeezed his mask until it shattered. The pieces showered down around his feet.

"I can't tell you how long it took to get here."

He fixed Liz with his gaze, both eyes radiating golden glory.

"The Grantzian Empire is on the verge of eternal prosperity. Its thousand years of history will only be the beginning."

He thrust Excalibur into the ground and extended his hand. His fingers were crusted black with Ladon's blood.

"And all you have to do is give me Lævateinn. Do that and you'll be empress. You will rule all of Aletia."

At last, Liz's lips moved. "And what will happen to you?"

Hiro smiled, his gaze softening. "I will watch over you. Whatever history you write, I will bless it."

He spread his arms wide. Light and dark issued forth from Excalibur and Dáinsleif, bleeding together around him. He looked as gentle and frail as a full moon floating in the black of

night.

“For the world above and the world below, this stalemate ends today.” He turned his gaze back on Liz, his face filling with unshakable resolve. “I will ascend to the heavens and become a god.”

Liz raised Lævateinn in a guarded stance. Hiro gazed at her—all fierce, beautiful crimson—and smiled.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up volume 10 of *The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles.* To my returning readers, welcome back. It's been too long.

Let me ask you right out of the gate: have you looked at the front cover? You may notice this volume features somebody who's been around since volume 1 but has never made a cover appearance. That's right: the archpriestess. Look at her playing with that little bird with a gentle smile on her face, the very picture of compassion. Beautiful, simply beautiful. But that's the least of her charms. Her temple garb is marvelous, don't you think? It's so pure, yet filled with incredible sexiness, I hardly know where to look. All this to say, if this volume made you like the archpriestess, I could jump for joy.

But there's someone else there whom we mustn't forget. Surely some of my eagle-eyed readers will have noticed a certain boy radiating a fierce chuuni aura? Of course you did. I don't doubt your right eyes began to ache the moment you saw him. Look at him, mantle blowing in the wind, posing as if to say real men let their dual-wielding do the talking. He's incredibly cool. I feel like I'll have some extra-special delusions before I go to sleep tonight.

Anyway, I'm pushing my line count, so I'd better get to the thank-yous. But before that, there's one more thing I'd like you to notice. Please, I beg you, look at the color illustration. Do you see her? There, on the bottom left. Yeah, the little one. The itty-bitty one. It's chibi Aura! Isn't she cute? Or at least, that's what my editor, I-sama, said, and I vehemently agree.

All right, for real this time:

To Ruria Miyuki-sama, your gorgeous illustrations are a balm for my heart and fuel for my chuuni soul. I transcend my limits with every new piece of work you send.

To my editor, I-sama, thank you for putting up with me. I've only been getting worse going into the new year, and I'm sure you must be frustrated, but I hope you'll continue to lend me your expertise.

To everybody in the editing department, the proofreaders, the

designers, and everybody else involved in making this book a reality, I look forward to working with you again.

And to you, my readers, we've managed to get to volume 10, and it's only possible because of your support. I'm incredibly grateful. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I'll be keeping the chuuni rays set to red-hot over here, so I hope you'll continue to support me.

Until we meet again.

奉 (Tatematsuri)

Bonus Short Stories

Involuntary Book Club

“Here.” Aura thrust out the Black Chronicle, flushed with insistent excitement. “Read this.”

Scáthach looked back with resignation. “Please, Lady Aura,” she said. “I only just read it yesterday.” She wiped off the sweat she had worked up during training. All the while, the Black Chronicle’s cover jabbed into her ribs.

“I thought the withdrawal symptoms might be setting in.” Aura tapped the side of her nose conspiratorially, her eyes gleaming.

“I have noticed no such symptoms.”

“Don’t be silly. The Black Chronicle is the most addictive drug there is. Read it once and you won’t be able to sleep until you read the word ‘Mars’ again. That’s why it’s gotten so hard to find.”

“If that were true, would Lady Liz not also be addicted?”

Aura had thrust the Black Chronicle on Liz just as often as she had on Scáthach. Liz had given in more than once, but she had never come back to it of her own volition.

“She said she couldn’t risk it anymore. What a shame something so wonderful is only safe for a chosen few.”

“I wish I’d thought of that,” Scáthach muttered under her breath, trying to think of a similar avenue of escape.

When it came to the Black Chronicle, the normally levelheaded Aura became uncharacteristically enthusiastic. Scáthach had turned her down, only to wake up that same night to Aura reading it aloud by her bedside, refusing to leave until she took it for herself. She had even been forced to compile an extensive essay on her impressions, with Aura looking over her shoulder to ensure the task was done.

