Author: Tatematsuri
Illustrator: Ruria Miyuki

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The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles


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“I will never stop, Liz.”
?
Hiro Oguro
“I will never yield.”
Liz

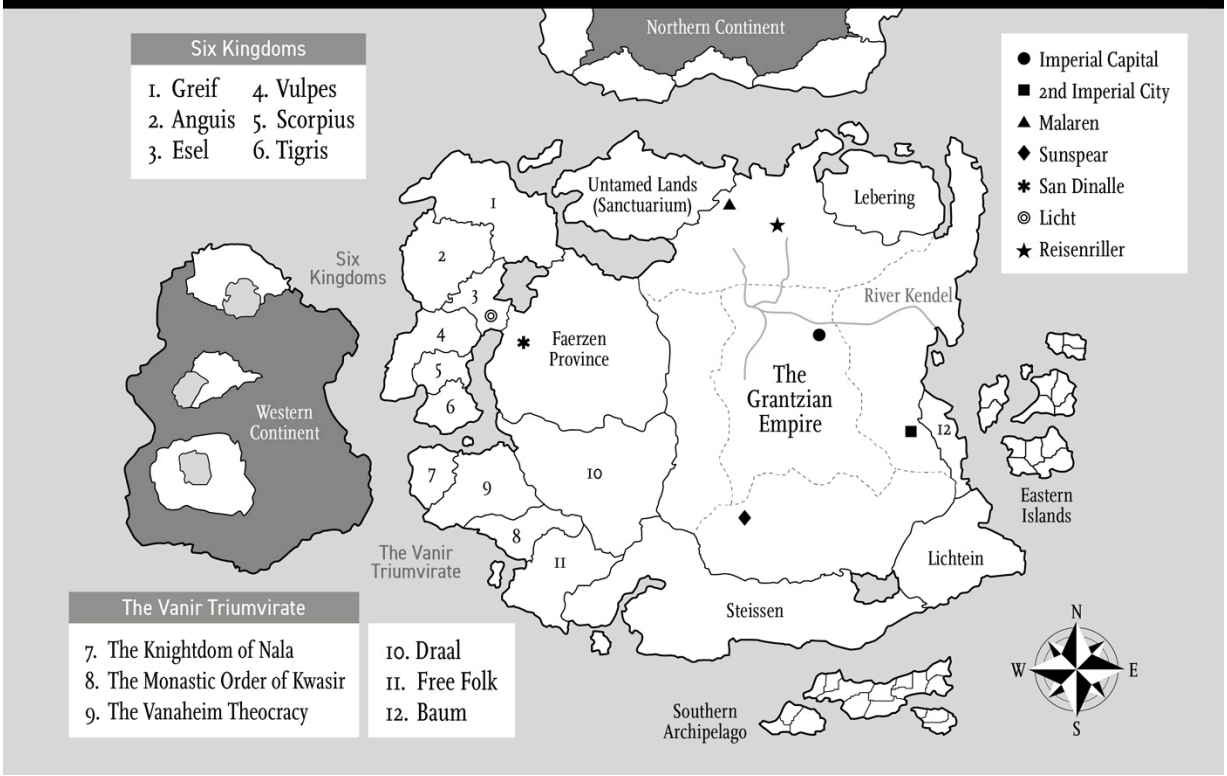

“My mind is quite clear. I assure you it was hard at work.”
Meteia Vias

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, Sixth 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.



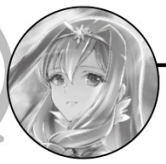
Culann Scáthach du Faerzen

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. She 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 and spread discord across Soleil as the mysterious Nameless.



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.

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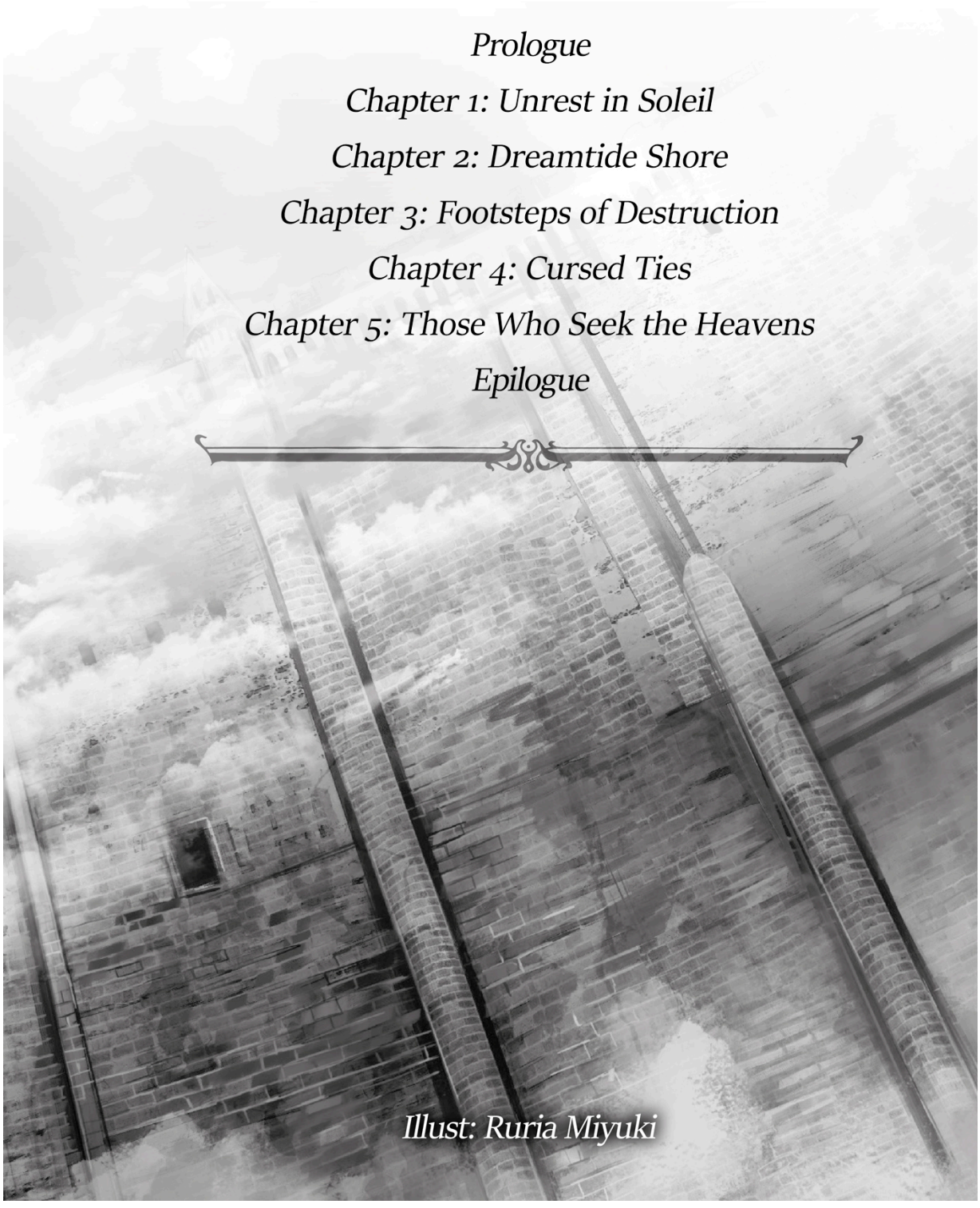
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Illust: Ruria Miyuki

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Prologue

"You will see this through, I trust?"

The leaf-shaded light filtering through the window cast a shadow across the woman's smile. Her time was short now, as was the knight's. The age would not be halted, the world would turn on, and those who could not keep up would be left behind. Whether they wished it or not, both of them would be abandoned by the march of time. And yet...

"As you wish it, my lady. For you, I will do all in my power."

And yet the knight vowed to resist. She could not afford to do otherwise. To save her bedridden mistress, she flew to the farthest reaches of the east and the west, the north and the south. Yet nothing changed. Her efforts were futile. Her lady only grew weaker. Hope after hope guttered out before her eyes, leaving only black despair, and she spent her days wandering lost in the dark.

"Murdered?"

When the boy first told her the news, the knight could not believe it. Her ears rang like the world was crashing down. Her vision went white. So vast was her anguish that it would crush her if she did not grant it release. Callously, unfairly, she turned it on him.

"Why?! How?! Were you not there to protect her?!"

Her outburst was ugly even to her own ears, but she could not bring herself to hear his apologies. She called him heartless for failing to shed a tear, labeled him impotent for failing as a guardian. Yet it was not heartlessness that kept his eyes dry. He was a broken man. His heart was a hollow ruin, his smile had vanished, and his emotions had lost their color. By the time the knight realized her mistake, it was too late, and she had lost his smile forever.

"Forgive me, my lady. I failed to keep my word."

She cursed her own foolishness. How truly rotten her soul must have been. She had cared only for vengeance, thinking of nothing

but her own feelings, and what had it gotten her? A fistful of ashes and an ignoble death on the battlefield. But salvation was at hand. She had not been forsaken. She followed the light, and when her eyelids fluttered open again, a crimson-haired girl was lying beside her. She needed no explanation, no soul-searching, no contemplation. Her mistress had returned. That was all that mattered.

"I will not fail again."

Her doubts fell away, and she raced across the land with fierce conviction in her breast. The white wolf howled, knowing the day would soon come for her to fulfill her ancient vow.

Chapter 1: Unrest in Soleil

The northernmost swathe of the Grantzian Empire's northern territories was shrouded in never-ending blizzards. Most people made their homes in the more temperate south. The land there was blessed with fertile black soil, and its agricultural bounties supported the rest of the region.

Three noble houses ruled this land of snow and earth: House Scharm, House Brommel, and House Heimdall. The most prestigious was House Scharm, which counted itself as one of the empire's five great houses and had produced many imperial chancellors. Next was House Heimdall, which, as the guardian of the great wall of Friedhof to the west, enjoyed even greater fame. Last came House Brommel. Although known chiefly for being overshadowed by the other two, its staunch service to House Scharm had earned it a quiet reputation as an indispensable pillar of the north—at least until recent years, when House Brommel took advantage of House Scharm's decline to swell its faction's ranks. A rift had formed between the two houses. Now, they were on the brink of open war.

House Brommel's seat of power lay in Logue, in the east of the northern territories. The city's proximity to the Lebering border made it a vital strategic location, and it could rival any of the great cities of the south in size. Oddly, however, its people were gray of face and lacking in joy. They had little enthusiasm for their profit at House Scharm's expense. All of them could sense war on the horizon. Word had come that Lebering was mustering its forces, which only added to their unease. What was more, their lord seemed to have no intention of avoiding conflict. Indeed, he had been amassing troops from loyal nobles, and more soldiers gathered at the encampment at Castle Himinbjörg with every passing day.

"A formidable number," Typhos von Brommel remarked. "Truly, there are no limits to human greed."

A smile pulled at his lips as he gazed down from the balcony. His courtyard was filled with soldiers. What poor fools—they would ride to war because their masters wished it, and they had no choice but to obey. If they fled, they would be hounded. If they hid, they would be found out and sent to the block. Defeat in battle would mean a cruel fate for their families at home. How did it feel, he wondered, to live at the mercy of lords who could twist their lives out of shape on a whim?

"Yet it remains impressive how firmly these humans band together," he murmured, "if not always for noble reasons. That unity of thought is how they prevailed over my zlosta's strength. Bested by those we looked down on as lesser, by those we deemed beneath us... Had we the same capacity for exponential growth, we would have been the victors a thousand years ago. Do you not agree, Ceryneia?"

He glanced back. Behind him, the hooded figure of the primozlosta Ceryneia knelt with his head bowed.

"Yes, my lord. But it was only with a man as powerful as Artheus at their head that they could unleash their true potential. And had Schwartz the Hero King not sat at his right hand, the humans would have had no future to speak of. There will be no such champions in modern times."

"You believe the present age can birth no heroes?"

"The humans have grown complacent, my lord. Peace makes poor soil. With no turmoil in the heavens, even emperors need not be exceptional when their only duty is to preserve their post for the next generation. Indeed, they are best when they are ordinary. All of history proves this, not least the third emperor's purges."

"He was no exceptional man, merely an ordinary one overshadowed by his father. And while the present age has produced no heroes, that has not stopped one returning from the past."

Ceryneia raised his head. "If I may, my lord, without Artheus, there is no one to save the Grantzian Empire from its plight. Even Schwartz could not do it. For a thousand years, our Lord has woven his web across the land. None remain who can stop us."

Hatred dripped from every word he spoke. Elation quickened his

tongue, and his voice radiated confidence. Typhos was not unsympathetic. They had indeed spent a thousand years undermining the empire. There had even been several occasions when they might have destroyed it. Yet success had never been certain, and so they had bided their time, resisting temptation until the day they could ensure the downfall of von Grantz beyond a doubt.

"We stand upon the brink of success. Only a little longer and all our dreams will reach fruition. But that is all the more reason to be cautious. It would not do to fall at the final hurdle. No victory is ever certain."

"I know, my lord."

"We must act with the utmost care, now and in the future. The slightest mistake might cascade beyond our control."

Ceryneia frowned. It was unusual for his master to be so talkative. "What are you suggesting, Lord Demiurgos?"

"So, you would use that name." Typhos paused. "We may be called the Lords of Heaven, but while we have approached our creator's might, we do not equal him. The people think us gods in their ignorance, but that does not mean we are."

"Only the Spirit King has failed in truth, my lord. You might still claim the heavens. And I do not doubt that you will."

"Indeed. I will not make his mistakes. I fully intend to become divine. To that end, I sought the power of the other Lords." Typhos turned his attention from the world below and raised a hand to Ceryneia. "What became of the Iron Monarch?"

"He is here, my lord."

Ceryneia revealed what he had kept concealed behind his back: a pedestal decorated with several dwarven heads. The gory trophies surrounded a large, glittering chunk of what looked like metal ore.

"The Iron Monarch's heartsteel, my lord. The heads belong to the king who served as his medium, as well as the rest of the royal line."

"Fine work. You have done well." Typhos took the metal in hand and raised it to the sky, narrowing his eyes against its glow. "Ah, my brother. How beautifully you shine."

Without a moment's hesitation, he lowered the ore into his

mouth. Unpleasant crunching emerged from between his lips. He was crushing it between his teeth, taking his time as though savoring the flavor. Finally, he swallowed.

"An ignoble end for a sibling of mine. Yet it brings me one step closer to what I seek."

Nothing outward about him changed. His appearance remained the same. Yet Ceryneia was accustomed to perceiving others through sense as much as sight, and Typhos's shoulders trembled with mirth. He seemed struck by great joy.

"I have no need of the heads," Typhos commanded. "Dispose of them." He kicked them aside, went back to his chambers, and settled down into a chair. "You are the only one to return, Ceryneia. What of the rest?"

He reached for a silver goblet on the table. At once, Ceryneia was at his shoulder with a bottle of wine, filling the cup with indigo liquid.

"Augeas fell to the Iron Monarch, as did Stymphalides. Weakened he might have been, but he was still a Lord of Heaven. It took all of our strength to bring him low."

"What of Erymanthos?"

"Burned alive in the fires of Mount Vyse. With the Iron Monarch fallen, nothing remained to suppress its eruption. The city beneath the mount must have been turned to ashes in an instant. Had I only my eyes, I might have witnessed that glorious moment for myself."

"It was spectacular, I don't doubt," Typhos mused. "Yet now my twelve primozlosta are but three. Unless..." He drained his goblet and turned to a corner of the room, where unnatural shadow roiled. Ceryneia followed his gaze. "Four, perhaps. Welcome back, Ladon."

A hooded figure emerged from the darkness—the primozlosta named Ladon. He approached Typhos on all fours, blood spilling from his abdomen.

Typhos rose, sensing something amiss. "There is a strange force within you. What has befallen you?"

Ladon could not answer. His groaning filled the room.

"That wound in your stomach... I see. Something is buried within."

Typhos stooped down and rolled Ladon onto his back, setting a thoughtful hand to his chin. Beside him, Ceryneia waved a hand over Ladon, moving down the primozlosta's flank and coming to a stop over the ragged tear in his side.

"I sense a fearsome curse, my lord."

Typhos snorted. "I might guess its source. Allow me."

He plunged his fingers into the wound. Ladon screamed in agony.

Ceryneia cried out in rare surprise as he held Ladon down. "That is not safe, my lord! You know not what it is!"

"Surtr would not send him back alive without a reason. I will take the gamble."

"Did you not just advise me of the importance of caution?"

"This curse may be a threat to you, but not to me, as he well knows. Besides, he would not deprive himself of the opportunity to look me in the eyes as he slays me."

Typhos's hand stopped, then he yanked his arm back out. A gemstone emerged, tangled in Ladon's entrails. A wordless howl tore from the primozlosta's throat, but Typhos paid him no mind as he extracted the stone from the viscera. Blood splattered across the floor.

"A curious dharmastone. I have sensed this before..." A blue crystal with a strange mottled pattern lay in his hand. "Ah, Stovell. Or, no...perhaps the curse that Nameless made for him?" His eyes narrowed. He seemed to see some significance in that.

At that moment, the dharmastone cracked, then shattered. Black light flooded the chamber, then faded away just as quickly. Not a trace remained of the crystal.

"Are you all right, my lord?"

"Hmm... A curse-bond. He truly despises me, it seems. I feel his hatred coursing through my veins." Typhos gazed down at the intricate sigil burned into his hand and grinned. His attention turned to Ladon. The primozlosta's breathing was growing shallow. "Ladon. Tell me what transpired before you pass."

"We fought...with Mars. With Surtr..." Ladon lay wreathed in viscera in a pool of his own blood. His voice was vanishingly quiet.

"And Hydra perished?"

“Yes...my lord. Slain...by our foe...”

“You were bold to challenge him. With your eyes plucked out and your manastones taken, I doubt you could have put up much of a fight.” Typhos returned to his chair, gazing with fascination at the pattern on his hand. His breathing had grown animated. “Did you retrieve what you were tasked with collecting?”

“Yes, my lord... My pocket...”

Ceryneia reached into Ladon’s breast pocket and retrieved a glass phial. Two golden eyeballs lay within. He offered it to Typhos, who took it and inspected it in the candlelight.

“Marvelous indeed...yet I sense little power within. Thinned, no doubt, after so many centuries of álfen blood.” He tossed the phial away and returned his hawklike gaze to Ladon. “What irony that Surtr’s curse was your only true prize.”

“Forgive me...my lord...”

“Well, it matters not. It seems the genuine article is in Surtr’s possession. Artheus planned well. To have foreseen events a thousand years hence... Perhaps he was even closer to divinity than we. Or perhaps it was the Spirit King’s work before he sequestered himself away in his failure.” Without so much as a glance at the primozlosta who had given his life to retrieve them, Typhos crushed the eyes underfoot. “Those hateful álfar have begun to move, as have our dear spawn beyond the wall. Soon, we may quit this wretched place.”

He stood up again and approached Ladon. Behind him, Ceryneia spoke.

“The álfar are strong, my lord. The Vanir Triumvirate have remained unscathed throughout the conflicts thus far. And if they should best the empire, their leader may continue north to lay waste to us.”

“She may believe she is using us, but we yet pull her strings—as we do those of the War God and the changeling child. They all dance in our palm.” Typhos grasped a fistful of Ladon’s intestines and pushed them into the dying primozlosta’s mouth, cocking his head as he did. “Imbibing your own viscera will not heal your wounds, yet so fierce is your vitality that you still cling to life. So too

are our pawns. Once broken, they cannot be restored, but nor will they consent to simply fade away. Not without cost to us, at least." He let the organs fall and looked up from his blood-slicked hands. "Ceryneia, you will remain with me."

Ceryneia bowed his head in acknowledgment, but then a thought seemed to strike him. "Shall I recall Khimaira from Six Kingdoms, my lord?"

"I could not guess what is preoccupying him, but he would be too late in any case. Leave him. He will return of his own accord once he tires. In any case, he is serving us well enough by keeping the imperial army trapped in the west. As indeed is the troublemaker."

"As you command, my lord. And what of Ladon?"

"His innards might be replaced, but to what end? He has already proven himself useless to keep alive." Typhos regarded Ladon coldly. "I shall end his misery. He has been faithful these past thousand years. I shall permit him to serve me one last time."

Without hesitation, he bit down on the bridge of Ladon's nose. The tearing of flesh mingled with the sickening noises of consumption.

Ceryneia kept his head bowed, moving not so much as a muscle despite the gruesome scene before him. A cloying stench suffused the chamber. Eventually, the noises abated, and Typhos returned unhurried to his chair. His face was red with blood.

At last, Ceryneia spoke. "Ladon must be honored that his lifeblood now strengthens you, Lord Demiurgos."

"Paltry strength," Typhos snorted. "The twelve primozlosta have grown more feeble than humans, it would seem. A novel discovery, but hardly a welcome one."

He gazed again at the sigil on his hand, licking the crimson from his lips, before wiping a drop of blood from the corner of his mouth. A bark of laughter escaped his throat.

"This vessel's time grows short."

He raised a hand to his face. His skin flaked away like dry seaweed. He stared at it, utterly nonplussed, as if it were not his own.

"Mars...my magnum opus. Come to claim my life. I welcome it."

Spitting out a tooth, he brought the bottle of wine on his desk to his lips, turning to regard the snowy sky beyond the window.

"And so our long, long battle shall finally conclude. What began one thousand years ago will come to an end at last." He raised his goblet to the window with a rare smile. "Do you not look forward to that, Spirit King?"

* * * * *

The twenty-seventh day of the tenth month of Imperial Year 1026
Malaren, a moderately sized city in the northern territories

In the north of the empire, as north as one could go in Soleil, rose the colossal shape of Friedhof, the Spirit Wall. It had been erected around five hundred years before the present day in response to an invasion by the monstrous creatures called the Wild Races. Order in the north had sharply declined, ushering in instability that threatened the well-being of the entire empire. The affair had only come to an end when the twenty-second emperor enlisted the help of the third archpriestess to chase the Wild Races back to the farthest reaches of the north. Yet he had been unable to eradicate them entirely, and so with the Spirit King's aid, he had raised the great wall of Friedhof—a bastion that still stood to this day, keeping the world of men safe from the threats that lay beyond.

Malaren and its surrounding territories were the hereditary lands of House Heimdall, the current head of which was Hermes von Heimdall. Although old enough to be past his prime, he was still counted among the five high generals who defended the peace of the empire. He was known far and wide as the guardian of Friedhof, and safeguarding imperial lands from the Wild Races was his charge.

The west gate of Malaren stood wide open. Townsfolk fled the city in droves, carrying their belongings. From time to time, they quailed as thunderous booms rang out from the Spirit Wall, glancing fearfully toward the noise as they hastened through the streets. Black smoke blotted out the sky. The plume only swelled with time, seeming to mock the efforts of the people below. Cries, shrieks, and roars of anger filled the air, periodically drowned out by bellowing

cries.

Friedhof itself had become a battlefield. Soldiers lined the battlements. Beneath them, rank upon rank of monsters advanced on the wall, ignoring the arrows raining down on them as they pounded at the icelike surface with siege weaponry.

"High General!" cried the commander of the defense, panting as he fell to one knee. "The monsters continue their assault. They have yet to damage the wall, but they are moving like organized troops. They appear to be focusing their efforts on the gate."

"The gate, eh?" Hermes growled. "As I feared. Any sightings of yaldabaoth?"

"None yet, sir. We have sighted several archons who appear to be acting as commanders, but if there are yaldabaoth present, they remain on the back lines."

Hermes nodded. "Keep your eyes peeled. There are yaldabaoth on the field; I know it. They wouldn't be this coordinated otherwise. Now, send reinforcements to the gate. Take 'em from the battlements if you have to."

With a bow, the officer left to attend to his tasks. He vanished into the press, barking orders left and right.

Hermes watched the man go with a sigh. "Won't hold out for much longer," he murmured.

The bodies of fallen soldiers lay before him in rows, felled by unlucky arrows from beyond the wall. Between the blood oozing from the fresh corpses and the stench they exuded, they might as well have been a beacon for monsters.

Victory felt thoroughly out of reach now. With morale at rock bottom, no reinforcements in sight, and an enemy that outnumbered the garrison, fighting on seemed hopeless. Most commanders would have fled by now. Yet Hermes knew that giving up would set a poor example for the men beneath him. He gripped his bow tightly and approached the battlements, drawing strength from his high general's stubbornness and pride.

"A strange sight it makes," he muttered. "Mindless beasts fighting like men."

A sea of bonfires burned in the distance. The blaze covered the

land like the fires of hell. The monsters looked almost like human soldiers, marching in lockstep and raising battle cries. Their zeal ran hot enough to melt the falling snow, for all the good it did them in a raging blizzard. Yet they marched on, their inner fire shielding them from the freezing winds. It made for a fearsome spectacle.

"Hah. Monsters marching arm in arm, eh? Live long enough and you'll see anything."

Roars rose from far below, so loud that they could have been right next to his ear. The churning ranks were individually as dumb as beasts, but they converged on the wall with palpable intent. Crudely stitched hide drums beat out a threatening rhythm.

Hermes looked away, laying a hand on the shoulder of the soldier beside him. "Help the townsfolk evacuate, recruit. Send them as far east—no, south would be better. As far south as you can."

This was no time to be sending Second Prince Selene refugees to take care of. He already had his hands full dealing with House Brommel's treachery.

"Are you telling me to leave my post, sir?"

The young soldier ducked as an arrow whistled over his head. The shaft was easily two or three times the length of anything a human would use, and it chilled the blood to imagine the arm strength needed to propel it so high. Certainly, the young soldier seemed rooted to the spot.

Hermes smiled despite himself. As a lull came in the fighting, he gave the man a friendly push. "On your way, lad. You'll make it if you go now."

"Yes, sir!" The force of the push sent the recruit stumbling forward, but he soon found his feet.

With a silent prayer for the man's safety, Hermes leaned back against the battlements and looked up at the southern sky.

"Muninn was too late, it seems..." he sighed, stroking his beard. He had entrusted Surtr's young agent with his final hope, but he had waited for many days and good tidings were not forthcoming. "Not his fault, I suppose. Mine, if anything. I ought to have written to Lord Surtr sooner."

Friedhof was not very far from Six Kingdoms, all things

considered, but he doubted the armies of Baum marched around with their valuable spirit weapons in tow. Even if Surtr had given the approval to send arms, it would take a long time for them to arrive. He was not to blame. Hermes had misjudged the severity of the situation and left things too late.

"But who could have foreseen those creatures would come so soon? Or that they'd be so organized..."

They were moving like humans, precisely targeting undermanned locations and reinforcing vulnerable positions in their own lines. It was less like facing a horde of monsters and more like fighting an army—one that was highly trained and moved with perfect coordination.

Waves of flaming arrows rose from below. With the wall's height, the wind robbed most of their speed before they reached the top, but a handful miraculously covered the distance, and those few were enough to claim many lives. The calculated unpredictability of the volleys kept the defenders on the back foot. This was not one of the feeble offensives of years past, born of brute force and little else; it was an eruption of five centuries of accumulated resentment. The monsters were bringing everything to bear in their attempt to destroy Friedhof.

"If they had this much power, why didn't they unleash it before now?"

Had they simply been testing the strength of the wall? But why? Perhaps if Hermes had thought to answer that question earlier, the situation might have been prevented.

"Were they simply scouting out our defenses? Aye, I suppose it could have been..."

Lulling the enemy into a false sense of security only to crush them in one fell swoop—a cunning strategy indeed. It had certainly been effective. Hermes and his fellow defenders were hard-pressed. What had truly caught them by surprise, however, was that they had been outsmarted by monsters and yaldabaoth. Too late, they had learned their sense of superiority had been misplaced.

"My fault, for all that's worth now. I ought to have retired before I got this old."

When Hermes looked to the root of this debacle, all he found was his own arrogance and pride. Still, there was no time to regret his choices. Making amends to his troops and his people could come later. First, he had to live up to his position and overcome the crisis.

"High General, sir! We have a problem!"

A harried voice interrupted his thoughts. At the same time, a roar pierced his ears and the floor shuddered beneath his feet, sending the soldier who had addressed him sprawling. Several men around him also lost their footing. Hermes managed to keep his balance by clinging on to the battlements. His eyes widened as he took in the sight below.

"What kind of bloody arrow...?"

For a moment, there was silence. Then, with a mighty whistle that set the air thrumming, a colossal spear came rocketing up from below. The wall shook again as an arrowhead taller than a human pierced its surface. Another mounted the ramparts, its recurved barbs catching soldiers in their grasp as it slid back, crushing them against the battlements. Plumes of blood sprayed high, raining down viscera as they painted the wall red.

"Oh, hells..."

Hermes's face filled with horror as he took in the full length of the bolt. A long, thick rope trailed from the nock to the ground below, and it was all too clear what that meant. It was only a matter of time before monsters came climbing up.

He turned to the defenders. "Slick the wall with oil!" he bellowed. "Everything you have! Ready your flaming arrows! Drive them back, whatever it takes!"

The command set the battlements abuzz with activity. More than a few of the soldiers who had lost their footing were bleeding from the head, but they joined the defense all the same. Every one of them understood they would suffer far worse if the monsters mounted the wall.

"What's that thing made of? Damned well went through the wall like butter..."

Friedhof had been raised with the power of a deity, and five hundred years of history testified that it was impregnable. It had

stood firm against every external assault. But now that legend was about to fall before Hermes's eyes. He could not conceal his shock. He had swung a sword against the wall with all his strength and failed to even leave a nick in its surface, yet the enemy's assault had punched through it with ease.

Even as the garrison hastened to marshal a defense, more colossal spears thudded into the wall. The floor shook beneath the soldiers' feet as they carried oil up from below and hurled it over the edge. Hermes watched in silence for a moment. At last, he drew his spirit weapon from his belt and hopped up onto the battlements, surveying his soldiers as they went about their work.

"We must hold," he said, raising a fist high. "Second Prince Selene is sending reinforcements. King Surtr of Baum has sworn to send us spirit weapons. Help is coming, but we must hold a little longer. Just a little longer! What is there to fear?! Those beasts?! Bah! You stand in defense of your countrymen! Stand with your eyes forward and your heads high!"

Hope and courage swelled in the ranks as his voice carried. Life returned to the soldiers' dying eyes. Seeing their faces grow bright once more, Hermes sheathed his spirit weapon, raised his bow, and fired. A cheer went up from the battlements as the arrow punched clean through a monster climbing the rope. Morale had been restored. Even so, there was no telling how long that would last. Hermes's words were lies. There were no reinforcements coming. Once the defenders realized they had been deceived, Friedhof would fall into monstrous hands for the first time in its five hundred years of existence.

"And all this old hound can do is refuse to go down without a fight. Cling stubbornly to life and go shamefully to his end."

He would drag countless soldiers with him to hell. All he could do to absolve himself was commit every last drop of his strength and experience to the fight. Perhaps he would only be satisfying his own pride in the end, but if he was to die, he would die like a high general.

"If we can only hold, perhaps we might buy time for Lord Selene to defeat House Brommel."

Given space to breathe, maybe Selene could find a way. Hermes's task was to hold the line until that happened. If House Brommel was still a threat when Friedhof fell, Reisenriller would be caught between two foes. House Scharm would have to put the rebellion down quickly. Fortunately, Selene surely understood that too. He would make good use of the time he was given.

"One last test of your mettle, old man. Will Friedhof be a killing field or the key to the empire's salvation?"

Hermes had no idea whether he would survive the coming hours, yet strangely, he felt no fear. If anything, he was filled with exhilaration. For all his complaints, he was still a warrior, and some part of every warrior relished the thrill of a battle to the death. It seemed this old hound's place would always be on the battlefield...in which case, there were only two paths before him.

"No more time to think, eh?"

A horde of monsters spread out beneath the wall. Hermes looked down on them with such composure, one would never have thought he was making his last stand. Yet there was no arrogance on his face. He regarded them with the predatory glint of a tiger stalking its prey.

"Fair fortune to you, Your Highness."

That would be his last thought for another. From this moment forth, he would become a demon that lived to slaughter his foes.

As the first monster crested the wall, Hermes met it with a roar and an upraised sword.

* * * * *

House Scharm had ruled the north for generations. In that time, it had produced a number of imperial consorts, not to mention a great many chancellors of the empire. It was one of the most prestigious of the great houses, with its power and influence matching House Krone even in the latter's heyday. Even in recent years, Chancellor Graeci had commanded immense respect, while his younger sister had been chosen to become the second imperial consort. However, she had been slain in the attack on the inner

palace, while Graeci had been cut down by assassins, leading to the chancellorship being usurped by House Kelheit. House Scharm's influence was now waning, and it had lost the confidence of its nobles. With no current head, it had sought the aid of Second Prince Selene, but his prolonged convalescence had left him unable to address the threat of House Brommel or save House Scharm from decline. The house was currently the weakest it had ever been, and House Brommel's rise promised war in the not-so-distant future.

House Scharm's seat of power was Reisenriller, the Whitesteel Castle. The city lay under a permanent layer of snow, and the castle rose from the world of white like a vision from a fantasy. Its beauty was renowned within the empire and without, and many came from across the continent just to lay eyes on it. Now, however, the city was devoid of travelers. Soldiers patrolled the streets, their expressions stern. An oppressive atmosphere hung over the rooftops, and the townsfolk locked their doors.

But the castle was a hive of activity. Military and civil tribunes hurried through the corridors. Anxiety lay thick on the guards' faces.

Through it all walked Selene's aide, Herma von Heimdall. The son of Hermes von Heimdall, he had inherited his father's valor, and his soldiers knew and trusted him as an upstanding and honorable man. He hastened to the throne room and flung open the doors.

"Where is His Highness?!" he demanded.

"I am here, Herma."

Herma looked around. The lord of the castle was sitting on the throne. He raised a hand. Herma's sister, Phroditus von Heimdall, waited at his side.

"Is something wrong, brother?" she asked.

Herma did not answer. He approached the throne and bowed his head. "Your Highness," he said, a little out of breath, "a messenger has come from Malaren."

Selene leaned forward in his chair. Phroditus straightened up, regarding her brother intently. Both looked apprehensive. They could guess what he was about to say.

"My father—that is to say, High General von Heimdall reports that a horde of monsters under yaldabaoth command have begun an

assault on the wall."

"And we hardly have reinforcements to spare." Selene leaned back in his seat, frowning. "We may not have a choice, though. Did Hermes say anything more?"

"Yes, Your Highness. He writes that he will attend to the matter to the best of his ability and you are not to worry. He wishes you fair fortune."

Selene smiled despite himself. There was Hermes's stubborn streak. No doubt the man would have killed for reinforcements; one could only imagine the will it had taken to send reassurances instead. Still, that only made Selene more concerned.

"The man truly never changes. Our forces more or less rival those of House Brommel, do they not, Herma? Might we have some troops to spare?"

"I fear not, Your Highness. Your letters have certainly given some of the nobles pause, and some of them have thought better of sending troops to House Brommel, but our foes still have the upper hand. Reducing our forces further will only persuade more houses to turn away from us. I cannot advise it."

"Then there is only one way to save Malaren. We must deal with House Brommel in short order."

"I agree, Your Highness. We cannot afford to let them besiege us. We must sally forth ourselves. Prolonging this conflict might be to our advantage, but what would we gain if Friedhof is overrun in the meantime?"

"We cannot leave House Brommel to fester, but nor can we allow Friedhof to fall. Both paths lead to ruin, it seems. How vexing..."

"I doubt we can expect reinforcements from the central territories either," Herma said. "I have heard ill tidings concerning the Vanir Triumvirate."

"The álfar certainly know how to pick their moment." Phroditus scowled. "Opportunists that they are."

"Both the west and the south coming for the empire at once," Selene remarked. "One almost suspects they might be working together behind the scenes. In any case, we can only place our trust in Liz and Rosa. Our role is to restore order in the north as quickly as

possible. We shouldn’t expect assistance.”

That said, a thorny road lay ahead of them. They would have to secure victory over House Brommel before riding to Friedhof’s aid. There was no telling how many days that would take or what would be left of the Spirit Wall once they arrived. Nonetheless, it was the only way. If they prioritized Friedhof, House Brommel would capture Reisenriller and House Scharm would fall. Their allies would not stand for that. In this day and age, few nobles were patriotic enough to sacrifice their homes in defense of their nation. Most would sooner switch allegiances than give up their own security.

“As cruel as it is to say, we must trust that Hermes can hold out until we settle matters with House Brommel.” Selene rose from the throne and walked down the red carpet in the center of the chamber, his twin blades Móralltach and Beagalltach in hand. “Time is short. We must make haste.”

Phroditus and Herma fell in wordlessly behind him.

“Let us teach House Brommel and their traitorous allies the folly of opposing House Scharm.”

A smile spread across his face as he licked his lips in anticipation.



* * * * *

A flock of birds soared high in the sky, silhouetted against the sun. With the wind in their feathers and their wings flapping gracefully, they had long been the envy of those who walked on the earth, but all the more so now, when the fires of war threatened to sweep across the continent. They vanished into the clouds of the eastern sky as if mocking the struggles of those below.

While birds could afford to migrate with the seasons, people sought stability, and there was no greater haven than the imperial capital. Its population density was the greatest to be found in Soleil, its economy the most vibrant, and its culture the richest. To call it the most prosperous city in the world would be no exaggeration. Named Cladius, it was a shining symbol of the empire's long history and the pride of its people. No matter what ills befell the continent, it had remained lively and vibrant for the thousand years since the reign of Emperor Artheus. Yet now the city grew more anxious by the day, and its people's faces were dark.

The central boulevard beyond the main gate would ordinarily have been thronged with townsfolk, but today it was lined with soldiers. The imperial lion fluttered and snapped above them. Beside it flew the sigil of House Kelheit. In the middle of the host rolled a commander's carriage occupied by Myste Caliara Rosa von Kelheit, the acting head of House Kelheit and the chancellor of the empire. She was accompanied by two civil tribunes who served as her aides and a formidable pile of papers.

"Even in wartime, the economy trundles on." Rosa cast a glance over the various missives she had received from all across the continent and sighed. "We'll have to balance our negotiations with putting out all these fires...which will doubtless mean more paperwork for me."

"Needs must, my lady," one of the aides said. "With Lady Celia Estrella campaigning in the west, there is no one else who can tend to the empire."

"I am well aware of my duties." Rosa sighed. "Permit me a little

grousing. These last few weeks have been one thing after another."

Revolt fomenting in the north. Monsters stirring beyond the Spirit Wall. The Vanir Triumvirate marching on the empire from the south, with the Free Folk joining their call to war. The chain of events sparked by Six Kingdoms' invasion of Faerzen now threatened to set the whole continent ablaze. Rosa had issued a call to arms to the empire's nobles, but there was no telling how many would respond. Few had survived the events of the past few years unscathed. No doubt many would be reluctant to commit their depleted forces, underestimating just how perilous a position they were in.

Never in all the empire's long history had it faced such an existential threat. Crises had arisen before, but never so many at once. Truth be told, Rosa only felt so unafraid because she could scarcely believe it herself. No doubt her soldiers felt the same. Being so far from the peril helped, perhaps, but more to the point, when the empire had existed for a thousand years, a world without it was inconceivable. Rose had read the reports, but they felt like fiction. She doubted reality would truly sink in until she saw it with her own eyes.

"I cannot predict what lies ahead," she murmured. "It is all I can do to react to the present. Sometimes I wonder if I am truly fit to be chancellor."

Her aide looked scandalized. "That is not—"

Rosa silenced him with a wave of her hand. She shook her head. "Forgive me. This is no time for self-pity." With a rueful smile, she returned her attention to the pile of documents. After a while, she stopped on one. "This report is remarkably well written. Who compiled it?"

"It was the daughter of House Loeing, I believe."

"Ah, I remember. The one who takes so little after her grandfather."

Once upon a time, High General Trye Hlin von Loeing had been charged with the defense of the southern territories. Now, after his part in Stovell's rebellion and the death of the emperor, he was reviled as a traitor. His family had managed to avoid punishment by association, in part because they had disowned him prior to his

betrayal but mostly because the emperor's passing was still concealed from the public. Nonetheless, they had lost their status and their place in the southern territories. They had fled immediately to Liz's camp and now lived under the protection of the Gurinda Mark.

"As I recall," the aide continued, "she showed little talent as a military tribune but distinguished herself as a civil one. By all accounts, she has a promising career ahead of her."

"I'm pleased to hear it. Let's hope she realizes her potential."

That was yet another reason Rosa felt compelled to steer the empire through this ordeal and help it to rebuild. Once, Liz had possessed no allies at court, but after the treachery of Stovell, the first in the line of succession, she had become the emperor's heir apparent. Nobody could have expected such a coup, and yet while she still had much room to grow, she was now on the verge of taking the throne. Many other young and talented people were distinguishing themselves similarly. The world was due for a changing of the guard. *Omnia vanitas* applied to people as well as nations, it seemed. Yet Rosa was optimistic. Change was not to be feared. She would have gladly relinquished the seat of chancellor in an instant had its recipient been talented enough to better support the empire.

"We must succeed. For the sake of those who will inherit the future, if nothing else." She paused. "Speaking of loyal retainers, how fare my eastern nobles?"

"The most prominent are marching south with General von Grax and High General Vias, my lady."

"So she's finally joined the fray, has she? Good."

High General Vias was one of the five high generals and the Warden of the East. She had won her rank by defeating the then-High General von Grax in a duel several years prior. Emperor Greiheit had officially awarded her with the position, but free and wilful as she was, she had dismissed his orders as bothersome and refused to attend to them. That would have earned anyone else the death penalty, but Greiheit had simply ignored her impertinence, leaving the rest of the empire no choice but to follow suit. The emperor had

shown no mercy to anyone else who defied him, commoner or noble, leading to speculation that she was his illegitimate child. Rosa, however, knew that could not be true. Greiheit had taken no other woman to bed since marrying Liz's mother. Otherwise, his Fifth Spring would never have occurred.

In any case, it was a relief that High General Vias had seen fit to act. Rosa had feared she might not. Fortunately, the national crisis was too pressing for even her to ignore.

"Her presence might just make up for the troops we have committed to the west."

The álfar of the Vanir Triumvirate were surging up from the south, accompanied by the half-bloods of the Free Folk. House Muzuk's loyalties were an unknown quantity. Word had even come that the Grand Duchy of Draal was in league with the invaders. If they all joined forces, the empire could not rival their numbers, but a high general's presence on the field would give the enemy pause. Besides, between Rosa's First Legion and High General Vias's Fifth, the imperial forces would not be wanting for strength.

"And once Liz claims victory over Six Kingdoms, we can expect Draal to withdraw from the fight."

Liz had taken the First Legion's shock troops, the Knights of the Golden Lion, as well as the entire Second and Fourth Legions. Once Six Kingdoms was defeated, their presence on Draal's border would require the Grand Duchy to act far more conservatively.

"I suspect they have been too cautious and missed their chance," Rosa mused. "To our benefit, naturally."

Even so, any show of vulnerability and they would pounce. Every nation in Soleil was just waiting for its chance, both enemies and allies. Lebering, the empire's erstwhile ally, Steissen, now ruled by the formidable beastfolk, and Lichtein, the nation of slavers to the south, were no different. When their leaders evaluated which side would be most advantageous to take, they would not factor friendship into the calculation.

"Victory is the only way we can secure the empire's future."

All of them were fighting desperately to ensure the survival of their home. Liz surely felt the same. No doubt every citizen of the

empire did.

Imagining her sister struggling valiantly in the west, Rosa sighed and refocused herself. Just then, a thought occurred to her.

"Come to think of it, I never did find Cerberus..."

Liz's faithful white wolf had gone missing shortly before Rosa's departure from the capital. She had searched long and hard, but the beast had eluded her grasp. After some indecision, she had settled on not letting Liz know. The last thing her sister needed was something else to worry about.

"I've no doubt she'll be fine, but even so..."

For lack of any other option, Rosa had left the search to her mansion guards and ladies-in-waiting. She could only hope that the wolf would show herself again, as unruffled as ever, once the fighting was done.

"I'll set that matter aside for now. I'll need all my wits about me if I'm to meet with Beto."

The head of House Muzuk had always been impossible to read. Rosa knew he was pulling strings behind the scenes, but as yet he remained in Sunspear, defying all her attempts to find proof of his deeds. He was a formidable opponent in every aspect. Nonetheless, she had no intention of rolling over and dying.

"You will not find me unprepared, Beto. Soon, your age will end."

She had spared no effort in scheming for the coming confrontation. She would never be better prepared. Nonetheless, pitted against the head of House Muzuk, it was difficult not to be nervous. She looked out of the window to distract herself. The boundless blue sky stretched far away, studded with clouds and gleaming with sunlight.

* * * * *

If asked to name the greatest city in the empire's south, any and all would think of Sunspear. Built upon the only swathe of grassland in the southern desert, its convenient location made it a crossroads of continental trade. The region also possessed bountiful reserves of gold. It was upon this wealth that House Muzuk had built their

fortune and secured their status at court.

As the fires of war converged on the nation, House Muzuk alone had seemed unaffected, emerging from the fall of House Krone as a new political juggernaut. Relatively untouched by the fighting compared to the other great houses, they had utilized their cunning to outpace their peers and seize power. Their sole defeat had been losing the chancellorship to House Kelheit following Chancellor Graeci's death, a failure brought on by their own arrogance. Nonetheless, their power and authority had not been diminished. They remained second only to House Kelheit in influence.

House Muzuk's seat of power in Sunspear was the site of the largest gold mine in the empire. This, along with fertile grasslands that bred fine horses, formed the backbone of the southern territories' economy. As if to proclaim its wealth to the world, many of the city's buildings gleamed with gold. Perhaps the greatest of all was House Muzuk's palace of Glitnir. Drenched in the rays of the sun, the unopposed monarch of the day, its golden glory remained undimmed by the uncertainty swirling over the empire, and the people's faces shone just as bright.