Aura’s proselytizing was so notorious that even ordinary soldiers and townsfolk barred their doors when she had the Black Chronicle in hand. Her position was high enough that none of her victims had the courage to refuse her, but they made their grievances known in anonymous complaints to Liz, which had grown so numerous that Liz had confiscated the book. Aura had immediately begun avoiding meetings, missing meals, and abruptly bursting into tears. Yet when Liz relented, she had snapped back like a rubber band and grown worse than ever. Faced once more with mounting complaints, Liz had turned to

Rosa, only for Rosa to take Aura's side, publicly declaring that anyone who didn't want to read the book could simply refuse to. The letters had finally ceased, and Aura walked once more with the Black Chronicle proudly in hand, preaching its virtues in every spare moment. Scáthach privately cursed Rosa's name.

"I was just about to wash myself," Scáthach said. "Perhaps this could wait until then?"

"Wait?" Aura's eyes widened in surprise, then slowly filled with tears, as if she were a lost child who had finally found their mother.

Scáthach hung her head and took a seat beneath a tree. Who could refuse a face like that? "Very well. Perhaps you could read it to me."

Aura's face lit up, and she opened the Black Chronicle, beaming. "If you really need to have a wash, I'll start from Meteia and Mars's great escape."

Scáthach frowned. "Did that not happen in the prologue?"

"The time will fly by. The Black Chronicle is special like that. It starts with the ending."

"The sun will have set by the time you are done. Would you not start from a little further in? From Meteia's battle with Hydra, perhaps?"

Scáthach didn't have time to marvel at how the contents of the book seemed to have sunk in. Aura immediately turned her suggestion down.

"No. You can't understand Meteia's appeal without starting at the beginning. Once they knew how she tried to uphold the first archpriestess's last wishes, anyone would weep."

"All right," Scáthach said with no small amount of resignation. "If you say so, then that's what we'll do."

Further resistance was futile. Once Aura started on the Black Chronicle, no one in the world could stop her.

"And I want another essay. Your last one was superb, but I'm sure you can do even better this time."

"I'm flattered, I'm sure." Scáthach could do nothing but laugh.

Artheus and the Black Chronicle

"Now, then. How to begin?"

The golden-haired youth—Artheus, first emperor of the Grantzian Empire—stroked his chin. On the desk before him lay

a stack of blank paper. He leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling, folding his arms behind his head.

“There is much I could write, Hiro. A great deal has happened since you left this world, and I mean to get to that in time. For now, however, I must commit my blood-brother’s tale to writing.”

Artheus had thought long and hard about what to leave his comrade-in-arms when he inevitably returned to Aletia. After much consideration, he had settled on writing a book. However, he had soon run into another problem. There was so much to tell, it was hard to know where to start.

“From Hiro’s arrival in this world, perhaps? Or from the time he first struck me? I daresay I can still feel the sting.”

He raised a hand to his cheek, smiling fondly. Few could claim to have been punched by a boy newly arrived from a distant otherworld. At the time, he never could have imagined the trials that awaited them, or that they would someday take to the battlefield as blood-brothers. It had been their bond that secured victory in the final battle between human and zlosta and set Soleil free.

Artheus stood up and moved to the window, where he gazed out at the scenery below. “Even now, I can scarcely believe it. Both that you are gone and that my sister is no more.”

The passage of time was cruelly slow nowadays. Naturally, the end of the war with the zlosta had not meant the end of hardship. Many troubles remained to plague the land. Still, life was far more boring now that peace reigned. Artheus knew such thoughts were improper, but he could not help but pine for the days he had braved danger with his blood-brother at his side.

“If only you were all still here, life would not be half so dull.”

Once upon a time, he, his sister, Hiro, and their comrades had traded dreams of peace over flagons of liquor, believing they would become real once the fighting was done. Yet one day, he had looked around to find he was the only one left. Now he ruled alone from a throne room far too large for one man. The peace he had sought brought only solitude.

“And I have taken to talking to myself where once another would answer.”

Both familiarity and honesty had vanished from around him after he became emperor. Now everybody treated him with painstaking reverence, and his head often ached to imagine what they might be plotting behind their smiles.

“But look at me, living in the past like an old man. Oh, Hiro. What would you think to see me now?”

Had his memories grown gilded by nostalgia? No, the world had simply been brighter then. It was agonizing to feel himself grow old. The thought of his inevitable deterioration filled him with dread.