Nonetheless, House Muzuk's civil tribunes had never looked so harried. Word had arrived that the Free Folk had crossed the border into Steissen, while the forces of the Vanir Triumvirate were marching through the Grand Duchy of Draal, apparently making for the southern territories. One official in particular paced through the buzzing halls of the palace, a newly compiled report in hand. He stopped before the door to Beto von Muzuk's quarters and knocked. A voice from within commanded him to enter.

"I have the most recent report, my lord," he said.

"Excellent. Leave it there. I will get to it in due course."

"Of course, my lord." The tribune bowed his head and laid the report on the desk near a pile of parchment scrolls.

"How fare our forces?"

"The commander reported in not long ago, my lord. All appears to be well, for the most part."

"For the most part?"

"There has been a minor dispute with the eastern nobles' troops,

my lord. Nothing worthy of note."

The eastern nobles' troops had set up camp around Sunspear. Officially, they were reinforcements sent to compensate for Ludurr's absence as he accompanied the sixth princess on her campaign. Unofficially, they were there to keep an eye on Beto and House Muzuk.

"A dispute? Over what?"

"A trivial matter, my lord. Some drunken argument that has spilled over into lasting resentment. No fists have been thrown, but I am told the participants now argue whenever they meet, and with war on the horizon, our troops are on edge. It may be prudent to keep them apart for the time being."

"We can hardly expect them to be the best of friends, but nor can we afford for this to grow out of control. I will speak with the eastern nobles' commander."

"Thank you, my lord. That is all I had to report."

"Fine work. You may go." As the aide departed, Beto settled back into his chair and heaved an exhausted sigh.

A woman—his wife, Selvia—laid a hand on his shoulder. She gazed at the map in front of him, taking in the arrangement of pawns. "The Vanir Triumvirate is finally on the march, I see."

"Mm. And the Free Folk with them." Beto picked up a pawn and narrowed his eyes at it. "But the most concerning of all is Draal. They maintain their silence, but our agents suggest they are preparing for war."

"But they are still waiting to see how events play out?"

"They haven't decided what side they're on. No doubt they aren't amused by the Vanir Triumvirate marching through Draali lands as they please. That isn't a fight they could take without bloodshed, but if they held back for now and struck from behind once the fighting began, they could vanquish the álfar and win favor with the empire."

"What would you do if you were the grand duke?"

"You know I've never liked hypotheticals, but...very well. If it were me, I would join the assault on the empire. Donate enough resources to the Vanir Triumvirate to earn their trust as I made note of their supply trains." Beto traced the map with his finger as he laid

out his thoughts. “Then I would carve out the fattiest parts of the empire for myself, and if the álfar tried to stop me, I would burn their supplies and force them to pillage from local settlements. Then I would dispose of them and win the people’s support, consolidating my rule of the territories I had claimed.”

“And do you expect that is what they will do?”

Beto shrugged and shook his head, smiling. “I doubt it. The current grand duke is far more capable than the last. He is noble of conduct and, aside from a little too much fondness for food, has few failings to speak of.”

“But surely—” Selvia began.

Beto cut her off with a chuckle. “But he has no power. None at all. Capable he may be, but he commands no authority to make use of his talents. His retainers override his will at every turn, leaving him no room to excel. Ability is nothing without power, just as the finest sword is worthless in an unskilled hand.”

Selvia clapped her hands together in realization. “So that is why you could do it. Because you surround yourself with such talented people.”

“Precisely. Many of my subordinates are even more capable than myself, Ludurr foremost among them.”

“Then what if you left the southern territories to Draal? Could you seize the throne?”

Beto spun around in alarm.

Selvia cocked her head and smiled at him. “Whatever is the matter?”

“Nothing. I was a little surprised, that’s all. I never expected I would hear those words from your lips. It would be wise not to repeat such foolishness. There is no telling who might be listening.”

Beto resettled himself in his chair and sighed. Selvia laid her hands on his shoulders and brought her mouth to his ear.

“Do you truly think so? I would have thought a man as shrewd as you would jump at the chance.”

“I have always respected the royal family as truly as any loyal citizen of the empire. I have no intention of usurping them. Why must I hear this nonsense from my wife’s lips?”

"If that is truly your wish, I will say no more. Yet it seems to me that the empire's days are numbered, and if we do not act, we will be ruined alongside it. But silly me—I am sure you must have already thought of a solution."

Beto stood up, almost as if fleeing Selvia's grasp. He moved to the window and gazed outside. "I have thought of several. For now, however, we must watch and wait. We still do not know where the Vanir Triumvirate means to march after they pass through Draal."

"Either they mean to join the Free Folk in their offensive against Steissen and then strike up from the south," Selvia mused, "or they will move from Draal to the western territories and make straight for the capital."

"Agreed. There are only two roads an invader might take to the central territories. That said, I cannot imagine they will take the western route. The southern territories are still strong. They would disregard us at their peril."

The chancellor was making her way south with the First Legion at this very moment. If the Vanir Triumvirate moved in from the west, it would be a simple matter for Beto to move his forces north and trap the Vanir troops in a vise. No, the álfar were too cunning to make such an elementary mistake. They were surely plotting something else.

"If they ignore us and sweep in from the west, they will leave their backs wide open. Lady Celia Estrella will fall upon them when she returns from Six Kingdoms, while we and the chancellor will strike them from two sides."

The Vanir Triumvirate would be surrounded. Defeat would be certain.

"No," Beto continued, "it only makes sense that they will come from the south. And even if some misfortune befalls them on the road or they fall back before reaching the central territories, the empire will not hold if they manage to secure Sunspear."

The imperial leadership—that was to say, Liz and Rosa—were betting that victories over Six Kingdoms and the Vanir Triumvirate would bring stability to the empire. Once the immediate fighting ended, they would switch their focus from military conquest to

domestic policy. However, that could only happen if the empire's territories remained whole.

"And even if we do succeed in beating back the Triumvirate, the north remains a powder keg."

Word that House Brommel was gathering its forces against House Scharm had reached even this far south. No doubt they were hoping to take advantage of the present turmoil to expand their territories. The head of House Brommel had always struck Beto as unremarkable, but it seemed he possessed a measure of ambition.

"Clearly, I misjudged the man," Beto muttered.

"Oh?" Selvia sounded almost goading. "Would you look down on him for doing what you could not?"

Beto frowned at her. "No," he said, his voice level, "He has risen in my estimation. Consider Friedhof. Any citizen of the north should be aware of its importance, and yet he has embarked upon this foolish endeavor."

Beto also knew of the crisis at the Spirit Wall. When House Brommel had turned on House Scharm, it had done so knowing malign forces were stirring in the Sanctuarium. If Friedhof fell, a tide of monsters would sweep every last human from the north.

"He stands to bring ruin not only to his own territories, but the entire empire. Whatever paltry strength House Brommel won with this rebellion would not spare them from what followed."

"All that makes it sound like he has fallen in your estimation. Is this sarcasm, dear? From you?"

"Not at all. When I first heard of House Brommel's plans, it sent a shiver down my spine." Beto returned to his desk, gathered up his pawns, and dumped them haphazardly on a map of the central territories. "The empire will spend the coming weeks locked in battle with the Vanir Triumvirate and the Free Folk. Win or lose, they will be bloodied by the fight, and what soldiers remain will be too exhausted to go back to war. The same will be true of Lady Celia Estrella's forces."

If House Scharm fell to House Brommel, the royal family would be forced to purge the north in order to preserve their dignity—but only if Second Prince Selene was harmed. If House Brommel took

him captive and let him remain alive under their influence, they might just escape without consequence.

"The imperial leadership is weary of war. So long as the second prince lives, they will have no choice but to overlook House Brommel's treachery. The threat beyond Friedhof will ensure that. There is no other way left to restore order." Beto stroked his chin, eyes sparkling with amusement. A new opponent had emerged from a most unexpected place. "Although I must say, I would rather see them purge the north, as unlikely as that would be."

"Why do you say that?" Selvia asked. "Did you not just say their troops would be exhausted?"

"That is precisely why. Once the Vanir Triumvirate and the Free Folk are driven back, nothing will remain to threaten the south. As soon as Lady Celia Estrella turns her eyes northward, I will be able to snatch the western, eastern, and southern territories."

From there, he only stood to gain. If all went well, Rosa would be unseated, the sixth princess would lose her political backing, and he would rule the empire from the shadows.

"So if anything untoward were to happen to the second prince, it would only work to my advantage. It would signal the dawn of the age of House Muzuk."

Beto chuckled, a grin spreading across his face, but Selvia only frowned as she stared at the map. It was unclear what she was thinking. Still, Beto did not seem to mind. He laid a hand on her shoulder and smiled.

"At last, I will make my late father proud," he said.

"Indeed," she replied. "Surely even he would acknowledge you now."

"I must speak with the commander of the eastern noble forces. I do not wish my chambers touched. Ensure they are not cleaned."

"Of course. Take care."

Once Beto was gone, Selvia turned to the portrait that presided over the room. It depicted the former head of House Muzuk, the man who had raised it from a minor noble family to one of the five great houses. Although he had sadly passed away from illness, his son Beto promised to bring even greater prosperity to his household

and was revered like a god among the people of the south. Yet that gilded history concealed an ugly truth.

"The house of Grantz may be rotten," she murmured, "but House Muzuk is no less so."

Hatred festered in her eyes as she glared at the portrait, far too fierce to be directed at a father by marriage. Her mouth twisted into a sneer and her voice grew low, as if she were uttering a curse.

"Because of you, I lost something irreplaceable."

She picked up an empty wine bottle and hurled it, but it did not hit its mark, instead striking the wall barely to the side of the painting, where it shattered.

"So let it all burn. Every last cinder."

She kicked Beto's desk. The mound of scrolls toppled to the floor with a crash.

* * * * *

If asked to name the greatest nation in Soleil, anybody would cite the Grantzian Empire. If asked to name the second, however, answers would be more varied. Some would cite Faerzen, the now-ruined champion of the west. Others would reply with the relatively young Grand Duchy of Draal. The álfar-ruled Vanir Triumvirate with its illustrious history. The Republic of Steissen and its technological prowess. Or, last but not least, Six Kingdoms, a nation born from a maelstrom of strife.

Six Kingdoms was, as its name implied, made up of six smaller nations that differed vastly in culture, values, and schools of thought. Some were diligent, like the álfar. Some were carefree, like the beastfolk. Some, like humans, coveted honor and glory. These differences had often led to squabbles. Whenever strife broke out, however, the High King of Greif had always been there to intercede and salve the belligerents' outrage.

The High King's words carried weight for good reason. Greif was the first and oldest of the kingdoms. Yet those words concealed a long and complex history. Six Kingdoms had emerged from the third emperor's racial purges when his brother had fled west after a failed

rebellion. In time, that brother had founded Greif and granted the descendants of the Black Hand kingdoms of their own, rewarding their loyalty for accompanying him in exile and ensuring their legacy would be preserved. That was the root of the High King's authority and the reason the people of the other nations obeyed his will.

The capital of Greif was Fierte. With a wide ocean to the west, the port city had grown rich on maritime industry and trade. It had historically made a point of welcoming other cultures and other peoples, creating a citizenry that was free and open-minded, even if some accused them of lacking individuality.

Atop a hill a short distance from the city proper stood the High King's palace. A sturdy wall stood at the foot of the hill to repel would-be invaders, garrisoned by troops from all six kingdoms. Farther up the road was a second wall, the last bastion of defense before the palace itself. This was manned exclusively by soldiers of Greif, and to become a member of this "palace guard" was one of the highest honors members of its military could hold. Every new recruit dreamed of one day standing atop that hill.

Now, however, that last bastion was wreathed in flame. Black smoke rose skyward, causing uproar among the troops watching from below.

Two people faced one another in the courtyard. A black-haired boy with golden eyes stood with a sword in each hand. His stance was relaxed, but his presence alone, while somehow faint, left no doubt as to the threat he posed. His name was Hiro Oguro. A thousand years ago, he had challenged the world at the first emperor's side, winning himself the name of Mars in the process. Now, he was the second king of the nation of Baum, said to be small in breadth but large in stature, and he called himself Surtr.

"Tell me, Liz," he said, "do you think this world has a god?"

Opposite him stood a crimson-haired woman of striking beauty. She was the sixth princess of the empire and the wielder of the Spiritblade Lævateinn, and the people whispered that she was the first emperor reborn. For a long time, it had been unthinkable that she might ever take the throne, but now she was first in the line of succession and a political player that none could ignore. With the

beauty she had inherited from her mother, she had received a mountain of proposals, and the rumors of that beauty had spread like wildfire until all of Soleil knew her name.

"When the Five Lords of Heaven exist, it's hard to say there isn't." She arched an eyebrow, raising her Spiritblade guardedly.

As Hiro shrugged helplessly, raised voices reached his ears. A host of soldiers had poured through the gate, and a stir was now spreading through them as they caught sight of Liz.

He turned to glare at them. "Silence."

Some immediately shut their mouths. The rest looked around quizzically, sensing that something had happened but not entirely sure what.

"Return to your posts," Hiro told them. "Allow none to pass."

Although he was not the king they served, none questioned his authority. They abandoned their advance and began to filter back to their positions.

Liz watched in astonishment. "What did you do to them?"

"I gave them an order, that's all. But now no one will interrupt us." He looked up at the sky and exhaled, long and deep. "There is no god in the heavens, Liz. The Five Lords of Heaven may be as powerful as gods, but they aren't divine. Not really. They're copies, and defective ones at that." He looked back down at her again. "The closest anyone ever came to becoming a true god wasn't any of the Lords. It was a human. A man named Artheus."

"The first emperor?"

"He was an anomaly from the day he was born. Even the Lords never foresaw the coming of someone so impossibly powerful. He was like the original creator reborn."

Spirits existed outside the reach of human perception, and yet Artheus had been able to converse with them since before he could walk. As he grew older, he had enlisted the help of the archpriestess to forge the Spiritblade Sovereigns, achieved an unprecedented victory over the zlosta, and founded an empire that had lasted for a thousand years.

"Think about everything he achieved. Were those not feats worthy of a god?"

“He didn’t do it alone,” Liz countered. “He had the Spirit King’s help and capable comrades by his side. You should know that better than anyone.”

Hiro smiled sadly. “If only that were true.” He bit his lip. For a moment, he looked on the verge of tears, like a child with no home to go back to. “But I was only ever a burden to him.”

Liz narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

She knew how much Artheus had doted on Hiro. Lævateinn had told her as much. Every vision of the past she had seen in her dreams had shown them laughing and joking like the best of friends. Never once had she sensed that Artheus thought of him as a burden.

“He cared for you, always. I’d stake my life on it. Lævateinn wouldn’t lie.”

Her words did nothing to ease his despondency. The shadow of guilt lay heavy on his brow.

“I told you once that emperors can’t afford weakness. That they have to stand alone.” His eyes bored into her. “He never should have cared for me. But I won’t repeat his mistakes. Give me Lævateinn, Liz. Then all this can finally be over. No one else will have to suffer.”

“I told you, I can’t do that.”

“I don’t see why not. Give me Lævateinn and you will be empress. The empire will escape its fate. All will be as I will it. I could give you the world you desire.” Hiro sounded like he was trying to persuade her of something he was not certain of himself.

Silence fell between them. At last, the strength left Liz’s shoulders and her gaze fell to the ground.

“All right,” she said. “I think I understand.”

Hiro regarded her searchingly. “Then you’ll do it?”

“Never.” The rejection in those syllables was piercing and absolute. She raised her head, revealing eyes burning with an iron will.

Hiro smiled. He did not look disappointed. If anything, he seemed pleased. “Why?”

“Why would I want something I didn’t earn? Whether the empire survives or falls isn’t for you to decide. I’d sooner die than live at

someone else's pleasure."

"Even if that comes at the cost of countless people's happiness?"

"We're all fighting for happiness, every day of our lives. All this preaching about gods and eternal peace... You just want to impose your will on the rest of us. It's an insult to our efforts."

Hiro chuckled. "I should have known you'd say that. Let me put it this way, then." He held out a hand. "Will you join me?"

Liz cast a single disdainful glance at his hand and snorted. "Let me say it plainly for you," she said, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear as she fixed him with a piercing gaze. "The empire will not fall. I will lead it to victory myself."

"Right to the end, you'd rather solve everything on your own." Hiro raised both hands in mock surrender. "No chance of reaching an understanding, then."

Liz's stare only grew more forceful. "Did you ever think there was?"

"No, you're right. I suppose I didn't." Smiling softly, he drew Excalibur and Dáinsleif from the ground. "Would you believe me if I said I don't want to fight you?"

"I don't want to fight you either. But I've clearly kept you on too long a leash."

Hiro cocked his head. "What do you mean by that?"

Liz planted a hand on her hip and sighed. "Come back to us, Hiro."

"After all this?" He smiled despite himself. The suggestion seemed preposterous.

She nodded without a hint of amusement. "After all this. Put down your sword and let me take charge."

"You know I can't do that. Like it or not, the gears are turning. Even I can't stop them now."

"I don't doubt it."

Hiro frowned, perplexed that she would agree so readily. "Then why are you here?"

"As I said, you're coming back to us. And if you won't come quietly, I'll drag you back by your ear."

"You can try." Hiro angled his body sideways and sank into a

crouch, assuming a battle stance with Dáinsleif high and Excalibur low. He regarded Liz with a cool gaze. The stance was no affectation. It fit him more comfortably than he had ever looked with a single blade, as well it should—it was the very first form he had learned from Artheus a thousand years ago, beyond the mists of time. This was Hiro in his old glory.

"I mean to." Liz grinned. "You're coming with me if I have to break every bone in your body. If you're planning on being a god, I'm sure you can take it."

Azure flame coiled around her fist. Crimson fire raged behind her, giving voice to her fury. The inferno scorched the sky.

The air seared Hiro's lungs as he drew a breath. "What a thing to say." He chuckled, but his smile did not reach his eyes. He could sense the strength of her resolve.

Liz narrowed her eyes, underscoring the point. "You've steeled yourself, I see. Good. Well, then, do try not to die." She leaped high, carving a perfect arc toward her foe.

"By the looks of it," Hiro murmured, "that might be a tall order."

He slipped out of the way with the barest of motions, but the earth cratered behind him as Liz crashed down. A cloud of dust blasted outward. Pillars of flame erupted from the ground. He grimaced as the heat scorched his skin, shielding himself from the flame with his mantle as he leaped away.

"An ordinary man would be quaking in his boots right now, but a seasoned warrior knows the widest swings are the easiest to dodge. Still, a good opening play." His eyes narrowed fondly as he watched the fires rise high. "And one of Artheus's favorites. It takes the user a while to recover, but the flames guard them from enemy approach. If I put a foot wrong, I'd be burned to a crisp. Lævateinn is unique even among the Spiritblades, you see. Still, its guard is far from impenetrable...like so."

He raised an arm. Wind swirled around his hand to gather in his palm. The gale drew the flames in, sapping the pillars of their strength, before launching skyward in one last burst of dust.

"Wind can fan a fire, or it can smother it," he murmured as he watched the fiery orb vanish into the blue. "It's all in the hand that

guides.”

Liz seized on his moment of distraction, closing in on him in a flash. “And where do you think you’re looking?!”

She brought Lævateinn up in a rising slash. The blade bore down on Hiro’s left arm, but he leaped back out of its way in a blur of speed.

“Burn your fullest, Lævateinn.”

All of a sudden, Hiro’s arm was wreathed in flame. At once, he cut it off at the shoulder. Blood sprayed high. The severed limb struck the ground with a dull thump. Liz’s eyes widened. He had done it seemingly without pause.

“Lævateinn’s flames can’t be quenched,” he explained as he watched his own arm burn. “There was no other way. Besides, a lost limb or two means nothing to me now.”

He sounded as detached as ever, even as his face grew pale. Sure enough, blood vessels sprouted from his shoulder, bones regrew, and skin sheathed the newly regenerated tissue. Within seconds, his arm was restored. He flexed his fingers to reassure himself that it functioned, then retrieved Excalibur from the ground and regarded Liz once more.

“Or was that only meant to scare me? You can will the flames away, I suppose. But I assure you, you don’t need to go so easy on me.”

She had struck a telling blow. He had been comfortable in his prediction that she would attack from an unexpected angle, but when push came to shove, she had outfoxed him. It was clear she had grown. Still, it would take much more than that to hurt him, let alone incapacitate him. It had been her best chance to win this battle, but she had let it slip away.

“If you aren’t prepared to kill me, Liz, you might as well hand me Lævateinn right now. You’ll need a stronger will than that in the battles ahead.”

“Enough! I won’t hear that from someone who won’t even fight me!” She raised Lævateinn and charged again. The blade surged forward—faster this time, sharper, more forceful. “And if you won’t fight, you might as well lie down and give up!”

Hiro deflected the first strike, parried the second, dodged the third, but the dancing blade only grew in speed. A dizzying array of slashes took aim at his eye, his cheek, his forehead, his arm, his hand. He sensed Liz aiming for his leg and wrenched his blade around in a hasty parry. Lævateinn's point sank into the earth. Yet the assault was not over; Liz followed up instantly, conjuring a plume of flame. Hiro smothered it with his mantle, spun back around to face her, and collected himself, but from beginning to end, he had been on the back foot.

"I'll admit it, Liz. You've gotten strong."

And so she had. E'er did flowing water cleave hard stone. Her unpredictable barrage overwhelmed her enemies with primal force. She fought with the same philosophy as Hiro, although where she had learned it, he could only guess. Even he had not devised it alone. A thousand years ago, two instructors had instilled it in him: Artheus for battle and Rey for self-defense.

Both Artheus and Rey had been strong and valiant. He had always walked in their shadows, but he had dreamed of one day fighting at their side, even if he knew that was beyond his abilities. They stood upon a summit he could not reach, a peak too tall for an ordinary human to climb. Fly too close to the sun and he would burn to ashes.

They possessed a strength I could never have.

And here, now, was everything he had ever hoped to be.

Here was everything he had ever loved.

Here was everything he could not save.

In his mind's eye, Rey became Liz and Liz became Rey.

This time, I'll save you. I swear it.

Wild passions rose in his breast, and it took all his strength to hold them in. This was Liz, not Rey. To conflate them would be foolish and childish. Yet both were dear to him even so.

When was it again? That I first saw his strength in you, and her radiance?

Shortly after their meeting in the Forest of Anfang, perhaps, after regaining his memories in Frieden—that was when he had first seen the spark in her. It had been a feeble flame at first, on the verge of

guttering out, but it had grown in brilliance day by day as she had overcome trial after trial. Nonetheless, his doubts had persisted. It was only when he first saw her fully grown that he had known for certain. And now, as she stood before him, her soul burned with the brightest flame, beautiful and indomitable, yet gentle still, like a priceless jewel.

"Did you know the first emperor had an elder sister, Liz?"

Her face filled with confusion.