“I want to safeguard the legacy you left behind. I only wonder whether I can.”

The thought of what would happen after his death brought only anxiety. His age was coming to an end. Eventually, the day would come when he would have to entrust everything he safeguarded to the next generation.

As he sank into melancholy, the door burst open.

“Father!” a voice cried out. “He did it again!”

Again? Artheus shook his head, shoulders slumping. He turned to see a boy standing in the doorway, out of breath. The child was the spitting image of Artheus himself in his younger years.

“What now?” he asked.

“My big brother scribbled all over Meteia’s statue!”

“Not again. The people of Baum will be furious.” With a sigh, he tousled the boy’s hair. Only then did he notice the child’s eyes were watering. “What’s the matter?”

“I tried to stop him, and…well…he hit me…”

“Did he now? There’s no harm in fighting, but you have to make up afterward.” Artheus clapped a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Your bond will be all the stronger for it.” His eyebrows rose as if he had abruptly remembered something. “Ah, that’s right. I must let you read this someday.”

“Read what?”

“Nothing you need worry about for now. Perhaps when you are older.”

He finally knew where to begin: with a tale of two brothers. He would write of how he and Hiro had forged their bond in the hope that his sons would learn from it and rule the empire hand in hand.

“I will pen such a tale of camaraderie that you will blush to read it.”

Artheus led his son from the room, wondering what expression Hiro would wear when he read the book at last.

Meteia's Recollections

"I leave Lord Hiro in your care," Rey said. She looked so frail as she lay upon her bed, gazing out of the window, that she might have vanished at any moment. The sorrow on her brow was painful to look upon.

Meteia found herself lost for words. She immediately fell to thinking about how to restore her mistress's smile. "My lady," she stammered, "I…I do not understand. Surely you can take care of him yourself?"

She pushed the request back, unable to bring herself to reply in the affirmative or the negative. Yet Rey only smiled softly, with no hint of accusation in her eyes.

"I fear I will not be able to see how his story ends."

Meteia could hardly bear to listen. She had never seen Rey so frail. To hear such resignation from someone so courageous, so confident—someone she herself had admired—was almost too much to take. She wanted to cover her ears, yet she could only bite her lip and listen.

"My time grows short."

Meteia knew only too well what those words meant. She had thought herself prepared, yet they wiped every thought from her mind. All color drained from her vision, rendering the world a featureless white. Her throat clenched up as her body forgot how to breathe.

"Please do not say such things, my lady. You will recover. All will be well."

"Meteia."

She raised her face at the sound of her name, tears trickling down her cheeks. Rey was gazing at her, the picture of gentleness. Her smile was no less kind or affectionate than the day they had first met.

"I can entrust him to no other."

"I could never take your place, my lady."

As the archpriestess, Rey had been a constant companion to the newly arrived otherworlder. Their duties kept them apart nowadays, but even with Hiro campaigning on faraway battlefields, they still kept in contact by letter. Rey was his rock, and her presence gave him the strength to continue fighting.

"Without you," Meteia continued, "I fear he will destroy himself." When she had first learned of Rey's impending death,

she had thought her heart might split in two. It was all too easy to imagine how Hiro might react.

“He will manage. You both will. I do not doubt it for a moment.”

“How can you be so certain, my lady?”

Rey laughed softly. “Between the two of you, there is no hardship you cannot overcome.”

What expression she had worn as she spoke those words, Meteia could no longer recall. The world had changed with fearsome speed after Rey’s passing. Meteia had failed to save Hiro. She had only been able to watch in despair from afar as he unravelled. And then…

“Ngh…”

Meteia snapped awake, pressing a hand to her flank as agony lanced through her.

“A dream…”

She staggered upright, planting a hand on the tree she had been slumped against, and looked around. Darkness pressed in on all sides. She stumbled off through the midnight forest, uncertain where she was going, letting her feet lead her where they would. A rueful smile came to her lips as she recalled how she had come to this place.

“That the twelve primozlosta might not have been the last of our foes… Poor fortune indeed.”

She had fought and lost and, to her shame, fled. What was worse, as she ran, she had blundered into an unexpected enemy who had dealt her a mortal blow.

“So this is the end…”

At last, she halted and sat down once more upon the dirt. She glanced at the wound on her flank. Not only was it still bleeding, she could feel viscera pressing against her palm.

“Forgive me, my lady.” She raised her head to the night sky, but the stars were hidden by the forest canopy. “I fear I will not be able to keep my word.”