"Well, a half sister. They were born from different mothers. She was the child of a human and an álf." Hiro ducked a swing and leaped back out of range. "Celia Rey Sinmara von Grantz. The emperor's sister, the first archpriestess, and the leader of the First Ones."

"What does that have to do with what's happening now?"

"You should know that better than anyone." Dáinsleif clashed with Lævateinn as the pair sprang together. "Half-bloods were despised back then. As soon as she was born, she was given to a people who had been oppressed since time immemorial—to the First Ones and the settlement of Baum, a sanctuary for the persecuted."

The half-blooded people of Baum had had no place among any of the races of Soleil, and the times had not been conducive to compassion. In the end, it had been the Spirit King who had taken pity on their plight. Under the deity's protection, their settlement had been shielded from brigands and people-traffickers. And so Baum had cut ties with the outside world until the twelve primozlosta raised the banner of zlosta supremacy and a human king named Artheus had come to them for aid.

At first, the people of Baum had refused the young king's call. Only after Rey, the first archpriestess and Artheus's sister, impressed upon them the scale of the zlosta threat had they finally relented. Their wary hearts had softened, and the two factions had joined hands as allies. Through their cooperation, the Spiritblade Sovereigns had been forged to lead the human resistance.

"You probably know what happened next. A young boy was summoned from another world, and the battle with the zlosta began in earnest."

So had begun an age of bloodshed. Pent-up resentment had burst free and swept the continent, sowing widespread carnage. Countless blameless souls had lost their families, their friends, their lovers to the cause before finally succumbing to the fires of war themselves. Hiro and his comrades had looked back to find a trail of corpses in their wake. There was no stopping what they had begun. Yet before their work was done, Hiro had returned to his own world, and Artheus had passed away without ever realizing his dream.

"And what happened to the first archpriestess?" Liz asked. "To Rey?"

"That's not for me to say. But I'm sure you'll learn soon enough." Hiro turned Liz's strike aside and leaped back, resting Excalibur on his shoulder. "All I can tell you is that the half-blood alliance became inconvenient for the empire. It put the lie to the idea that the zlosta defeat was a human effort, you see. So the third emperor did all he could to wash history clean of her ties to Artheus."

"Why? Why would he hide the truth?"

"He was afraid, I suppose. Afraid of something more powerful than himself. And that dread turned into persecution of the other races. But Baum survived. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say it was spared thanks to the Spirit King's protection."

They stared at each other across the distance. Liz seemed more guarded now. She did not approach as she had before. It was not hard to understand why: Not once had Hiro swung his sword offensively.

"The third emperor was powerful enough to rule all of Soleil," Hiro continued, "but a single tiny nation still found a way to defy him."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Don't you want that power, Liz? Power so absolute, it could defy the greatest empire Soleil has ever known? Give Lævateinn to me and it can be yours."

"I told you, I don't want anything you're offering." Liz scowled. How many times did he mean to offer her this ridiculous proposition?

Hiro narrowed his eyes, scrutinizing her reaction. "Then you'll have to kill me. Or I'll take control of the empire myself."

"Say you really did become a god. Would you just...rule from the

shadows? Is that really what you want?”

Hiro nodded. “The empire is my friends’ legacy. I don’t want to watch it burn.”

“Then we both want the same thing.”

“In the long term, yes.”

“Then why do you refuse to come back to us?!” In a fit of anger, Liz thrust Lævateinn into the earth. A haze of dust flew up around her.

Hiro stood unmoving, staring evenly at where she had been. “We might be heading for the same destination, but our paths will never cross.”

One had chosen idealism, while the other had chosen pragmatism. Their paths had diverged, never to meet again. Any alliance they could strike would inevitably come undone.

“You’ll break every bone in my body? Is that all, Liz? Don’t be so naive.”

Idealism and reality. Both paths called for resolve—the resolve to cut down anyone who stood in their way, be that a parent, a child, or a sibling. That was how human beings matured. That was the burden of the mighty, and if Liz could not bear it, she would do better to shut herself away and never take up a cause at all. There were many paths she might take, but only one led to heaven.

“Time to prove your mettle, Liz. You can’t afford to be naive if you want to make your ideals a reality.”

Hiro slashed the dust away and surged forward. As Liz’s eyes widened in surprise, he brought Dáinsleif down without hesitation. Yet an instant before it made contact, the blade skittered away and a punch caught him squarely in the cheek. He kept his balance, however, pushing her hand aside and meeting her gaze again.

“I will never stop, Liz. Not as there’s breath in my body.”

“No doubt. But I will never yield.”

Her eyes burned with a fierce will. Flame raged in their crimson depths. She was strong enough now, in both body and heart. But something was still lacking. She did not yet have the resolve to claim the heavens.

“If you’re going to be empress,” he said, “you’ll have to be

prepared to cut me down."

"Enough!"

Azure fire coiled around her, shaped by her fury into a serpent of flame. The sky trembled as the inferno bore down on Hiro. He crushed it effortlessly in his fist and lashed out with Excalibur, but Liz would not be bested. Lævateinn flashed, catching the blow. Sparks sprayed as their blades met. Then, there in the opening was Dáinsleif, seeking Liz's heart—and she caught it between two fingers. Hiro only had a moment to marvel at her exquisite technique before an impact blasted through his abdomen, launching him away.

He righted himself with a fist against the ground. A rent appeared behind him and a sword emerged, hilt first. He landed on that foothold, then launched himself like a bullet back at Liz. In a heartbeat, he had closed the distance, and the two were locked in combat once more.

Their Spiritblades clashed once, twice, five times, ten. The battle had long ceased to be a contest of swordplay. Now it was more like a brawl, ugly and brutal, each combatant striving to overpower the other with sheer strength. The earth shattered, the air split asunder, and the terrain around them transformed with each new strike. Their battle seemed fated to last forever...

And then, all too abruptly, it ended.

"Wha...?"

Liz stiffened, eyes wide, her breath catching in her throat. Opposite her, Hiro looked no less surprised. Lævateinn's crimson blade had skewered him through the chest.

"Why?" Liz breathed. "Did... Did you *let* me...?"

It was hard to fault her for her doubts. Hiro had visibly moved his blade aside to hand her the victory, stepping forward to throw himself on her sword. She stared at him with fury in her eyes. For him to take pity on her was the last thing she wanted.



Hiro shook his head. “I would never. Give me a little credit.” His brow furrowed as he grasped Lævateinn’s blade, but after a moment, understanding filled his eyes. “I see. You chose her.”

He dragged Lævateinn free and stepped away, pressing a hand to his wound with a reassuring smile.

“So that’s where your loyalties lie. Funny how things work out.”

His words were not for her. His eyes were trained above her head. She looked up to see a bow floating in midair. The weapon was shaped like a crescent moon, carved from plain wood without decoration or artifice, yet for those with eyes to see, its exceptional nature was plain. A vibrant breeze swirled about it, shimmering to suggest some vast hidden power. This was the true form of the Spiritblade Sovereign Gandiva.

The bow hovered playfully in the air for a while, but eventually, it transformed into a sword and fell to Liz’s feet.

“Why?” she repeated.

“Take it,” Hiro said, one hand still pressed to the hole in his chest. “It’s chosen you.”

She regarded the Gale Sovereign in confusion. “I don’t understand. You had a contract.”

“Spirits are impulsive creatures. Some, like Lævateinn, are loyal, but it’s not unknown for others to betray their masters.”

It was Gandiva who had contrived Liz’s triumph, sending Hiro’s foot sliding forward to create an opening she could exploit. Its treachery had taken even him by surprise. By the time he had realized what was happening, Lævateinn had run him through.

“Don’t blame it,” Hiro continued. “I should have known better.”

“That’s not the point!” Liz’s eyes were filled with hesitation. She had been prepared for a battle to the death, only to have that snatched away by Gandiva’s intervention. How could she accept its loyalty now?

Hiro sighed. “You won’t be able to chase it away. Refuse it all you like, but it will stay with you. You might as well reach for it when you need it.”

As Gandiva vanished from Liz’s feet, Hiro turned his back on her and began to walk away.

"Where are you going?" she demanded. "This isn't over."

"I don't fight just for the sake of it. I'm not that bloodthirsty. Besides, I think we might have gotten a little carried away."

He spread his arms wide. Dáinsleif and Excalibur were gone from his hands. Liz realized for the first time that Greif troops now surrounded them. She glanced around with a threatening gaze as she began to understand the situation they were in.

"You can't expect my eyes to keep their hold after all that. Not that they would have worked on that many people for long anyway."

The two of them were in Six Kingdoms' back garden. Every exit was blocked. Hiro was here at Lucia's invitation, so he was unlikely to be taken prisoner, but Liz was the commander of the invading imperial army. He set a hand to his chin, trying to think of a way out.

At that moment, a woman emerged from the palace, and his mind ground to a halt. It was Lucia. She looked unusually pale. As best he could tell, she wasn't wounded, but something was clearly wrong. As he hesitated over whether to say something, a man broke off from the surrounding troops and ran to her side. It was her aide, Seleucus.

"Is something the matter, Your Majesty?" he asked.

"'Tis the High King." She spoke with downcast eyes and trembling shoulders. "I fear he has passed."

Her voice was almost a sob. Silence fell over the courtyard. The soldiers looked at one another in stunned confusion. Liz stared at Lucia, frowning. Hiro, too, narrowed his eyes. Eventually, some of the garrison recovered themselves enough to run to Lucia's side. That broke the spell over the rest, and the courtyard descended into uproar once more.

As dismay spread through the crowd, Lucia fell to her knees. "'Twas Nameless!" she cried, striking the ground with her fist. "'Twas all the work of that treacherous álf! General Ramses sought to pursue, but alas, he was struck down!"

From the details she omitted, Hiro could guess what had occurred. No doubt her downturned face hid a wide grin. All was going as she had planned.

Liz frowned too. Her eyes must have discerned something of

Lucia's deception.

"Why are you standing around like fools?!" Lucia cried. "Nameless cannot have gotten far! We must search the area!"

The Greif troops sprang to action. They scattered in all directions with anger in their eyes, now entirely blind to Hiro and Liz. Lucia smiled in satisfaction as she watched. Her solemnity of a few moments prior was now entirely gone. She flicked open her fan and wafted herself gently as she cast a sidelong glance at Seleucus.

"Gather the ministers of Greif, if you would. 'Twould seem they are in need of new leadership, and on such short notice too. I shall assume command as an interim measure."

"And if they disagree?"

"Inform them that the High King entrusted me with Six Kingdoms on his deathbed."

"Of course, Your Highness. I will consider any who defy you to be traitors and deal with them appropriately."

"Splendid. It is imperative we seize Greif before any can question my legitimacy."

As Seleucus departed, Lucia turned to Hiro and Liz, their battle now suspended.

"Do forgive my interruption. I would be all too happy to allow you to resume...did the sixth princess's presence here not represent such a coup." She leveled her fan at Liz. "A truce, little princess. Betwixt your nation and mine."

"I can't—"

"Can you afford to refuse?" Lucia hardly allowed Liz to get a word in edgewise. "The Vanir Triumvirate and the Free Folk are marching to war."

Liz's eyes widened. "What?"

"This is hardly the time for meaningless squabbles, don't you think?"

Hiro stepped between them. "How do you know about that?"

"Did I not promise you an interesting tidbit in return for your assistance?"

Hiro smiled despite himself. He should have known she would try to put one over on him. "I didn't expect to receive it so soon."

“When better to share intelligence than the precise moment it is most useful? Wait too long and it shall become worthless. At least this way you might make something of it.” With a laugh, Lucia turned back to Liz. “Now, I ask you, Lady Celia Estrella, do you accept my truce?”

She licked her lips, her serpentine eyes narrowing.

Chapter 2: Dreamtide Shore

Linkus, in the Gurinda Mark

Not so long ago, Berg Fortress had served as the sixth princess's base of operations. She had arrived at the fort in the shadow of an unprovoked invasion from Lichtein, which she and her forces had driven off in gallant style. Many had died on that day on both sides, although no trace of the battle now remained.

Yet despite its illustrious history, Berg Fortress now stood empty. Its facilities were old and required rebuilding. Moreover, the late Fourth Prince Hiro's victory over Lichtein had expanded the empire's territories a fair distance south. The fortress had fallen into disuse as other emplacements grew up along the new border. For a time it had even been slated for demolition, but protests by the people of Linkus had allowed it to remain, newly fortified but otherwise left alone.

The townsfolk had objected for several reasons. First, they could not stand to see a place so strongly associated with the sixth princess—now the heir apparent to the throne—treated so callously. Secondly, it had been at Berg Fortress that Hiro, then Mars's only living heir, had first revealed himself. And last but not least, the people of Linkus had lived all their lives under the auspices of House Gurinda. Many had known the sixth princess's mother, Lady Primavera, and afforded her household—Liz included—uncommon admiration and respect. A plan was in progress to turn Berg Fortress into a tourist destination. Already, travelers were flocking from all over Soleil to see where the sixth princess's rise had begun.

Near the fortress sprawled a sea of tents. Their banners showed the imperial lion and the livery of House Kelheit. In the center was a tent larger than the rest, belonging to the commander of the Fifth Legion.

"I wondered where you had gone," said General Robert von Grax, "but you show yourself at last. No doubt Chancellor Rosa will be

relieved.”

Von Grax inclined his head to a woman lounging on a nearby couch. A swarthy man with a chiseled jaw, he had once held the seat of high general until his defeat before the emperor by the very woman now in front of him. He had lost his post as a consequence and been demoted to her second-in-command.

The woman showed no sign that she had heard him. He knelt down and sat cross-legged on the floor.

“Forgive me, High General,” he said, crossing his arms in mock disapproval. “I see sleep still weighs heavily on you.”

She was beautiful by any measure. Her skin was smooth as glass and dazzlingly pale, so much so that it was hard to believe she was a soldier by trade. Her striking golden eyes, somber yet sublime, only shone brighter for its pallid glow. A curtain of white hair veiled her left eye, but a raised fringe bared her right to the world, revealing eyelashes as sharp as blades. Nonetheless, a general lethargy blunted her edge, and the white-furred ears atop her head looked as endearing as they did predatory.

Her straight nose and fine features gave her the beauty of a work of art more than a human being. In that sense, she was similar to the sixth princess. Some whispered it was an artifact of her rumored imperial blood.

There was one curious point about her: She wore an old-fashioned uniform. It was identical to those used a thousand years ago. No garb from those times had survived to the present day, but she had sought out a dwarven artisan to craft it for her specially. Von Grax had no idea why she was so attached to that particular design, but the question seemed unimportant to him, so he had never asked.

“I am not sleepy, thank you. I have naturally tired eyes, that’s all. My mind is quite clear. I assure you it was hard at work.”

She rubbed her eyes with the back of a hand and stifled a yawn. Her movements were subtly animalistic. She was a half-blood, born between the beastfolk and the álfar. Her porcelain beauty came from her álfen heritage, but her beastfolk blood ran deeper when it came to her personality and mannerisms.

Von Grax snorted. “You, thinking? And I suppose the sun will rise at dusk tomorrow and set at dawn.”

“For all I know, it might.” High General Vias took the jab in stride with a wicked grin. “I’m no astronomer. Are you?”

Von Grax snorted despite himself but quickly reasserted a sober expression. “Suppose our reinforcements make it in time,” he said, his voice gravelly. “Do you believe we will be able to hold the Triumvirate off?”

“Hard to say. At least until we know their numbers.” High General Vias looked up at the ceiling and yawned, then looked back at von Grax, scratching her neck. “Has Lady Celia Estrella’s uncle joined us yet?”

“Not long since. I’ll admit I haven’t met Margrave von Gurinda before, but the man seemed capable.”

“He is,” she replied sleepily as she rolled over. “If he inherited the mark today, he wouldn’t be content to stay a margrave. He would be proving his worth in the central territories.”

Something caught her attention and she sat bolt upright, ears quivering. Her gaze snapped to the entrance of the tent. Raised voices were faintly audible outside.

Von Grax picked up his sword. “What is happening?” he cried, his voice an air-shaking bellow drawn up from the pit of his stomach.

A soldier pushed through the tent flap and sank to one knee. “Enemy spies, sir! Discovered in our ranks!”

Von Grax’s face turned red with anger. “Spies?! What are our sentries playing at?! We may be on home turf, but that is no excuse —”

He cut himself off as High General Vias laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Enough. You’re making my ears ring. This man isn’t at fault. Take a moment to calm yourself.”

She strode past him and exited the tent. Von Grax scrambled after her, but he stopped and stared as he saw what was happening outside. The camp was in uproar, far more so than would have been expected from the discovery of a few spies.

“The soldiers are anxious,” Vias said. “Something’s got them

worked up. False reports of an enemy attack, perhaps?"

"A shameful showing," von Grax said bitterly. "Forgive me. Soldiers of the empire should not be so easily deceived."

"I see why those spies ran for their lives. We can't leave the troops like this. They're a danger to themselves and others. Get them back in line."

"As you command. What will you do?"

"Catch those spies." Vias closed her eyes and spread her arms wide. "Two...no, three."

"Hm?" Von Grax cocked his head.

"I have them. There, there, and...there." She gestured in several directions before turning to von Grax reproachfully. "Well? Hurry up and send some men. I took off their legs, so you'd better be quick or they'll bleed out before we can question them. And don't forget to calm the rest of the soldiers either."

With that, she turned around and returned to the tent.

"Where are you going?" von Grax called after her.

She glanced back. "To sleep. Wake me up at dinnertime."

With a final wave, she disappeared into the tent, curled up on the sofa, and shut her eyes. From the distance came the sound of von Grax barking orders.

"This body feels more familiar now," she murmured. "Not long now. Not long at all. I will not fail again. I will keep my oath."

Her voice faded to nothing as she set sail once more for the land of dreams.

* * * * *

Esel was known as the gateway to Six Kingdoms. Located on the border with Faerzen—now annexed by the empire—it had flourished during the era of overland trade, but strengthening sea routes had left it behind. Now, its population was in decline, and the imperial invasion had forced a mass exodus that had left more than a few settlements abandoned.

Licht, the capital city, was under heavy assault from the main body of the imperial forces. Black smoke poured from the walls. Yet

the imperial army had in turn come under attack from the rear by Vulpes, Scorpius, and Tigris. A vanguard of soldiers from Steissen was holding off the Six Kingdoms troops under the command of the high consul, Skadi.

The beastfolk troops had initially been pushed back, but an imperial ambush—led by the elite cavalry of the Knights of the Golden Lion, the Knights of the Royal Black, and the Knights of the Rose—had successfully turned the tide. Still, the Six Kingdoms soldiers were not easily dissuaded. They had identified the Steissen forces as the weak point in the circle and commenced a focused push to break free. The beastfolk, themselves a keystone of the imperial rearguard, were trying to hold their own, but the numbers were against them.

"We're losing ground, chief!" one of Skadi's aides shouted. "We can't hold much longer!"

The beastfolk chieftain barely registered his voice. Even if she could have afforded distractions, she was fully focused on the hunt.

"Hah!" she cried. "Is that all?!"

She swung with wild abandon, carving through nearby álfar as she pursued her prey. With the blood of her enemies soaking her from head to toe, she looked like a demon stalking the battlefield.

Standing against her was Maram Inar, the álfen wielder of the Dharmic Blade Brionac. He wove between her strikes with dexterous skill, but even he could not evade them all; blood sprayed from countless cuts across his body, large and small. His face was drawn, his steps were unsteady, and it was all he could do to fend off her assault. Skadi was by far the more grievously wounded of the two, but she only laughed as she laid into him, reveling in the pain.

"Mongrel!" Maram spat. Against any other foe, the contest would have fallen to him long ago, but he had underestimated the beastwoman's force of will and strength of arm. Blood wept from a gouge in Skadi's thigh and her left arm hung limp and lifeless, but still she kept coming, grinning all the while.

"Aye, and proud of it! Now, let's make this a battle to remember!"

Her right-hand claws sank vainly into the ground, but she used their momentum to whip her left arm into a horizontal swipe. Maram

avoided death by a hair's breadth, escaping with only a slash across the cheek, but Skadi's relentless pursuit forced him to leap back.

"Maram!" bellowed an álf in high-ranking officer's attire. "What are you playing at?! They have us surrounded! You must carve us a path!"

"I know!" Maram snapped back. "I am doing all I can!"

"You would address your commander in such a—"

"Enough out of you, pup," Skadi growled. "You're spoiling my fun."

She pounced on the commander, expelling a drunken sigh as she drove Tyrfing's claws into his face. Maram backed away. He had seen enough to feel fear, and as he watched her bathe in her enemy's blood, he realized he was looking at a madwoman.

"Have you lost your mind?! He is dead, you fool!"

"Aye, and what of it?" Licking her lips, she drove her blades down over and over again until the álf's face was nothing but pulp. "You'll go the same way soon, and what a joy that'll be!"

She tossed the body to Maram's feet and approached him, humming cheerfully.

Maram inched backward, gritting his teeth. "You're insane," he growled, more to distract from his fear than anything else. If he so much as glanced behind him, she would pounce. The only way out was through; the only escape was to cut her down. Yet his arms refused to move. He bit his lip and let out a wordless howl, forcing them to obey his will.

Brionac spun through the air toward Skadi. It refracted in midair, splitting into multiple blades that converged on the beastwoman from all angles. There was no escape, yet she plunged fearlessly into the steel whirlwind.

"Good, good! I knew you had more in you!"

She knocked the blades aside with Tyrfing, crushed them between her teeth, kicked them to the ground, and leaped high to avoid their grasp. She could not dodge them all, but she evaded lethal injury. Her spatial awareness was extraordinary. She responded to incoming attacks with the barest motions, minimal but terrifyingly quick. As the blades rained down, she ceased using her

claws to shield herself, avoiding the onslaught with increasing ease as if to prove she had grasped its flow.

Maram watched, aghast. “Impossible...”

“It’s all about matching your opponent’s speed,” she purred. “And you’re so predictable I could yawn.”

With a dismissive snort, she pounced at Maram. Her arc was wide and high, easy to dodge if the álf so chose. He slipped to the side, caught Brionac as it returned to his hand, and flung the chakram out once more. Then he turned about and leaped onto a riderless horse as it cantered past.

“Pathetic,” Skadi growled. “Die a coward, then!”

She bounded after him, but fatigue chose that moment to crash over her, stopping her from catching him. Even if not for her exhaustion, her wounds would have slowed her down.

“Blast it! Somebody stop him!”

The surrounding beastfolk moved faithfully to intercept, but they all fell short. Skadi mounted her steed and made to pursue. At that moment, Maram flew back into view, launched by something unseen. She turned in stunned surprise toward the direction he had come from. There stood a one-armed woman with a face like stagnant water. She chanted a single word over and over like the foulest curse:

“Vulpes. Vulpes. Vulpes.”

It soon became clear that Skadi was not the only one taken aback by her arrival. Maram was just as shocked.

“You live?” the álf cried, trembling. “But how?”

Luka looked clear through him, indifferent to his terror. “And who, pray tell, are you?”

“Wha—”

With a thunderous crack like the air exploding, Maram’s head left his shoulders. Brain matter splattered across the ground. His decapitated body slumped to the earth, blood spraying from its neck, before Luka swung her hammer down again and smashed it to pulp. Wails arose from the Steissen troops at the ghastly spectacle. Yet Luka only stared into space, even as the uproar spread and blood and viscera rained down upon her.

“All who side with Vulpes will meet death.” A ghoulish smile spread across her face. At last, she seemed to notice Skadi. “What? No word of thanks?”

“You think I owe you one?”

Sparks crackled between the pair as they glared at one another.

“All that matters is that the issue is settled, is it not?” said a voice. Before them, a cloaked figure appeared out of thin air. “But forgive me. I am Khimaira of Orcus and of the twelve primozlosta.”

The newcomer approached the puddle of gore that had once been Maram Inar, cloaked head swaying from side to side as if searching for something.

“And what are you up to, eh?” Skadi regarded the figure warily.

The primozlosta leaned over with his back to her, seemingly unconcerned by her hostility, and began to rifle through Maram’s remains.

“I asked you a question!”

Skadi leaped at him, but he moved out of the way in the nick of time. She scowled and prepared to pounce again, but he hopped back out of attack range.

“This will make a fine lure,” he murmured cryptically. In his hand was a dharmastone.

“Put that down.”

Luka sprang at Khimaira from behind, but the primozlosta ducked aside, putting yet more distance between himself and the two women. He stowed the dharmastone away and pulled his hood down low.

“I would advise a little more caution,” he said. “That which you spare no second thought may be of the highest importance to us...and so too is the reverse true.”

With that, he vanished once more, leaving Skadi and Luka to stare helplessly at the space where he had stood.

“Are you hurt, Miss Luka?!” a voice cried. Huginn, the acting commander of the Crow Legion, came running toward them.

Khimaira’s parting words nagged at Skadi’s mind, but more pressing was the question of why Huginn and Luka were there at all. She looked around.

“Blasted álfar really beat us back...”

She hadn’t noticed in the thick of the fighting, but the Steissen forces had been pushed back as far as the Crow Legion encampment. She looked away from Luka and Huginn sulkily, peeved that she had ended up requiring assistance and reluctant to offer thanks.

Muninn approached from across the battlefield. “Hey, Huginn!” he called. “Letter from the boss!”

“From Garda?”

“Aye, that’s the one. I had the reply ready to go, so I sent it off, but I figure I’d better get this to the chief anyhow.”

“His Lordship’s away in Greif,” Huginn replied. “And only the gods know what road he took.”

“That’s why I want you to take it. He’s bound to send a messenger sooner or later. You can hand it over then.”

If push came to shove, the letter could be delivered through the imperial spy network, but it would be easier to sit and wait for Hiro to make contact. Huginn took the letter without complaint and stowed it carefully away in her pocket.

At that moment, a great roar went up from behind them. They turned as one. Most likely, the imperial forces had broken through the gate of Licht. But Skadi frowned. Something did not seem quite right.

“Odd...” she murmured.

Luka shifted. “What is?”

It was unusual enough for Luka to acknowledge someone else at all, but while her face was as unreadable as ever, her eyes were bright and sober. She appeared to sense something as well.

“I dunno. Nothing, maybe. Just...not the reaction I’d expect from breaking the gate, is all.” Skadi scowled. Whatever was wrong, it was something she found hard to articulate.

Luka, too, gazed wordlessly at the imperial lines, her silence ominously suggestive of agreement.

* * * * *

A horse-drawn carriage rattled along the roads of Greif. Inside were King Surtr of Baum and Queen Lucia of Anguis.

"Are you sure you shouldn't be overseeing things yourself?" Hiro asked.

They had gone to speak with Greif's highest officials, only to find they had been slain by Orcus, leaving the kingdom's administration in chaos. Lucia, however, hadn't seemed to mind a bit. Upon consolidating her ceasefire with Liz, she had gathered Greif's chief generals and imperiously instructed them to follow her. Their train was making for Licht with all haste, racing to put an end to the fighting between Six Kingdoms and the empire.

"Worry not. Seleucus shall attend to it."

Her confidence told Hiro all he needed to know. "You were ready, I see."

She had been planning this ever since he had arrived in Six Kingdoms—perhaps even since the empire first crossed the border into Faerzen. Grief's commanders had already been bought and paid for, and if she had the loyalty of the leaders of the military, the soldiers beneath them would follow without any need for her direct intervention. At most, she would need a representative, and she had that in Seleucus.

"I suppose that makes sense," Hiro continued, "but what I don't understand is why you wanted a ceasefire with Liz. This would have been the perfect chance to deal the empire a mortal wound."

Lucia chuckled. "Your princess would get the better of me, I fear. Even my Graal could not foil the Blade of the End."

"You could have killed her if you wanted. It would just have cost you."

"And make an enemy of you? I think not. The gods only know what you are planning, but I am not in the habit of starting battles I know I cannot win." She began to fan herself. "And besides, even if by some miracle I cut you down atop the mountain of corpses it would no doubt entail, I would be faced with a vengeful empire and Baum. Six Kingdoms would be finished. No, there was no future along that path. She would have made a delectable morsel, but if I could not slay her or capture her, what else could I do but let her

go?”

Hiro was beginning to sense something of her intentions. Brokering her own ceasefire with the empire, leading Greif’s troops down to Licht... Most likely, her targets were the leaders of Vulpes, Tigris, and Scorpius. They had joined the fray on the orders of the Vanir Triumvirate. By declaring them traitors and dispatching them, she could seize control of virtually all of Six Kingdoms.

In short, Lucia had used the empire to make her political opponents bleed, then dangled Hiro in front of Liz to lure her out, yet called a truce in time to save his life. He had been nothing more than a pawn in her quest to reunite Six Kingdoms. No doubt her agents were at work in Vulpes, Tigris, and Scorpius at this very moment, inciting rebellions against their governments. Meanwhile, the empire had been left to contend with the Vanir Triumvirate, the unrest in the north, and the turmoil in the south. If it destabilized, she would sweep in with all her remaining forces, seizing back Faerzen and probably carving out a chunk of the western territories for good measure. She truly was formidable. Her wits were a force to be reckoned with...just as Hiro had hoped.

Everything’s going according to plan.

Scheming against her from the start would only have made her suspicious. Far better to predict what she intended and build his plans around it. People fueled by honor or compassion could be impulsive and hard to read, but Lucia was eminently predictable. Outwardly, he let himself appear chagrined, but inside, he was smiling.

“So what are you going to do next?” he asked.

She could not know. If she realized her mind was an open book to him, all would be lost. He would leave room for doubt and ambiguity, allow her to lower her defenses, and ensure she continued to act in his interests.

“First, I shall strengthen Six Kingdoms’ foundations. After that...well, ’twill depend on the empire, I suppose.”

“I see. I’m sure you’ll want to—”

A glacial blue spear suddenly appeared in the air between them. Lucia regarded it with surprise. For his part, Hiro peered at Gáe Bolg

with suspicion. It was extremely unusual for a Spiritblade to manifest of its own volition. He heaved an exhausted sigh. This had been a day of troubles, and it seemed they weren't going away anytime soon.

Gáe Bolg's thoughts flowed into his mind. He pinched his eyebrows, wincing at the pain. After some time, he nodded in comprehension and raised a hand.

"Enough. I understand."

Gáe Bolg vanished again.

Lucia leaned forward in her seat. "'Twould seem it wanted something."

"It appears we have a problem. Would you mind asking the driver to go a little faster?"

"What's the hurry?"

"Your plans might have hit a snag."

Lucia's eyes filled with understanding. She smiled wickedly. "I see. Well, that certainly will not do." She rapped on the window and instructed the driver to put the whip to the horses, then returned her attention to Hiro. "I assume this concerns a different matter than the last message you sent Lady Celia Estrella? Ought you not send another messenger?"

"It does, but don't worry. I don't think we need to tell her."

Liz had the Far Sight. If anything, she probably had a clearer picture of the situation than they did.

"How mercenary of you." Lucia remarked. "I must say, though, one is reminded anew of the uniqueness of the Spiritblades. None of the other Noble Blades would appear unbidden before their masters, nor vanish just as callously."

"They were made that way. Their creators reasoned that living weapons should have their own wills so they could never be controlled."

That was the source of the Spiritblades' formidable power. It had also proven their fatal flaw. The Spiritblade Sovereigns were five yet one, but each of those five acted of its own accord and could reject a wielder if it so wished. They could still bestow great power if forced to obey, but that would incur a terrible curse—a penalty no

one would choose. Such weapons could not kill a god. Their free will had prevented even Artheus from uniting them to one purpose.

"Then Gandiva abandoning you was...what, precisely? A passing whim? How could anyone ever wield such a willful weapon?"

"That was something of a special case. A conflict of loyalties, you might say. Although, more to the point, it spent so long in Greiheit's possession, it's grown to reflect him in a lot of ways."

"To reflect Greiheit, you say..." Lucia's eyes narrowed.

"The Spiritblades all differ in many ways, but that's one thing they share." Hiro sat back in his chair with a rueful smile, his eyes far away.

* * * * *

Not long had passed since the battle was joined, and yet Licht was already in a sorry state. Anyone could see why: Esel's forces had been depleted by the fighting in Faerzen, and with the change in trade routes making it a far less desirable conquest to outside powers, its military was used to fighting bandits at best. Repairs and renovations to the city walls had long been put off, and now that idleness had come home to roost. Years of neglect had made its ramparts frail.

Nonetheless, in spite of all good sense, the battle raged on. Esel's rulers might have had their backs to the walls, but they refused to surrender. Forced to fight on in the face of certain defeat, the garrison's spirits were broken. Their faces were masks of despair. Only the fear of death kept them going. This was no longer a war, but a one-sided massacre. Even the imperial troops took no pleasure in the slaughter, as their faces made plain. Yet showing mercy to the enemy would risk not only their friends' lives, but their own, so they could do nothing but fight to the best of their ability, praying the defenders would see reason and give in.

Aura looked on from atop a nearby hill, surveying the storm of fury and anguish that raged over the city.

"Command the first cohort to advance. The second cohort will cover them."

She dispensed orders calmly and rationally, but she could tell the battle was decided. It was a mystery that Esel had not surrendered already. Continuing to hold out only ensured grievous casualties on both sides. She did not want to send more soldiers to their graves, but until the enemy laid down their arms, the bloodshed would continue—and it was fast beginning to seem like the empire's only choices were to fall back or to exterminate the city's defenders to the last man.

All at once, Aura sensed a change in the air. She looked toward the city gate, where a strange hole had formed in the imperial lines.

"What is that?" The words rose unbidden from her throat.

She squinted, but looking more closely only brought a different kind of disbelief. A lone figure was tearing indiscriminately through the fray. It lashed out at whoever was closest, be they soldiers of Esel or the empire.

As she watched, the monstrosity tore through the battlefront and fell upon the imperial troops mustering before the burned-out city gate. The first cohort had been preparing to plunge into the enemy lines, but the new arrival broke their advance. Esel troops fell victim to it too as they tried to flee back into the city. Enemies and allies dissolved into a churning mass as confusion and alarm spread across the battlefront.

"Send word to the rear," Aura commanded, her eyes not wavering from the monstrosity for a second. "Create an opening for the Vulpes, Scorpius, and Tigris troops. Let them flee."

Her aide turned to her, incredulous. "Are you certain, my lady? They are on the brink of defeat."

"I'm sure. I don't like this one bit. Send word to High Consul Skadi and the commander of the Crow Legion. We might need them."

She had seen a similar sight before, four years ago, on the day she'd met Hiro. A creature much like this had appeared in the midst of the battle with the invading Duchy of Lichtein. The only difference was that this one wasn't quite so monstrous in appearance, although it was no less sinister to look at. While certainly not human, it was at least recognizable as being cut from the same cloth.

“Recall the best troops to the core. If that thing breaks through, we’ll— Oh no.”

Aura’s fears came to pass before the words even left her mouth. The monstrosity lumbered into a sprint, scattering bodies left and right as it made a beeline for the imperial core. Almost too fast to follow with the naked eye, it plowed cleanly into the first cohort with the momentum of a score of warhorses, massacring anything in its way as it thundered across the ground.

“What in the hells...?”

Aura’s aides blanched as they registered the monster’s approach. Even as they stared in silence, dumbfounded by the sight of imperial troops being tossed about like rag dolls, it broke through to the second cohort. At last, Aura saw it clearly. It had a woman’s form, although there was no telling if gender even had any meaning to such a creature. No ordinary woman could send three burly soldiers flying with a swing of her arm.

“We must retreat to the back lines, my lady. The beast is almost upon us.”

“Too late.”

As the words left Aura’s lips, a mighty detonation shook the air before her. Dust and dirt rained down from above. The corpses of the soldiers guarding the core sailed toward her position, launched through the air like arrows from some gruesome bow. Hundreds of warriors and thousands of arrows had not been enough to stop the creature. As it broke through to the core, it spread its arms wide and roared to the heavens as though proclaiming its supremacy.

“It’s hideous...” one of Aura’s aides whispered.

It was indeed unpleasant to look at. Half of its face was swollen and inflamed, and putrid flesh dripped from its abdomen as if rotting away, yet its few remaining humanoid features suggested it had indeed once been female. Aura wrinkled her nose as a horrid stench drifted from it on the wind.

“Lord...Hy...dra...?” The beast cast its eyes about as if looking for something. It followed some invisible summons on unsteady legs, ignoring Aura and her retinue entirely.

“My lady! You must flee!”

As Aura's subordinates tried to usher her out of danger, she realized where the monster was heading.

"No..." she whispered, blanching. "You can't!"

She leaped toward the beast, drawing her spirit weapon from its sheath and driving it into the creature's back. It halted in its tracks, but the wound was not mortal. Still, a spirit weapon was no ordinary blade, and its bite clearly caused the creature pain. It gave a horrendous roar and thrashed about like a bucking horse. Its convulsions sent Aura and her weapon flying. She bounced across the ground before crashing into a tent and finally coming to rest.

She grasped a nearby bed and hauled herself to her feet, grimacing in pain. Only then did she realize where she was. She spun to face the bed.

"Scáthach..."

There lay Scáthach, her breathing soft but undisturbed. The bed had been knocked askew when Aura crashed into it, but fortunately, she didn't seem to have been hurt. Aura sighed in relief. At that moment, she sensed something approaching from behind her.

"AaaAAAaaa..."

The beast's voice was so tortured that Aura could not even tell whether it was roaring or wailing. It advanced on her with drool spilling from its gaping maw. Suddenly, its right arm blurred into motion, whistling through the air. She brought her spirit weapon up in a frontal guard. By some miracle, her blade stopped the claw, but the force still launched her through the air. She sailed over Scáthach's bed and collided with the tent wall. The canvas softened the initial impact but smacked her down hard against the earth.

"Ngh..."

She pushed herself to her feet. Her nose was bleeding from her impact with the ground, and she watched through tears as crimson droplets splattered on the dirt. She looked up to see the beast lurching to and fro, resuming its search for something unseen. There was no telling what it was looking for, but she had to lure it away from the tent.

She gripped her weapon tightly and leveled it at the monster, trying to ward it away. The creature didn't even recognize the threat.

It simply peered down at her with mild interest, brought its face up to hers, and gave an earsplitting roar. Aura clapped her hands to her ears. As she staggered, it swung its right fist with lethal force. She sensed death coming and shut her eyes.

"Ngh!"

She felt gravity ripped away. A moment later, a massive jolt shook her body. Strangely, there was no pain. Perhaps this was what death was, she thought. Yet as the seconds dragged on, her awareness began to return, and she realized she could still move. Her brow furrowed in confusion.

"So much for my recovery," a voice said. "I swear, who fights by an injured woman's bedside?"

The voice was one Aura knew. One she had endlessly wished to hear again. Perhaps this was a dream, or a mirage, or perhaps she really was dead. Whatever the truth, she opened her eyes to see...

"Scáthach?"

"The very same. Forgive me, Lady Aura." Scáthach smiled. She looked different now—because her hair was shorter, perhaps—but she was real, her voice gentle, her nod firm and reassuring. "Anyone would think you had seen a ghost. Or do I perhaps have something on my face?"

Aura shook her head. "No."

"Good. But we may speak later." With another smile, Scáthach lowered Aura to the ground. The reassuring firmness of gravel crunched beneath her boots.

Aura looked around, realizing for the first time that they had moved outside the tent. Soldiers and aides stood slack-jawed around them.

"First, we must do something about that creature." Scáthach turned to a nearby soldier. "You there, sir. Would you lend me your spear?"

The man held out his weapon without hesitation. Scáthach took it and swung it once, twice, thrice, testing its heft. Satisfied, she took up a battle stance, sliding her right leg forward and lowering her spearpoint to the ground.

Aura found herself reaching out to hold her back, to stop her

plunging into yet another unwinnable battle. Scáthach no longer had a Spiritblade's blessing to protect her. How could she hope to prevail?

"Stay behind me, Lady Aura. No harm will come to you, I swear it." She radiated conviction. There was no rational reason to believe her words, and yet somehow, Aura could not doubt them.

"I have lost my homeland. I have lost my family. I thought I had nothing left. No reason to live." Scáthach's eyes took on a distant look as she stared the beast down. Her hands tightened on her spear. "But I was wrong. I awoke to see Lady Aura before me. Though I knew not what peril had befallen her, my first thought was for her well-being. And I realized I still had something left to lose."

She drew a deep breath, let it out, then bent at the waist, bowing her head low. The monster watched her carefully. Perhaps it was simply wary, or perhaps it could sense that she was no ordinary foe.

"I have my comrades. Those who need me still."

Shallow breaths, in and out. Her focus narrowed to a sharp point.

"And I have those I must defend. If I turned my back on them now, my family would not welcome me in the next world."

Face low. Eyes on the enemy. Her irises burned with fierce animosity. The beast stepped back, suddenly on guard.

"Come, monster."

Her foot tensed against the earth, and all at once she was a bullet, streaking through the air too fast for Aura to follow. She closed the distance to her foe in a flash, faster than it could react.

"And I will show you the price of harming those I hold dear."

A heartbeat before making contact, she jerked upward, leaping high above the creature's head.

* * * * *

To the west of the empire lay the Grand Duchy of Draal. Its history was unusual as nations went. It had once been part of Faerzen before winning its independence with the aid of the Republic of Steissen. Yet it had soon soured on Steissen's interventions and sought help from the Vanir Triumvirate, all the while offering tributes

to the empire. In short, it relied on a careful diplomatic dance to secure its continued existence. However, maintaining so many links to so many nations had made its culture confused, on top of sparking regional strife. The most severe of these conflicts was religious; the north of the Grand Duchy followed the empire in worshipping the Spirit King, while the south, like the Vanir Triumvirate, followed the Faerie King. The nobles were as divided as the commonfolk, and the resulting feuds had plagued the reigns of many grand dukes.

It would be fair to say, however, that the current grand duke was suffering worst of all. The Vanir Triumvirate was using his land as nothing more than a bridge to the empire. Turning them down would risk an uprising from the faerie worshippers of the south, while letting them through would outrage the spirit worshippers of the north. Caught in the horns of this dilemma, he had yet to come to a decision. Meanwhile, the Vanir Triumvirate cared nothing for his troubles; they marched through his duchy with smiles on their faces, daring him to object.

Among the Vanir armies rumbled an ornately decorated carriage. Practically a mobile residence, it was just as luxurious inside as out. It was occupied by the Holy Emperor, the de facto leader of the Triumvirate and beloved icon of its people.

"So, Scáthach has awakened at last."

Behind the curtains was the hooded figure of Nameless. Despite the spacious carriage interior, she had taken up a position in one corner, where she sat hugging her knees.

"Hydra left a fine parting gift. It will have bought more than enough time. I need only make use of it."

The curtains blocked out the light, leaving her rocking from side to side in darkness.

"The Demiurgos stirs in the north. There is disorder aplenty in the south. The empire is vulnerable on all sides." Her monologue continued for her ears alone. "Now to see what will become of you, my pawn. Rail and writhe in what time is left to you. Let your instincts guide you, ignorant of the true reason for your birth."

Her puppet had long left her hands. Now it was far afield, acting

as it pleased. Her lips curled in joy as she sensed its distant presence.

A knock on the window broke through the gloom. "Your Holiness, our officers have requested that you hold a strategy meeting."

"And why is that?"

"It appears they are not content with our current plans. They have called for immediate revisions."

"Tell them I require some time to prepare myself. And remind them that revelations from the Faerie King cannot be disregarded."

"As you wish, Your Holiness." The soldier withdrew from the window.

Nameless scowled. "'Holy war' is nothing but a pretty name for ugly vengeance, no matter how glorious it sounds in the history books. It seems they have forgotten that."

That was a truth a certain man had impressed fiercely upon her. Only by earning his trust had she assumed her position so completely. Without his aid, she could not have become the person she was.

"If only you had ignored your suspicions, you might still be alive."

Her words were addressed to the chair opposite her, upon which sat the severed head of Cardinal Snorri. Once the right arm of the Holy Emperor, he had been slain by Nameless after discovering that she had taken his liege's place.

"But your ambitions did not die with you. Watch as I realize your grand dream. The álfar shall reign supreme over Soleil for one final, glorious moment."

And the world would be one—as it met its end.

"Are you watching with those eyes of yours, Lady Celia Estrella?" Nameless brought her hands to her cheeks, her voice thick with ecstasy. "Do you see how the fall of the empire is upon us?"

* * * * *

"Raaagh!"

With a savage cry, a great blow shattered the earth. The accompanying squall washed over Scáthach a split second later,

concealing another swing from the colossal fist. She slid one foot back and angled her body sideways to let the blow pass. Her hair fluttered as she launched an attack of her own. The scene might have been plucked straight from a storybook; in the amber glow of the western sunset, beauty dueled with the beast.

The assault on Licht had ground to a standstill. The first and second cohorts had retreated to their original positions. To the rear, the forces of Vulpes, Scorpius, and Tigris had taken advantage of the chaos to make their escape. Now, they were watching the battlefield from afar. Aura's nose wrinkled in annoyance, but they were hardly her priority. The monster in the imperial camp was a far more pressing concern. She had directed her finest troops to encircle it and Scáthach, but they had been unable to get any closer than that; the ongoing battle was not one for mortals to interfere in. Accordingly, she had sent to the rear for Luka and Skadi. There was no telling if the pair would arrive in time, but if they did, they and Scáthach would surely make short work of the beast.

"Incredible..." she breathed.

Scáthach's spearwork was magnificent to behold. Even without a Spiritblade's blessing, her strength exceeded what an ordinary human could dream of. Yet she was struggling to finish her foe. She had dealt the creature multiple wounds, but none of them were fatal. Moreover, as Aura had feared, the beast possessed the same regenerative capabilities that the prince of Lichtein had had four years prior. It was hard to see how Scáthach could prevail when its wounds closed in an instant. Aura would have jumped into the fray herself if she could have, but that might only have proven a burden. As it was, all she and her soldiers could do was watch.