Her own body told her that it did not have long left. Cold terror crept up from the soles of her feet as she felt her strength drain away.

“Fear not, my lady,” she murmured with a small sigh. “I will join you soon.”

Whether Rey would greet her with a smile or a frown, she did not know. Still, death might not be so bad if they would be

reunited on the other side. If she had just one regret, it would have to be…

“Hiro…”

She had failed to keep her promise. Failed to see his story to its end. She knew the sentiment was cheap, knew she had no right to hold it, but she could not help but wish for his happiness.

“Forgive me.”

Silence fell over the forest once more. Only the frail chirping of insects remained to disturb the darkness.

The Peaceful Days of the First Archpriestess

The gears of fate had slipped out of joint, and yet they continued to turn. Perhaps the possibility of repair remained, but even the gods had not predicted this—and if they had thrown up their hands in despair, what hope did mortals have?

The archpriestess, Rey, watched three figures sparring in the courtyard. One was the boy named Hiro, marked by his black hair and black eyes as having been summoned from another world by the Spirit King. She watched him dance with his wooden sword. Certainly, his otherworldly origins had gifted him with marvelous knowledge, but who could ever have imagined that he would grow so strong?

“He’s gotten used to his new strength, it seems.”

For a time, she had feared what might become of him, but his powers appeared to have stabilized. After his abduction, she had been sleepless with worry—it was enough of a relief simply to have found him safe. Hiro bore no blame for what had happened. It was she and her allies who had let the zlosta outwit them, allowing him to be saddled with a dreadful burden. The Lord’s power was immense. Eventually, its curse would begin to eat into Hiro’s very flesh. She needed to find a solution before that happened.

“Still,” she sighed, “what strength it is. One is reminded anew how mighty the Lords truly are.”

Hiro’s partner was a golden-haired, golden-eyed youth: Artheus, the king of this nation and the wielder of four of the Spirit King’s five Spiritblades. Only a handful of individuals in all of Aletia could rival him on the field, and even fewer of his fellow humans. Yet while they were merely sparring, Hiro was matching

him blow for blow. Only a few short months ago, it would have been impossible to imagine he would develop such skill. He had possessed valuable otherworldly wisdom, but in all other respects, he had been unremarkable at best. Yet now…

"So this is where you've been, my lady."

A voice interrupted Rey's thoughts. It belonged to a knight-priestess, one who had served Rey since the day the Spirit King had chosen her as his archpriestess. Born between the álfar and the beastfolk, she possessed pointed ears covered in white fur. Meteia's beastfolk blood ran particularly thick. She had physical capabilities ordinary folk could only dream of, and few could best her in combat.

"How is he?" Rey asked.

Meteia brought a hand to her chin, thinking, then raised her hands and smiled reassuringly. "You have little to fear, my lady. Sometimes his strength still gets the better of him, but he will master it soon enough."

"I'm glad to hear it. But if you notice anything amiss, you must tell me at once, even if you think it is beneath my notice."

"Of course, my lady. I will watch him like a hawk."

Rey listened, but she did not reply. She took a seat beneath a tree and watched Artheus and Hiro in silence.

"By your leave," Meteia said, sitting down next to her.

The hint of nervousness in her servant's eyes reminded Rey of a long-lost memory. A mischievous smile spread across her face. "Meteia," she said, patting her lap, "would you like to rest your head like you used to?"

"Bwah?!"

Rey burst into giggles. Struggling to make friends on account of her beast-like features, Meteia had been given to tears during their adolescence in Baum, and Rey had often comforted her by letting her lay her head on her knees.

"I-I'm flattered, my lady, I really am, but…urk…" Meteia's eyes darted from the sparring pair to Rey's lap and back again. "A-Another time, perhaps. When no one else is around."

Rey giggled. "All right. I can see you're embarrassed."

"Forgive me, my lady. I cannot allow Hiro to see me in a compromised state!" Her eyes made it clear that it had been a painful decision.

"Rey!" came Hiro's voice. "There you are!"

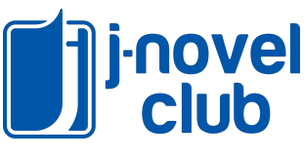
As he and Artheus approached, Meteia moved to stand in

their way. “Hiro! You will pay for this!”

“Me? What did I do?”

“Enough! Silence! You know very well what you did!”

Meteia pounced on him with a wolflike snarl. The first archpriestess looked on, smiling fondly.



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by Tatematsuri

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