"How odd," Scáthach murmured. "I feel light as a feather..."

She threw aside her broken spear and cast her eyes about for a new weapon, ducking between the monster's blows. Just then, a barrage of spears rained down from above. The monster halted to fend off the assault. Scáthach looked around in surprise. At last, her eyes found the soldiers who had hurled the projectiles on Aura's orders.

"My thanks, Lady Aura. You chose your moment well."

She pulled a spear from the earth and flung it at the beast. As it reeled back, she grasped two more and charged in. Her nimble movements left her foe at her mercy. Even as her weapons shattered in her hand, she only redoubled her assault. Yet she lacked the strength to finish the fight. Her blows were neither as weighty nor as sharp as they had been in her prime.

"But I chose this. I sought this. Who would I be if I did not accept it?"

Ever since the moment she had awoken, she had sensed something missing inside her. A friend and ever-present ally she had neglected in her pursuit of vengeance and ultimately cast aside.

"I will find you, wherever you are. I owe you an apology."

So she could not fall here. Not before she had reunited with her absent comrade.

"I am Culann Scáthach du Faerzen! The woman who will strike you down!"

She surged forward once more. A dozen throws, a hundred thrusts, a thousand slashes—she transcended her limits and still did not stop. For those who needed her, for those she held dear, she had sworn to fight on.

"And I will not fall before I see Gáe Bolg again. Least of all to you!"

One last mortal blow would settle this. Scáthach poured all of her strength into one final strike. The monster swung its fist as if to meet her measure. The two crossed, and a gust of wind blasted outward, carrying with it a cloud of dust. The onlookers watched with bated breath, straining to see who had prevailed.

When the dust settled, Scáthach had failed. Nonetheless, she remained upright and unbroken. She stared dumbly ahead with her shattered weapon in her hands. The last of the dust blew away to reveal a spear hovering before her, shining with a brilliant light. The fist that ought to have taken her life ground vainly against its haft.

The corners of Scáthach's eyes crinkled. Biting her lip, she stretched out a hand...and the world turned as white as winter. Ice spread out across the earth. A biting chill rolled out across the ground, leaving wisps of pale mist billowing in its wake.

"Come, Gáe Bolg! Protect what you hold dear!"

With her spear in her hand, she sped across the ground like a bird soaring through the heavens. Gone now was the fatigue of her battle. Her steps were light and joyful as she surged ahead to vanquish her foe. From mundane to monstrous, and from monstrous to heroic—with every passing second, she regained more of her rightful self, growing into power worthy of the divine. The beast she fought could only watch as the ice of the Boreal Sovereign crept across its body. Its screaming and thrashing was a child's tantrum in the face of the inevitable. All too soon, it had frozen solid, and then it moved no more.

"This is the end," Scáthach said, drawing back her spear to deal the final blow.

"Not yet, I think," a voice drawled. "She has not yet played her part."

Out from the shadow of the frozen beast stepped Khimaira of the primozlosta. He drove a hand deep into the ice, implanting something deep inside the creature's body. It happened so fast that even Scáthach could not react. She leaped back, eyeing the newcomer warily.

"A dharmastone cannot contain a curse of such potency," the primozlosta said. "Instead, the two will vie for supremacy."

"What have you done?!"

Scáthach bore down on Khimaira, but he produced two daggers and caught her spear. Both of the blades shattered at the hilt, but he survived with merely frosted sleeves. He kicked Gáe Bolg away and leaped back. A disconcerting smile spread across his face.

"Do enjoy this diversion...but my comrades and I have prior engagements."

He melted back into the shadows, leaving only a tinkle of unnerving laughter. Scáthach made to pursue, but the monster jerked into motion once more. With a mighty bellow, it clasped its hands, raised them, and swung them down at her head. She dove sideways. A mighty impact struck the ground where she had been standing, filling the air with dust. She leaped back to where she could see more clearly, but an enormous fist followed her, punching

through the haze to bear down on her.

"Let me go!" she cried as it seized her by the chest, but at that moment...

"This one's mine!"

No sooner had the woman's voice rung out from above than a devastating kick sent the monster flying. A horned beastwoman somersaulted through the air and alighted neatly on the ground, only to immediately take off after her quarry.

"Hah! Now *you're* prey worth hunting!"

Released from the beast's grasp, Scáthach could only stand and stare. The beastwoman was bleeding all over, but she didn't even seem to notice as she dove at her foe with savage glee.

"A beast like any other," muttered a gloomy voice beside Scáthach. "No talent but brute violence."

She turned to see a woman with a dreary face and lightless eyes. This time, she was less surprised. This, at least, was someone she knew.

"Is she a friend of yours, Lady Luka?"

"A feral creature by the name of Skadi. And to my shame, yes, we are somewhat acquainted."

"So that's Skadi of Steissen... She certainly lives up to the tales."

As they conversed, a bloodstained Skadi rolled to a stop at their feet.

"Bugger me. Tough one, this."

"All that bluster and this is what you have to show for it?" Luka sighed. "You never cease to mystify me."

Skadi pouted. "Aye, keep talking. That was just the warm-up. Now comes the good part."

That short exchange was all it took for Scáthach to understand that these two were going to be no help at all. Even as she fretted, Skadi was already preparing to plunge back into the fray.

Scáthach hurriedly called after her, "Hold a moment, Lady Skadi. Ought we not fight together?"

Whatever the hooded man had done, it had empowered the monster to shake free of Gáe Bolg's hold. It would be far too dangerous to attack blindly. It seemed clear that working in tandem

would yield better odds, yet Luka only scowled.

"Please. The very thought of working with that mongrel makes me sick. Still, I am glad to see you have awoken, at least. Huginn will be delighted."

"Thank you. Although I confess, I am still not certain what woke me."

"Indeed. In that case, perhaps we ought to work together. I cannot afford for you to slip back into unconsciousness. Imagine how distraught Huginn would be."

Scáthach could not quite follow Luka's logic, but at any rate, it seemed the woman was willing to help.

"Aye, fine." Skadi threw up her hands in surrender. "Seems I'm gonna have a tough time beating that thing alone. 'Sides, it's your prey. Wouldn't want to take it from you."

Scáthach set her mind to thinking of a plan, but she was interrupted by the monster charging toward them.

"Less thinking, more fighting," Skadi snarled. "Back me up, you two!"

The beastwoman plunged back into the fray before either of them could reply. Luka stepped forward too, readying Vajra—and froze in place.

"Jilbe?" she whispered.

Scáthach knew that name too. She narrowed her eyes at the monster. Now that she had something to tie it to, its appearance stirred something in the depths of her memory. It did indeed look almost like Jilbe. Scáthach had met the girl several times during her residence in Six Kingdoms, but the creature before her now was so twisted as to be almost unrecognizable.

"You believe that is Lady Jilbe?" she breathed. "But how?"

"She's Fallen," Luka said. "Whether by her own will or another's, I could not say, but there can be no doubt. The Steissen mongrel is too injured to fend off such a foe for long. We must finish this quickly."

"Is she truly beyond help?"

"She is." As usual, Luka's expression was unreadable, but there was no hiding the bitterness in her voice. "Do not let sentiment stay

your hand. A quick end will be a kindness."

Sensing the woman's regret, Skadi steeled herself. "So it will. Then I shall take her legs."

She slid one leg back, preparing to hurl her spear. From shoulder to elbow, from elbow to wrist, from wrist to fingertips, every nerve strained to the task.

And she unleashed Sainglend—Surestrike.

Hurled at full force, Gáe Bolg rocketed straight and true toward Jilbe. There was no plume of dust as it struck the ground at her feet. Instead, a bitter chill smothered the impact as ice rippled across the ground.

"Hah!" Skadi barked. "Not bad. Then I'll take her arms!"

As Jilbe ground to a halt, Skadi slipped inside her guard. She stretched her arms back as far as they would go, straining her joints to their limits, before letting all of the pent-up tension explode with a savage howl.

Blechen—Grinning Madness.

This was a technique that relished the rending of flesh. Skadi's muscles swelled and contracted in an instant, yielding incredible destructive force. Despite the monster's formidable powers of regeneration, its arms still flew free from its body, falling to earth as a rain of bloody ribbons.

"Enough, Jilbe. Enough."

Luka leaped high in the crimson deluge, greathammer in hand. She swung the colossal weapon down as if it were a toy. Wind whipped around its head as it struck Jilbe square in the face. With a gruesome crunch, the creature's head flew free from its neck.

Luka exhaled, watching brain matter spray across the field, then twisted in midair and swung Vajra down a second time. The hammer tore clean through the headless torso, splitting it in two before striking the ground with one final explosion that reduced the corpse to smithereens. A dharmastone rolled across the ground, coming to rest at her feet.

"And as for you..."

Luka brought Vajra down on the gem without a moment's hesitation, crushing it to powder. Its last remnants blew away on the

wind. She watched them disappear, her face as inscrutable as ever. At last, with one final sigh, she lowered her eyes again.

"I see the mongrel has passed out."

Skadi lay sprawled on the ground, unmoving. With a withering glance, Luka took hold of one of Skadi's horns and began to unceremoniously drag her away.



Scáthach chased after them, momentarily lost for words. “You mustn’t carry her like that,” she said finally. “You’ll worsen her wounds.”

“I hope I do.” Luka sniffed. “At least then she’ll be quiet for a while.”

Just then, Aura trotted up to them. “We need to hold a strategy meeting. I want you three...” She trailed off as she saw Skadi and shook her head. “I want you two to come.”

“I am only the vice-commander,” Luka said. “You ought to send for Huginn.”

“I did. She’s there already.”

“Then I cannot very well keep her waiting. You will have to find someone else to tend to this beast.”

Luka let Skadi drop and set off toward the command center. Scáthach watched her go, taken aback by her callousness, before stooping to gather Skadi in her arms.

“Lady Aura, she needs a physician. Lady Luka may not have thought much of her injuries, but she is badly hurt.”

“I know.” Aura nodded. “I’ll fetch one.” She ran a few steps, but then stopped and glanced back.

Scáthach smiled despite herself. “Worry not for me,” she said, loud enough for Aura to hear. “I won’t go anywhere. We will speak later.”

Reassured, Aura set off again. Once she was out of sight, Scáthach looked up at the sky.

“Do you truly aim to cast down the heavens?” A shadow fell across her brow as she looked down again. “Lord Hiro, just what is it you seek?”

Chapter 3: Footsteps of Destruction

The second day of the eleventh month of Imperial Year 1026

Stars glimmered in the velvet heavens as the night grew late. The howls of moon-roused beasts cut through the evening air, insects played their choruses, and the laughter of rustling leaves carried on the wind. In most ways, all was well. There was only one thing out of place: a gathering of bonfires and tents, humming with the activity of a harvest festival. Soldiers clad in heavy armor milled about as far as the eye could see. This was the imperial encampment on the outskirts of Licht.

The crimson-haired figure of Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz, heir apparent to the throne of the empire, came to a stop before a wall of soldiers. They stepped back to let her pass, falling aside like a receding tide. She strode unintimidated through their ranks. Beyond awaited her chief strategist, Aura.

"You've done well in my absence," she said. "I'm sorry I left you alone."

"That little stunt doubled my workload," Aura replied. "And I'm going to make sure you pick up the slack."

Liz gave a strained laugh. "You know, the ride back really took a lot out of me. I thought I might turn in early tonight."

She made to turn away, only to stop as she registered the woman at Aura's side. Scáthach bobbed her head, rubbing her neck sheepishly. She had been unconscious for Liz's departure, so while Liz had spent many hours at her bedside, it felt like a long time since they had last truly met.

Liz's chest flooded with fondness. It was only the eyes of the soldiers that stopped her from flinging her arms around her friend there and then. The siege of Licht had been bloody; many had died,

and many more were still recovering from their wounds. It would be insensitive to rejoice so openly in front of the survivors.

"I'm glad you're all right," she said finally. A small acknowledgment would do for now. They could celebrate properly later, once the onlookers were gone.

Scáthach smiled ruefully, seeming to read her mind. "Lady Aura has apprised me of everything I missed. I can only apologize—"

"Later. For now, I still have a lot of questions for you and Aura." Liz shot the latter a glance. "I think I've gathered more or less what happened here, but I'd still like to hear the full story."

"With pleasure," Aura said. "There are things I'd like to know too. Such as why Vulpes's, Scorpius's, and Tigris's camps are on fire."

She pointed east, where a false dawn burned. The flames were so fierce, one might have thought night had turned to day. Cries and wails drifted faintly on the breeze.

"I'll get to that, but first, could you send word to the officers that we're not in danger? I don't want to make the troops nervous."

"I already have. But I want the whole picture."

True to form, Aura seemed to already have surmised what the inferno signified. Nonetheless, she had strengthened the camp guard just in case—hence the wall of soldiers that had greeted Liz on her arrival.

"I'll get to that. We have a lot to talk about."

"It may have to wait. We were just about to start our strategy meeting."

Liz shook her head. "You can call it off. The war is over now, and we're short on time. We need to decide our next move."

She advanced toward the tent. Aura fell in meekly behind her. As they were about to enter, the inferno on the horizon erupted with even greater force. They turned to look as further screams echoed on the wind.

Liz's face was stony. "I've signed a truce with Six Kingdoms. The details can wait, but the long and short of it is, Lucia is their leader now. That's a token of good faith on her behalf."

Aura listened in silence. Judging by her expression, she more or less got the picture. No doubt her uncommon acumen had already

given her some idea of what Liz had done after flying off in pursuit of Hiro. Nonetheless, she knew better than to rush to conclusions. She would not truly trust her assumptions until Liz confirmed them.

Liz cut straight to the point. "The Vanir Triumvirate is on the march."

Aura's eyes wavered a little, but she gave a resolute nod. "Okay."

"Come on, Scáthach. You should hear this too."

"Of course. And I would be pleased if you could tell me what transpired with Lord Surtr."

Liz ushered the pair inside the tent.

* * * * *

The night was a bloodstained nightmare. Piles of bodies burned where they had fallen. Soldiers thrashed, writhed, shrieked in agony, rolled across the ground as endless arrows rained down. Yet even then, they were not allowed to die—at least, not until they had realized in dismay just who was cutting them down.

"These are men of Greif! Why—?"

An arrow caught the man between the eyes before he could finish. All around, other survivors were doused in oil and set alight. There was no word for it but "carnage." Blades fell equally mercilessly on those who threw down their arms and begged for mercy as those who resisted. Soldiers were leashed by the neck with ropes and dragged across the ground like rag dolls.

"Magnificent."

As Queen Lucia of Anguis watched the massacre unfold, unperturbed by the bloodshed, her soldiers brought two men before her. They had clearly not been treated kindly. Their faces were swollen, their clothes torn and bloodstained.

Lucia's lips curled in recognition. "The king of Scorpius and the chancellor of Tigris."

"What is the meaning of this?!" the king of Scorpius bellowed. "You would turn on— Agh!" He fell silent as one of Lucia's men kicked him in the face.

"The High King is dead," said Lucia.

The king's jaw hung open, the pain and shock of the blow already forgotten. "What? You lie!"

She fanned herself, smiling at his confusion, and leaned closer. "He was deceived and slain by the álfar."

"Preposterous. None will believe such obvious falsehoods!"

"You are merely treacherous rebels now. Rebels that Greif is justly purging."

"What nonsense is this?"

"Six Kingdoms has signed a truce with the empire, yet in your foolishness and bloodlust, you defied my orders to stand down." Lucia covered her eyes with a hand in theatrical lament. "Your wanton warmongering has damaged Six Kingdoms' reputation and standing with its ally—a crime for which you and your followers are now paying the price."

The king of Scorpius looked dumbfounded. "But we have received no such orders. Unless..."

"Dear me. Are all álfar so slow?"

"You snake! You will not get away with this!"

"Are you not puppets on the Vanir Triumvirate's strings? Is that not why you are here? Someone must ensure they pay for their audacity, don't you think?"

"You would make enemies of the álfar?!"

"We have long been enemies." Lucia struck the man across the face with her folded fan. "Or are you blind even to that?"

The chancellor of Tigris had held his tongue until then, but at that, he glared at her hatefully. "You will come to regret this. Soon the Triumvirate will lay waste to the empire, and without us to mediate, they will set their sights on you."

"Perhaps. But I can hardly allow Six Kingdoms to fall for fear of what might be." She planted a leg on the man's head and ground it into the dirt, reveling in his disgrace. "But I tire of this prattle. You shall be quieter dead."

"Witch! With my last breath, I curse you!"

"Curse all you please." Lucia turned to her soldiers. "Off with their heads!"

The men obeyed, holding down the struggling pair for

decapitation, but in a cruel twist of fate, their swords failed to cut clean. The pair writhed in agony as the blades fell on them over and over. At last, their heads came free and rolled across the ground. A spurt of blood caught Lucia across the cheek, and she scowled as she wiped it off.

"Seleucus!" she commanded. "How fares Licht?"

Her vice-commander stepped forward from the throng of soldiers. "The gates are broken, but it appears the imperial troops were repelled by some manner of monster before they could enter the walls. Nonetheless, the townsfolk are beginning to resort to looting. We must send men to restore order with all haste."

"Assemble the troops. Bring the city under our control. What of Esel's rulers?"

"Reports indicate a massacre in the palace, Your Majesty. None appear to have survived. Our scouts say it was as if a ravenous beast had rampaged through the halls. It may have been ransacked by rioting townsfolk, or perhaps there was some other culprit. It is too early to tell."

"And Jilbe is missing?"

"Indeed, Your Majesty. Would you have us look for her?"

Lucia waved a hand. "No. I shall assume control of the city for the present. We may return it to the house of Esel once the chaos has subsided."

Seleucus nodded. "I will find a suitably malleable candidate. You may expect my report in due time. Oh, and there was one more thing. Our agents report that the empire's position is growing increasingly precarious."

"Is it indeed? Perhaps I was hasty in offering a truce."

"Do you worry that you have chosen wrong?"

"Please. I would not walk this path of carnage if I had any intention of looking back." Tents burned in the madness of the battlefield, casting dark shadows across her face. "Now you shall see Six Kingdoms soar. Give me a year...no, a mere six months, and I shall win us new lands to call our own."

"How enticing, Your Majesty."

"Soon we shall be very busy, Seleucus. Time is our enemy now,

and it is not known for waiting.”

* * * * *

“All as planned, more or less,” Hiro murmured as he watched the encampment burn.

Huginn approached from behind him with her soldiers in tow. “It’s good to see you again, Your Lordship.”

“I’m glad to be back.” He tousled her hair. “Is everything ready?”

“We can leave on your say-so.”

His letters had made it, then. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Huginn held out an envelope. “Here. From Garda.”

“So he’s safe, is he? Good.”

Huginn cocked her head, but she bit back her questions and watched him read in silence.

“Excellent,” Hiro said once he was done. “It sounds like everything’s going smoothly.”

“I’m glad to hear it, Your Lordship.”

“Where are Muninn and Luka? I don’t see them.”

Huginn gestured behind her. “My brother’s running himself ragged about the camp, giving orders to the men. And Miss Luka... Well, she’s behind you.”

“She’s what?”

Hiro spun around to see a woman standing in the gloom, recognizable by her lightless eyes. She had gotten concerningly skilled at disguising her presence. If not for her greathammer, she would have made a fine assassin.

Luka peered at him accusingly, almost as if she knew he was thinking something insulting. “You certainly took your time. Dare I ask what you were playing at?”

“Things didn’t quite go as planned. I turned out to be less in control than I thought. Luckily, my interests coincided with those of the one who was pulling the strings.”

“How fortunate.” Luka gestured to the burning encampment. “So? Is this why you left us on duty instead of allowing us to return to camp? To show me this?”

"I thought you might enjoy seeing the end of Vulpes."

"Indeed I do. But make no mistake, I have no intention of reclaiming my throne."

"What happened here, Your Lordship?" Huginn asked.

"A night raid. The armies of Greif, led by Queen Lucia."

"Greif? Why? Aren't they allies?"

"Nameless murdered the High King, so Lucia has declared herself queen regent. She ordered them to stop fighting, but they ignored her, so she punished them appropriately."

"Seems a little excessive, Your Lordship." Huginn's eyes were wide.

Hiro shrugged. "The justification doesn't really matter. Once all dissent has been stamped out, there will be no one left to object."

"And now all of Six Kingdoms is under her control," Lucia said.

Hiro shook his head. "It's not that simple. What happened tonight will have repercussions. I'm sure you can imagine how Vulpes, Scorpius, and Tigris will take the news."

"Only if she has not prepared. And you can be certain that she has."

"Oh, probably. I wouldn't be surprised if factions with her backing were staging uprisings in all three kingdoms right now."

"Nor would I." Luka's eyes narrowed. "And do you plan to let her schemes unfold?"

"Of course not. She won't have the last word here. In fact, that's why I had the Crow Legion remain on standby. We march tonight."

"Tonight, Your Lordship?" Huginn asked.

Hiro nodded. "We're going to reconvene with Garda. Could you let Muninn know?"

"At once, Your Lordship!" The woman was gone in seconds.

Hiro turned back to Luka to find her gazing at the night sky. "Is something wrong?"

"Did you meet with her?"

"With Liz, you mean? I did. What about it?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking how little you have changed."

"Oh?"

"Never mind. More pressingly..." Luka turned to him. Her eyes

were no longer dull and brackish, but somehow clearer and more distant. “Do you truly mean to cast down the heavens?”

“Of course. I always did.”

That intention had guided his every step. A thousand years had passed in Soleil, this land once ruled by the gods, and yet nothing had changed.

“I have a promise to keep.”

It was he who had put the gears of the world out of joint. He had a responsibility to set them right.

“I will become a god and create the world my comrades hoped to build.”

The stars shone down as they always did. Yet, one by one, they were changing—a transformation not visible from the earth but clear to see from the heavens.

How many times his arm had fallen short. How many times his goal had escaped his grasp.

“I hope you’re looking down on me. Witness the birth of a glorious new world.”

Once, they had dreamed of a paradise, and the day was fast approaching when it would become reality.

* * * * *

Sunspear, in the southern territories

Approximately sixty thousand soldiers were stationed in and around the city. The force hailed from all across the empire and bore the flags of many different territories, but easily half of the banners belonged to eastern noble houses. Their masters were presently hosted inside the golden walls of Glitnir. The palace’s guard had been increased to account for the presence of so many dignitaries, and enough soldiers patrolled the halls that not even a mouse could squeak by unnoticed. Behind a closed door, the commanders of the army had gathered to hold council.

“How can you not know the Triumvirate’s numbers?” asked former high general Robert von Grax with no small amount of annoyance. His hawkish gaze was trained on Beto von Muzuk.

“They have divided their forces into smaller units that are presently advancing through Draal in multiple directions. Our scouts are struggling to ascertain the total count.”

“But if you were to venture a guess?”

“More than a hundred thousand, that much is certain. And thirty thousand more Free Folk, who are presently pushing into Steissen.”

“Bah. Let the Republic deal with the Free Folk. As the history books tell it, it’s their fault those glorified bandits exist at all.”

“I would caution against underestimating the Free Folk, General. The Triumvirate has equipped them with the finest arms and armor. They are no mere bandits, especially not when they come in these numbers.” Beto paused. “More to the point, Steissen still bears the scars of civil war and the high consul is away in the west. As likely as not, they will retreat behind their walls and let the Free Folk pass through.”

“Then we will meet them at Sunspear. Is that not why we are here?”

“I fear it may not be that simple.”

“What do you mean?”

“Judging by their troop movements, the Triumvirate may not be so obliging.”

Margrave von Gurinda nodded. “They may intend to ride straight for the central territories.”

Beto turned to the margrave in surprise. “Well, well. I had heard the sixth princess’s uncle was an astute man. It seems I was told no lies.” With an impressed clap, he set about laying pawns on the map. “But yes, quite so. Most likely, they have divided their forces in a bid to obfuscate their intentions. They hope to leave us anticipating an attack from the south while they sack the capital.”

“Then we’ll send word to Chancellor Rosa,” von Grax declared. “We’ll be the hammer and she’ll be the anvil. The Triumvirate may have the numbers, but they won’t be half as strong surrounded. With a bit of luck, some might even surrender without a fight.”

Beto gave a chuckle that seemed purposely designed to rub von Grax the wrong way. “That, I fear, is where this conversation comes full circle.”

"The Free Folk..." High General Vias murmured. It was the first time she had spoken.

Beto seemed a little taken aback by her interruption, but he quickly took it in stride. "Precisely. If they were to flank us, our efforts would be for nothing." He pursed his lips and let his shoulders slump. "Besides which, we cannot afford to chase the Triumvirate and leave Sunspear undefended. A force must remain in the city to prevent the Free Folk from ravaging the south. Yet, as I say, if the Triumvirate were to do something unpredictable, the central territories themselves might be in danger."

Rosa's First Legion only comprised about forty thousand men, all told. Combined with the full forces gathered in the south, that would only come to around a hundred thousand. There was no question that numerical superiority was on the Triumvirate's side. Ordinarily, the morale and training of the imperial armies would make up the difference, but not only was the Triumvirate's full strength still an unknown quantity, it was not even certain whether they would attack from the south or the east. If that were known, the empire could respond appropriately, but with information currently so scarce, the wrong decision could lead to tragedy.

"I can think of no avenue we have not exhausted," Beto said bitterly. "We have sent all the spies we can spare into the grand duchy, but they are yet to yield anything useful."

"And if we divided our forces, the enemy could simply pick them off one by one," High General Vias remarked.

"Precisely. We may defend the central territories or the south...and the fate of the empire hinges on which we choose."

"I fear for the north as well," Margrave von Gurinda added.

The rest nodded. House Brommel's concerning activities were common knowledge around the table, as was the perilous situation at Friedhof. Unfortunately, their hands were tied—send any forces north and the south would fall. The matter would have to wait until after they had driven off the Vanir Triumvirate. Yet even that was in question. Endless warfare had left the entire empire bleeding, and win or lose, the east and the south would pay a heavy price in the coming battles. A purge of House Brommel could easily hurt the

aggressors just as badly. Short of Selene being killed, the empire would rather call a truce with them, regardless of whether or not the second prince was under their thumb.

"For now, we must trust in Second Prince Selene," Beto said. "If the fighting is not over by the time we drive back the Triumvirate, then we can ride to his aid."

That was unlikely to happen, and they all knew it. House Brommel would want to move quickly. They would not have seized this opportunity otherwise.

"Even if worst comes to worst," von Grax said, "and he fails in battle, House Brommel would surely not be so foolish as to execute him. Anything short of that can be solved around the negotiating table. For the present, we ought to focus on our own problems."

Nobody disagreed. The south had no time to worry about the north with the Triumvirate knocking on its door.

"The chancellor's preparations have bought us time," Beto said. "I propose we make one final attempt to gather all the intelligence we can and reconvene then."

At this point, anything they could say would be baseless speculation. They needed more information to work from. With various indications of agreement, the meeting was adjourned.

After High General Vias left the room, she turned to von Grax and handed him a letter. "Deliver this to the chancellor," she said.

Von Grax nodded. "I will send a messenger at once."

As he hurried away, High General Vias called down the corridor to Beto. "Lord von Muzuk. A moment of your time."

The man turned. "But of course."

"Are you familiar with the first princess?"

Beto's brow knotted, but he nodded. "A little. She was entrusted to Frieden not long after her birth, as I recall."

"Do you know why?"

"Hm. I remember something about... Ah, yes, that's right. She was a sickly child, and it was hoped that the Spirit King's powers would restore her to health."

It had been a curious affair. The royal family had access to the finest physicians, yet they had sent their newborn child away—and

to Baum, no less, a journey that a sickly infant was unlikely to survive. Beto had not been the only noble who had thought it unusual.

"No need to pretend, Lord von Muzuk. A man as shrewd as you would have had no end of questions. I have no doubt you looked into the truth of the matter." Vias watched carefully as she spoke, gauging his reaction. "And given Baum's roots as the land of the First Ones, as well as the royal family's darker secrets...it's hard not to see the irony in what was done."

Beto gave an irreverent shrug. "Well, if you know that much, there's no point hiding it." He sighed and lowered his voice, holding up two fingers. "I had two questions, as I'm sure you can already guess. Firstly, the mystery of the archpriestesses: Why were the speakers for the Spirit King, a human deity, all álfen? And secondly, why did nobody object when the first princess was given to Baum?"

"It sounds like you found your answers."

"Indeed I did, whether by accident or design. The two questions turned out to be one and the same, with their answers sequestered away in the darkness of the palace. A secret too ugly for the history of a thousand-year empire."

"But it could not be hidden completely," High General Vias said. "The Spirit King made it so."

"Quite. That was how I found the truth myself. For better or for worse, Baum lies under the protection of a higher being. Even the might of the empire could not defy a god."

"Who else knows?"

"Any of the leaders of the great houses could have puzzled it out. Indeed, anyone who knows enough history ought to have their doubts. House Krone almost certainly knew, but their house has fallen. The head of House Scharm was slain, the rightful head of House Kelheit is dead under suspicious circumstances, and House Münster was ravaged by Six Kingdoms' invasion. And now the forces of the Vanir Triumvirate and the Free Folk converge on House Muzuk, leaving us fighting for our own survival."

"All the houses with a hand in the royal family's dirty secrets." High General Vias looked searchingly at Beto, but his face gave

nothing away.

"I will not deny it," Beto said with a snort. "And I doubt it is a coincidence."

"How deeply twisted everything has grown, and you and your like are to blame. Do you not think about what you do?" Having learned what she wanted, High General Vias turned to walk away.

Beto stopped her. "A question of my own, if I may."

"Ask."

"How much are you privy to, exactly?"

"You said it yourself, Lord von Muzuk. I simply know my history."

Beto chuckled. "Whatever did I do to earn your displeasure? Well, think what you like of me. For the present, fate has made us allies."

"Do not mistake me, Lord von Muzuk. For now, you are a brick in the road my mistress walks, but the moment she passes you, you will be left in the dust."

"I'm quaking in my boots, I'm sure." Beto did not look intimidated. If anything, he seemed to be thoroughly enjoying their conversation.

"It is not me you should be scared of, but the enemy within your own ranks."

"Pardon?"

High General Vias leaned forward. "Do not forget your name," she said with special emphasis. With that, she turned around and stalked away.

Beto stared at her as she went. "A singularly unpleasant woman," he murmured. "I really must make another effort to learn who she truly is."

Intelligence from the eastern territories was hard to come by at the best of times, but information about High General Vias was particularly thin on the ground. Even with the full resources of House Muzuk's spies at his disposal, all he had learned was the common story that she had won her position in a duel with von Grax.

"And that goes for the first princess too, I suppose."

That avenue seemed much more promising. In the past, he had been unable to probe too deeply for fear of the emperor's gale. Greiheit had shown no mercy to those he deemed enemies. Beto

had needed to be extremely prudent in his investigations.

"House Krone delved too deep, and we all know what became of them."

The darkness lurking in the house of Grantz was too unseemly to ever be revealed, yet its concealment was the rotten root from which much else had grown twisted. It had become potent in hiding, potent enough to drown out any light.

"But I suppose I am in no position to speak ill of other houses, now am I?"

Every bloodline had skeletons in its closet, and House Muzuk was no exception.

"If my subordinates were to know... Well, it hardly bears thinking about."

Ludurr was a particular concern. He was unyieldingly loyal to House Muzuk. What would he do if he learned Beto's secret?

Beto shook his head, smiling ruefully. "When did I become so given to idle fancies? No, I will forge on, just as I always have."

* * * * *

Repeated exposure to the fires of war had reduced Faerzen to a smoking ruin. The nation had changed hands so often in such a short period of time that many of its people had sought refuge in other lands, and with its economy on the brink of collapse, a large portion of those who remained had resorted to becoming bandits and brigands. Hardly a trace remained of its former glory.

After a brief period of hardship under Six Kingdoms, Faerzen was once again ruled by the Grantzian Empire. Thirty thousand imperial troops now occupied San Dinalle under the command of Ludurr Freyr von Ingunar. One of Beto von Muzuk's closest confidants, Ludurr was dainty in a way that seemed ill suited to war, but his dignified and delicate looks had met great acclaim in high society. Yet it was the kind of acclaim one preferred to watch from afar, since his skin was blindingly—many said sickly—pale, which noble ladies tended to find too disconcerting to approach.

Ludurr himself had never cared much what the world thought of

him. He considered himself first and foremost a servant of House Muzuk. The reason for his loyalty stood proudly on display in his quarters in the governor's mansion of San Dinalle: a portrait of the previous head of the house, which he had shipped specially from the empire. With his paperwork finished for the day, he had settled down in his chair to gaze at it.

Ludurr was a war orphan. He had no memory of his life before being adopted by House Muzuk. That said, he had never lamented his lot. The former Lord von Muzuk had been as good as a father to him, raising him with love and care. As a young man, Ludurr had thrown himself into his studies in the hope of repaying that debt. While the former Lord von Muzuk had passed away before Ludurr earned a place as a civil tribune, his successor, Beto, had proven just as capable and a man Ludurr could serve with pride. The gratitude he felt for the father became loyalty to the son, and he had sworn to bring prosperity to House Muzuk and Beto both. To this day, that remained his raison d'être.

He was so immersed in fond memories of his late mentor that he hardly noticed the knock on the door. An aide came in and bowed his head.

"Order has been restored on the streets, sir. I believe the next matter on the agenda was those midnight burglaries in the outskirts?"

Ludurr nodded. "Take your pick of the men. No need for restraint just because we're dealing with burglars. We have the resources, and we must show the people we can meet their needs."

"Are you certain, sir? Does it truly matter what people think of us in this backwater?"

"In a sense, no. This place will be forgotten once the restoration begins in earnest and Skye is rebuilt. But don't forget, someday Lady Celia Estrella will tour these lands. Mistreat the people and it may come back to bite us."

With the first, third, and fourth princes having fallen in quick succession, the sixth princess was now the only viable heir. The second prince was still alive, but he had few accomplishments to his name. All common sense dictated that Lady Celia would take the

throne. It would be unwise to risk earning her displeasure, especially when he was acting in House Muzuk's name.

"Of course, sir. I will impress as much upon the troops."

"Be certain you do if you want to avoid a fiery execution by Lævateinn. You would probably be reduced to ashes before you knew what was happening, of course, but you're a young man. I'm sure you hope to enjoy a few more years of life yet." Ludurr looked up from his papers, smiling. "I jest, of course. I would behead anyone who acted out of line long before the sixth princess caught wind of it. I wouldn't want her thinking I approved of their actions, you understand."

"I... I will bear that in mind, sir."

"Oh, don't look so worried. I'm sure none of my subordinates would ever let me down."

"Of course not, sir." The aide held out an envelope. "This arrived from Lady von Muzuk."

"From Selvia? I see."

"That was all, sir. If you will excuse me." The aide made to leave.

"Of course. You have my thanks."

Once the man was gone, Ludurr settled down to read the letter. His shoulders began to tremble as he scanned the page, and his sallow skin deepened to a shade of red. He finished reading, squeezed the letter in his fist, and slammed both hands down onto his desk.

"What in the hells have you sent me, woman?!" He swept his hand across his desk, sending papers fluttering to the floor, but it did nothing to quell his anger. "What demon possessed you to write this?!"

He balled the letter up and flung it against the wall, took a deep breath, then picked it back up again.

"If anybody saw this, House Muzuk would be ruined."

Selvia had taken no precautions to shield the letter from observers. There was not even a seal on it. It had simply arrived unguarded by an ordinary messenger. Whether or not there was any merit to its claims, it could have spelled disaster if it had fallen into the wrong hands.

"What is that woman thinking?!"

No, he reflected, this was no time to stew. He hit the bell on his desk and summoned his aide again.

"I am returning to Sunspear," he announced as soon as the man entered the room.

"Sir?"

"Someone else will have to rule in my absence. My presence is required immediately."

"Has something happened, sir?"

"A traitor has been discovered in our inner circle. I cannot afford to sit around playing governor here. They must be dealt with."

The aide clearly had questions, but he swallowed them. If Ludurr was not willing to explain further, that meant the matter was one of profound secrecy. All he could do was see him back to Sunspear as quickly as possible.

"I will ready a horse forthwith," he said.

"Thank you."

Once the aide had left again, Ludurr reached out into thin air and called forth a greatsword—Bebensleif, the Fiend of Creation. The Fellblade was almost as long as he was tall.

He knelt before the portrait in a retainer's bow. "I will strike down all who defy House Muzuk," he said, raising the blade above his head. "For they will be the rulers of Soleil."

* * * * *

The fifth day of the eleventh month of Imperial Year 1026

Rosa brought the First Legion to a halt near the border with the southern territories. Nothing was amiss, but the day was growing late, so she decided to make camp. Once the ground was picked out and the tents were put down, the column became something of a temporary town, but by borrowing the aid of the local nobles and the amenities of the nearby townsfolk, she ensured that her soldiers wanted for little.

Rosa herself had retreated to her tent, the better to avoid being embroiled in politics. She reclined on her sofa, studying the reports

from the army's scouts.

"Enemy troops sighted in six locations, with no opposition from Draal..." She sighed. "Have they decided to let the Triumvirate do as they will, or are they simply biding their time?"

She would have to prod Draal a little. With any luck, their reaction would help her determine whether they were friend or foe. And if they intended to stay on the fence until it became clear which of the Triumvirate and the empire would emerge victorious...well, she would have to ensure they paid for trying to hedge their bets. As she put the final pen-stroke to a none-too-subtly threatening letter to the grand duke, her thoughts turned to the struggle in the north.

"How is my brother faring, I wonder?"

At this very moment, Selene and House Scharm were trying to foil House Brommel's bid to profit from the empire's peril. Rosa wanted to believe her brother had the upper hand, but she knew that was optimistic. Her reports suggested that battle with House Brommel seemed unavoidable.

"One wonders if they're all working together."

House Brommel was causing chaos in the north, and the Vanir Triumvirate had ground into motion in the south, all while the main body of the empire's forces was engaged in the west. The two were moving practically in lockstep. It would have been harder to believe they *weren't* in league with one another.

"How proud they must be of their scheming."

Seeing that House Scharm was missing its patriarch and the rest of the empire was preoccupied, House Brommel had seized the chance to snuff its rival out for good. The late head of House Scharm was Chancellor Graeci, the elder brother of the second empress consort and uncle to Selene. That blood connection had allowed Selene to assume the position as the house's acting head.

"But he is not its true leader," Rosa mused. "And while his life is in little danger, the rest of House Scharm may not be so fortunate."

If House Brommel was victorious, Selene would almost certainly be taken prisoner. He would serve as useful leverage. However, Rosa noted, that assumed House Brommel expected the empire to still exist once they were done...

"They could hardly have picked a worse time for this little scheme. We have precious few forces to spare."

The coming days would determine the fate of the empire. The return of Liz and her forces would buy a little breathing room, but it would be dangerous to rely on them too much. There was no telling what would be left after the war with Six Kingdoms.

"Well, all that is a problem for after we fend off the Triumvirate." Rosa shook her head to clear it and picked up a sheet of paper. "At least High General Vias has pledged her support. That's one spot of good news."

The high general seemed to have joined forces with House Muzuk without incident, but if her letter was anything to go by, she did not trust them as far as she could throw them. She was convinced Beto was plotting something, although she had been unable to discern quite what. It was even possible that he was in league with the Vanir Triumvirate, she said, although she was wary of jumping to hasty conclusions and making needless enemies. It seemed best for her to proceed slowly and cautiously.

"Now that I think about it," Rosa mused, "this might be the first letter she's ever sent me."

She found herself unexpectedly impressed by the high general's penmanship. She had only seen the woman once, and even then only from afar—distant enough that she had not been able to make out her face, although there had been no mistaking the aura of a formidable warrior. All her other memories of Vias involved being inconvenienced by the woman's willful disposition. Whether the Warden of the East paid an order any heed was a matter for her mood and the gods. It had typically been General von Grax who fielded Rosa's requests.

"She may not be reliable, but there's no question about her strength. One look at von Grax will tell you that much."

Von Grax was his mistress's first and most loyal shield from criticism, and complainants' tempers tended to cool when a former high general made them apologies. The late Emperor Greiheit had also been soft on Vias. Rosa had never understood why her father, so strict in other respects, had indulged this woman in particular, but

there was clearly more to her than simple strength. The rumors that she was Greiheit's child out of wedlock had never been substantiated, but if martial prowess were all she had to offer, he would not have hesitated to cut her down.

"He treated her more kindly than he did his own son," Rosa murmured. Indeed, Greiheit's mistreatment of Stovell had sown resentment that ultimately claimed his life. "But what would make an emperor stay his hand?" She paused and shook her head. "Not that I have time to dwell on that now."

She reached for another report, smiling ruefully. The situation was so sensitive that a single oversight could spell disaster. She pinched the skin between her eyebrows and sighed. It was starting to look like she was in for another sleepless night.

* * * * *

The moon was full that night. High General Vias sat on the grass, the night breeze chilly on her skin as she gazed up at the sky. Some things never changed, even after a thousand years—the wind, the night, the stars shining down.

Their first meeting had been on a night like this. Her old mistress had been strong of heart and noble of spirit, unburdened by the cruelty of her fate—a woman who gladly extended her hand to those in need, was willing to render aid even to her enemies, and never asked for payment in return. She had walked the path she believed in, decisively and without regret.

"When was it, I wonder, that I realized you were no different to the rest of us?"

For the longest time, Vias had believed her mistress was special. History would come to revere her as a goddess, and with good reason. She had accomplished unprecedented feats in her short life. Her beauty had beguiled many a heart and her delicate grace had compelled many to her defense, yet she had walked the battlefield like a war-hardened champion. It had been easy to think her without flaw. Yet Vias had come to realize that her mistress was an ordinary woman like any other. Her meeting with the boy from another world

had brought unseen sides of her to the fore.

"How I wished our happiness would never end. If I could only watch her smile until the end of my days, I would have asked for nothing more."

But reality had not been so kind. By the time she had realized what she stood to lose, it had already been gone. Her mistress had passed, the boy had broken, and the world had transformed into something she did not recognize. Left behind by the turning of the age, she had committed a thoughtless oversight that beckoned irreversible tragedy—a mistake that had dealt the boy's ravaged heart another cruel blow.

"I would like to say I would make things right, but I fear the worst. History is repeating itself." She sighed, long and heavy, and ran her fingers through the grass.

"What brings you out here?" a gruff voice asked.

Vias turned to see General Robert von Grax, her staunchest ally. He proffered a large slab of cooked meat, the haunch of a monster that had terrorized the nearby countryside.

She took it and sank her teeth in, biting down so hard she cracked the bone. "It's a clear night tonight. I thought I might eat under the stars."

"That so, eh? Well, I hope you don't mind some company." Von Grax crashed down beside her and took a swig from a bottle of wine. "Not planning to sleep in Glitnir's beds? I thought you'd jump at the chance."

Vias shrugged. She was in the Fifth Legion's encampment on the outskirts of Sunspear. With no immediate threat on the horizon, many of the soldiers were carousing with liquor in hand. No small number of the sentries looked on with envy.

"Would you, if you were in my place?"

Von Grax let out a bark of laughter. "Sleep in a bed that viper Beto offered me? Hah! The finest silks would feel like broken glass. I'd half expect to wake up shorter by a head. I'd sooner sleep in the privy."

"Then don't ask me stupid questions."

"You never were much for talking, were you? I never trust anyone

with too quick a tongue, you know that, but there's honest and then there's you. Open up a little. It'll do you good."

"You might well be describing yourself, General."

"Bah! It's the drink, that's all. They say I'm getting long in the tooth, but back in my day, I was the strongest of all the high generals. I said what I pleased because I had the strength and the will to back it up, not because I was some silver-tongued charlatan!" He gave a garrulous laugh, which quickly turned into a coughing fit. "Gah! Drink went down the wrong way."

As hard as it was to imagine seeing him choking on his liquor, his words were no lie. His allies and enemies alike acknowledged his strength. To Vias, however, he looked every bit the fool he protested he was not.

"So?" Her eyes bored into him, sharp and cold. "Have you learned anything about Nameless?"

Her no-nonsense demeanor seemed to bring him to his senses. With a sheepish harrumph, he straightened up. "Nothing yet. No trace to be found either in the north or the west."

"Keep looking. She is bound to be planning something."

"I'll see to it."

"Unfortunately, our options are limited, especially when we know so little." Vias sighed. "For now, all we can do is look up at the stars and try to forget our unease."

"The age is beginning to turn. Like a dam holding back a river, once that first brick goes, there's no stopping it." Von Grax's eyes took on a faraway look. "It's all turning out as His Majesty predicted so long ago."

"He might have seen it coming, but he could never have stopped it. His foolishness is what pushed the empire to the brink in the first place."

Von Grax did not chide Vias for speaking of the late emperor so, nor did he deny what she'd said. "He was a reckless man in his youth. If only he had met Lady Celia Estrella's mother sooner, much might have been different."

"He was born without freedom, his entire life laid out before him before he ever took his first breath. Even that encounter was not as

coincidental as it seemed." Vias spoke in a low whisper, too low for von Grax to hear. Her face darkened. "But he was too slow to notice the truth. Or perhaps I ought to say he was too slow to resolve to fight his fate. He did what he could, but it was not enough."

For one thing, Greiheit had recognized Vias's strength and raised her to the position of High General. He had most likely realized who she truly was; it was difficult to believe he would have been so lenient with her otherwise, especially as her true abilities were suppressed by her bindings. For another, he had made Hiro the fourth prince; while the archpriestess—that was to say, Nameless—had certainly had a hand in that decision, he had doubtless also wanted to protect Liz. Although that choice had caused much strife, a truly bitter irony, not all hope was lost.

Vias brought a hand to her chest and bowed her head. "It seems I always fail my friends when they need me most," she murmured, "but now I can bring my full strength to bear."

Von Grax nodded. "For too long, I have held my tongue as others slander you. I would be glad to help you wreak a little havoc. Show those shameless gossipmongers why they ought to fear your name."

Vias returned his nod. "With pleasure. Why else do you think I joined this march?"

She had never cared much what the rest of the world thought of her, but she had sworn to do whatever it took to make Liz smile. She clenched her fist in determination.

Just then, her head jerked up. There was a strange scent on the wind. "Intruders. Two of them."

Von Grax moved to stand. "I will alert—"

Vias waved her hand, then turned to stay him. "No need. I have them. You'll find them on the ground to the south."

"As quick to act as ever, I see. I'll send some men."

As von Grax raised a hand and called a sentry over, Vias got to her feet with a yawn.

"Where are you going?" he asked. "Don't you want to question them?"

"I'm tired. I'm going to bed. You handle the rest."

"Right enough. Sleep well. I'll tell you if they cough up anything

interesting."

With a parting wave, Vias returned to her tent. Soldiers bowed their heads to her as she passed, to which she raised her hand in acknowledgment. As she passed through the tent flap, a curious change came over her—she began to shine with a bright light, and when it faded, she had transformed into a white wolf. She scratched her neck with a hind leg, jumped up onto the bed, and curled up. Her lips pulled back into another yawn, revealing sharp fangs.

I'm not averse to this form, she thought, *but its limitations are...vexing.*

She could not even converse in her wolf form, let alone stand up to a foe of any skill. She had learned that well enough during the attack on Rosa's mansion. Her own strength had not been enough; had Scáthach not come to the rescue, she would have been dead. In her original form, such an opponent would have posed her no challenge at all.

What a maddening curse the Spirit King has placed upon me.

The Spirit King was the cause of much, but he had been missing for many moons. Nonetheless, Vias did not believe he was gone, only biding his time, watching the conflicts in Aletia play out as he plotted his return.

If he hasn't shown himself by now, events must be proceeding as he hoped.

The Spirit King forged chains, handed down trials, levied ordeals, and returned to his lofty heights to observe. Elevating him to godhood was the work of his subjects. Only when they acted against his will did he intercede.

And Lord Artheus forging the Spiritblade Sovereigns certainly rattled him.

Artheus, the child prodigy, born out of the sight of the Five Lords of Heaven. The Spirit King had been the first to recognize his potential, showering him with favor and elevating him to the throne of his own empire. Yet Artheus had not been content to remain a pawn. Before his death, he had left behind the Spiritblade Sovereigns: swords capable of killing a god.

And so the Spirit King gave him fetters to hold him in check. A

shackle named Hiro.

Artheus had never resented Hiro for the role he had been summoned to play. Indeed, he had adopted him as his blood brother. The pair had joined Vias's mistress, the first archpriestess, in striving to create a better world. Yet reality had been cruel, and they had fallen short of liberation. Then and now, they remained bound.

Forever in chains, cursed never to be free.

It had been in pursuit of freedom that one young man had risen up a thousand years ago; in pursuit of freedom that others had flocked to his banner and rendered victory to the human cause. Vias had not seen their battle to the end, but they had no doubt paid a high price in blood. More to the point, their triumph had not been a victory for everyone. Their thousand-year-old myth had reached the worst possible conclusion.

How long must she suffer, I wonder?

As soon as she'd awoken and caught sight of the crimson-haired girl, she'd known Artheus had failed. And even she, with all her knowledge, could not help. All she had accomplished was making the boy's return more painful.

Do you weep still, Hiro? Do you blame yourself for what this world has become?

The wolf laid her head down and closed her eyes, surrendering to the call of slumber.

I will save you. This time, I will save you. I swear it.

That was why she was here—called back, as he had been, to this world for the sake of those she held most dear.

By the oath I swore to you, I will see him smile again.

* * * * *

Snowflakes fluttered down like feathers. The wind was calmer today, its fists weak as it beat against the window.

The latch opened, the heat burst free, and the cold flooded into the chamber. A woman stepped out onto the balcony, holding down her silver hair against the whipping wind. The night was cold enough to chill her to the bone, but she only smiled.

She was beautiful, a flower any would hesitate to pluck and would weep to watch die. Better to leave her be and admire her from afar. Her skin was white as snow, so delicate it seemed it might melt at the slightest breath, so fragile it might shatter at a touch. She was an auf, a changeling child born somewhere between zlosta and álf. Her name was Claudia van Lebering, and she was queen of the Kingdom of Lebering.

Before her unfurled a snow-covered landscape. Fort Dernier lay on the border between Lebering and the imperial north. Sensing the imminent downfall of the empire, she had come here to watch and wait.

One of her aides stepped forward. "The wind may be low, Your Majesty, but you will catch your death out there. Please, I must ask you to come back inside."

She did not turn around. "How fares the empire?"

The question was an abrupt one. This was neither the time nor the place. The aide did not protest, however. If that was what the queen wished to know, his place was to obey.

"Reisenriller is surrounded by House Brommel and their allies, but Second Prince Selene has ridden forth with his forces rather than weather a siege. It appears he intends to meet them in battle."

"What are their numbers?"

"House Brommel has sixty thousand, House Scharm forty."

"No doubt Selene wishes he had more."

"No doubt, Your Majesty. But many of House Brommel's forces hesitate to turn on their former masters. I expect they have only forty thousand soldiers in effect. Members of either faction may defect to the other as the conflict progresses, but for the moment, the scales are balanced."

"And yet House Scharm has decided to sally forth."

"Indeed, despite the dangers. Had they remained behind the walls of Reisenriller, reinforcements would have eventually arrived from the central territories. The imperial forces are making good progress in the west and will surely soon return. I must confess, House Scharm's actions seem reckless."

Claudia nodded along with her aide's analysis, but she cocked her

head at that final point. “We must not forget about the Vanir Triumvirate. They are coming from the south, are they not? That will divert some of the central territories’ forces.”

The central territories would have no soldiers to spare for the north. They were no doubt keeping one eye on Friedhof, but as long as the Spirit Wall stood, the Vanir Triumvirate remained the more pressing concern. Claudia would have made the same decision in their place. A marauding army visibly bearing down on the empire was a higher priority than a wall that might yet hold.

“With no reinforcements coming and ill tidings from Friedhof, I cannot blame House Scharm for wanting to bring this conflict to a swift end. I do not fault their decision. A siege might have bought them time, but it might have been seen as a coward’s tactic—a dangerous proposition while so many noble houses remain undecided. The second prince’s presence on the field will rouse their allies and make their enemies fear.”

“I see, Your Majesty.”

“All that remains now is to see which way the scales of battle will fall. Upon whom the gods will smile.” Claudia turned, brushing past the aide as she strode back inside the room. “And to see what we will make of this rare circumstance.”

She took a seat at the head of the table, crossed her legs, and stared at the map on the table. Occupying the other chairs were her aides, her officers, and various nobles of Lebering.

“Many of the northern nobles have retained their forces for fear of us,” one man ventured. “I daresay we will struggle to seize broad swathes of territory. We may have to content ourselves with the least defended areas.”

“You make a fair point,” Claudia said. “It’s true. With only thirty thousand soldiers at our command, we can at best hope to take a handful of castles before the battle is decided.”

A rather prideful officer frowned. “Surely we can do better than that, Your Majesty. Do you doubt our troops’ capabilities?”

“No, I simply refuse to let optimism cloud my vision. Both belligerents would prefer to conclude their squabble quickly, and whichever prevails will turn to us. I will not risk Lebering’s survival

for the sake of vanity."

"Surely we cannot come all this way just to do nothing, Your Majesty."

"No, and I do not intend to. But I believe we ought to watch for a little while longer while our scouts gather information."

A servant brought Claudia a steaming cup of tea. With a dainty smile, she set it to her lips. Her officers looked on in dismay. It was hard to blame them; they had already spent too long in this land. Lebering had gathered all its strength just to stand and stare at snow. This was no pleasure trip. They were starting to lose their patience.

"We cannot afford to wait, Your Majesty! Now is the time to seize glory for Lebering! For far too long, we zlosta have dreamed of a brighter future for our children! We must act swiftly if we are to make it a reality!"

Claudia did not so much as raise an eyebrow. "Act too swiftly and we will bring Lebering's end. Surely you would not gamble with your children's future. Time is still our ally. I wish to know everything I can about the state of the empire. Seek it out and bring it before me."

Sensing he had been ignored, the officer persisted. "A moment, Your Majesty. Did you yourself not say the conflict will be concluded swiftly? Do we have time to wait for our scouts?"

Claudia tittered. "I said only that both parties hope so. Besides, I am speaking of not only the north, but the entire empire." She sighed, bringing a hand to her forehead as she shook her head in undisguised disappointment. "One cannot grow too fixated on a single arena. There is never any harm in taking a broader view. Or do you doubt my leadership?"

"No, that is not what I—"

"Good. Then what will you do now?"

The officer blanched as Claudia's eyes pierced him like a spear. "I will contact our agents across Soleil, Your Majesty."

"Excellent. You are dismissed."

"Thank you, Your Majesty!"

"A broader view indeed," Claudia mused. "Broad enough to

encompass all of Soleil, in fact. My head fairly spins."

One misstep would rob her glory of its sweetness. Two would spell peril. Three would portend disaster. The road Lebering walked now was strewn with thorns, and its feet would be bloody by the end.

"I do have one concern." Claudia pointed to the central territories on the map. "The strife throughout imperial lands has driven the empire to the brink. It will not be easily defused, and the empire has little time. They have no choice but to fight as they are."

Even if the people had been unified, discord within the military would create opportunities that neighbors might exploit. At the root of the empire's peril was the arrogance and pride particular to all great nations.

"Had they only abolished the institution of the great houses," Claudia continued, "this crisis might have been avoided."

The nobles' loyalties were scattered. Ostensibly, they were unified in their desire to expel the invaders, but beneath the surface, each house was scrambling to fill the empty seats at the head of the table. Most were thinking of nothing but their own interests.

"They say the empire is a font of talent, but years of warfare have taken their toll. Its future now depends on those who were content to wait their turn."

That said, unlikely individuals often rose to the occasion in times of strife such as this. National crises were where heroes were forged, appearing to answer the pleas of their countryfolk. The empire already had one clear candidate. The only question was whether she was up to the task.

"Lady Celia Estrella may well prove worthy, but unlike Lord Surtr, I do not have blind faith in her. That is my concern: that his affection for her has made him naive."

The sixth princess's philosophies were made for a better world than she lived in. Her ideals were for times of peace, not war. Even the legend of the vaunted Hero King, layer of the empire's foundations, was a gilded lie spun over a far less glorious reality. The true Mars had been so cruel, most citizens of the empire would consider it heresy. Other nations had called him a devil and a dark

deity.

Histories that had escaped the empire's cultural influence agreed that after a certain point, Mars had abandoned his childlike naivety. He had ceased to show mercy to those who defied him, claiming the head of every commander who opposed him whether or not they laid down their arms. Countless countries had fallen at his hands. Innumerable commonfolk had died cursing his name. Only when Artheus had followed with blessings and forgiveness, shining like the sun, had the people bowed down before the house of von Grantz and lifted it to the throne of empire.

"Every war needs a villain, and theirs was no exception. Artheus offered the carrot, while Mars wielded the stick."

In war, both the victors and the defeated paid a price in blood. Magnificent legends concealed ignoble deeds. The role of history was to beautify reality so that it plucked at the heartstrings of generations to come.

"But Lady Celia Estrella has no such shadow. What they accomplished together, she must do alone. She must both remain unsullied and be willing to bloody her hands."

The empire had buried its sins in glory, concealing the tithe of blood for which it had been bought, and destroyed or defeated nations leveraged to further the deception.

"Naivety can be fatal. Those who truly love their country must be willing to be cruel." Claudia sighed. "And yet it has its uses. It will be too valuable to discard entirely, especially in the months to come."

If the empire survived this ordeal, it would be faced with the task of stabilizing and rebuilding. There would be no more need for heroes. The mighty had no place once the fighting was done. They shone their brightest in times of bloodshed only to be shunned in times of peace. Perhaps that had been why the Hero King had quit the stage after the empire's founding, although some theorized he had wanted to avoid squabbling with his brother for the throne. Either way, he had stepped tactfully and prudently out of history—a choice that had only strengthened his legend, assuring him a seat in the imperial pantheon and a place in myth.

"Yet he was a pitiful thing, in truth," Claudia murmured.

In her eyes, Mars's tale was a tragic product of war. He had fought for his nation, his people, and his loved ones until they had needed him no more. The closer victory drew, the less welcome his presence had become, and the more emboldened others had felt to vent their grievances upon him. She could not even begin to guess what it had taken to depart without hate in his heart. It was enough to make one wonder what his life had been for.

"In the end, he became emperor for a year, they say. Although one wonders how much truth there is to that tale..."

Decades after the conclusion of the war, he had returned to take the throne, becoming the second emperor for a single year before passing away without any accomplishments of note. What meaning had there been in his reign? Did it make up for the injustices he had suffered? Claudia did not trouble herself with entertaining such questions for long. There were no answers to be found, only endless speculation.

"No, it is what will become of the empire now that interests me most. Its fate and Lebering's are closely intertwined."

She would have to decide what she valued, what she sought, what she hoped to gain. Her choices would shape Lebering's future, and they demanded the utmost care.

"Then again, it is not for us to know what is right. That is for future generations to decide once all is said and done."

History was penned by human hands and given weight by human hearts. Until it was written, everyone was but a nameless actor on an unimaginably large stage.

* * * * *

West of Lebering, the kingdom of the zlosta, lay House Brommel's seat of power, Castle Himinbjörg. Farther west still, the Reisenriller kept vigil over the heart of the north. These lands had not seen war for the five hundred years since the invasion of the Wild Races, but now sixty thousand soldiers of House Brommel were advancing on the Whitesteel Castle, the warmth of their zeal melting the falling snow. In their way stood the forty thousand-strong forces of House

Scharm.

"Impressive," Selene murmured. "Do you know, this might be the first time I've ever seen one hundred thousand soldiers in one place."

The second prince was attending the battle in his capacity as the acting head of House Scharm. He stood on the back line, marveling at the sight before him.

"This is no time to admire them, Your Highness," said Phroditus, half of Selene's Twinfang Generals. "They have half again as many soldiers as we do. We cannot afford to be careless."

She glared at House Brommel's banners and the northern nobles who marched alongside them. The same men who had been so desperate to curry favor with Chancellor Graeci had now shamelessly defected to House Scharm's enemies at the slightest sign of instability. Some of them did not even seem to have committed to their treachery. There was hardly a noble in the north who did not owe something to Graeci. Quite a few lacked the nerve to draw steel against House Scharm, even as they stood in House Brommel's ranks.

"They have fielded sixty thousand, while we have but forty," Phroditus continued. "On the face of it, we would seem to be at a disadvantage, but we have received a letter from no small number of House Brommel's supposed allies. They already appear to be considering defecting."

Phroditus produced a sheet of paper. She moved a little hesitantly, perhaps fearing that the prince might be offended.

Selene went to tear the letter in two but seemed to think better of it. "'We will observe how the situation progresses,' they say..." he sighed. "They have me at a disadvantage, and they know it. I don't want traitors in my camp, but I can't afford to turn away potential allies either. Three years ago, they wouldn't have dared."

"You mustn't blame them, Your Highness. Not everybody is willing to sacrifice their livelihood for honor. People cannot live on goodwill alone. They are thinking only of their own survival."

"It takes more than ideals to inspire loyalty, doesn't it? Perhaps I should be glad the gap in our numbers is not larger. I suppose we

have Lebering to thank for that."

Lebering moving their forces to the border had made the neighboring nobles wary of relinquishing their troops. That one stroke had cut House Brommel's forces from one hundred thousand to sixty.

"Do not be too quick to thank them, Your Highness," Phroditus said. "They are watching us like hawks. We must restore order to the north and fortify the border or they will take it for themselves."

"Loyal allies indeed," Selene sighed.

Lebering was, in principle, an ally of the empire, although historically, their relationship had been closer to that of a vassal state. Queen Claudia's coronation had signaled a transition to a more equitable relationship, but centuries of oppression were not so easily forgiven. More to the point, Claudia herself was cunning enough to know the value of an opportunity. Lebering had grown at a tremendous rate under her stewardship.

"Our weakness is their chance for revenge," Phroditus said bitterly. "Anyone with a brain in their head could see this is an opportunity not to be missed."

Selene moved to reply but trailed off as a familiar figure caught his eye. Herma, the other Twinfang General, was approaching with characteristic poise. His expression was dark, but his feet were not dragging. If anything, he seemed a little hurried. Selene raised an inquisitive eyebrow as he waited.

"Your Highness," Herma said as he came to a stop.

"Yes?"

"Battle has been joined at Friedhof."

Those few words spoke volumes. Only Selene and his Twinfang Generals knew the true extent of the peril at Friedhof. They could not allow compromising information to reach House Brommel, and they had also hoped to prevent panic as much as possible, especially when there was no guarantee the wall would truly fall. Word would have gotten out eventually, but they had hoped to have defeated House Brommel before then. As a precaution, they had sent a messenger to Chancellor Rosa, but likely as not, she would engage the Vanir Triumvirate before the man arrived.

"Fighting at the Spirit Wall...and House Brommel benefits."

"It may not be a coincidence, Your Highness," Herma said. "The archons are mere beasts, but the yaldabaoth are as clever as men. It is possible they have been working together."

"But then, why this whole charade?" Selene lowered his eyes in thought.

Herma cocked his head. "Your Highness?"

"I mean, why would House Brommel raise an army of their own? They can't be ignorant of Friedhof's importance, and they know we aren't either."

Turmoil at the Spirit Wall would have drawn House Scharm's troops out to the east, and very likely Selene too. Yet House Brommel had done quite the opposite, acting suspiciously and drawing attention.

"If they hadn't made their intentions so obvious, Reisenriller would be standing empty right now. They could have walked straight through the door. Why make things harder for themselves?"

Herma sank into thought, but before he could think of a reply, his sister interrupted.

"What if they only allied with the yaldabaoth recently? That would make sense, wouldn't it, Your Highness?"

"I suppose. I was wondering if the opposite was true, if they were drawing our attention to conceal their partnership, but... Hmm. That doesn't seem quite right."

If the rest of the empire learned they had joined hands with the yaldabaoth, their heads would roll. That said, no one in the north was so unscrupulous as to ally with flesh-eating monsters in the first place. The prospect of the Wild Races being free to ravage the empire was too great a risk to take.

"Better not to overthink it, perhaps," Selene said. "It's all empty speculation in any case."

"No use crying over spilled milk, as they say," Herma supplied. "Although there is something to be said for planning for the worst."

Selene nodded, turning to Phroditus. "Perhaps House Brommel truly is in league with the yaldabaoth, but that wouldn't change our plans. It would only make a swift victory more vital. Now, I say we

put a little fear into these nobles who are considering defecting to us. They cannot be strong of will if they were so easily swayed by honeyed words. Their confidence will be easy to break."

"As you command, Your Highness," Herma said. "I will give them good reason to question their loyalties. Now, I must excuse myself. I have preparations to see to." With a bow, the man departed.

Selene laid his hands on the twin blades at his hips. "Our path remains lightless, our vision shrouded by fog," he murmured. "Sometimes I question whether it is even there at all."

"There is nowhere to go but onward, Your Highness," Phroditus said. "We cannot seize what lies there if we fear what we may find."

"As you say. But even so..."

Selene could not shake a strange unease. The more plans he made, the harder it became to dismiss the sense that he was missing something. Time after time, he had asked himself if he was walking the right path. Nothing appeared to be amiss. He had planned for every foreseeable eventuality. Yet the doubt that had taken root in his heart would not be assuaged.

"Móralltach. Beagalltach. Lend me your strength once more."

He drew his swords from their sheaths and lifted them to the sun. The blades shimmered as if spurring him on.

"Let's raise hell."

Chapter 4: Cursed Ties

The seventh day of the eleventh month of Imperial Year 1026

The snow had fallen thick, carpeting the ground in white. One, three, five sets of footsteps carved through it at desperate speed. Crimson droplets spattered on the snow to be churned into mud by heavy footfalls, leaving behind blots of sickly black. Soldiers stumbled and fell into pools of scarlet liquid, splashing it high, and their weapons crashed down with them, adding to the growing stain.

Black smoke blanketed the sky. A foul stench hung over the earth. Fires burned high as far as the eye could see, melting the snow to water that ran from cracks in the wall. Blood joined the flow, painting Friedhof red with the lives of its defenders. A horde of monsters swarmed up from below, and the garrison fought to push them back, but there was no hope. They were outnumbered, exhausted, barely able to keep hold of their weapons. Willpower was all that kept them going.

For five hundred years, Frieden had stood unbreached. Now, portions of the wall were falling before its defenders' eyes. The collapse swallowed soldiers atop the battlements and crushed the invaders below under falling rubble, but neither side paid it any heed. They were too busy fighting for their lives. Beneath pitiless rains of arrows, men dueled with monsters to kill before they were killed.

"What a sorry sight," High General Hermes muttered. He cut down the monster before him and looked around, chest heaving. There were only foes nearby. The corpses of his men sprawled wretchedly at their feet. The battle was the enemy's now; it was only a matter of time before the rest of the defenders were wiped out, and that was not the worst of it. He glanced down from the battlements. A current had taken hold of the horde of monsters, turning them from a wave into a river.

A soldier ran up, gasping for breath. “Sir! The gate has fallen!”

Hermes nodded. “Aye, I figured.” There was only one reason the monsters would move as they had: They had found a gap in the wall.

There existed one passage through Friedhof to the Sanctuarium. Why it had been constructed was a matter of some debate. Some believed the twenty-second emperor had used it to stage extermination expeditions into the untamed lands beyond, while others posited that the empire had once traded with the yaldabaoth in centuries gone by. Naturally, the portal was not undefended. It was sealed by three gates of sturdy iron, with broad access corridors to aid in defense.

At that, something twigged in Hermes’s memory. “Why didn’t you seal it?” he asked.

The passageway was rigged to collapse in case of emergency. As a last-ditch defensive measure, the defenders could bury it under tons of rubble, blocking it permanently.

“We did, sir, just before the third gate fell, but the monsters are clearing the rubble. At the speed they’re going, it won’t be long before they make a path.”

“Blast it. I’d hoped to make time, but it seems I’ve failed at even that.” Hermes looked to the sky, biting his lip in shame, and squeezed a letter in his fist. “Just a little longer and we would have seen the dawn!”

Time. That was the thing. How much difference a little more would have made... Still, complaining would change nothing. He steadied his breathing, trying to calm his mind as he surveyed his surroundings. All around, his troops fell before the endless onslaught, yet the rest remained determined to fight until their last breaths. He could not let such brave souls die in vain.

He turned back to the soldier. “Have the townsfolk been evacuated?”

“Yes, sir. They’re well on the way. But, if you’ll forgive me, surely you don’t mean...”

“I do, son. Send word to the officers. I’m enacting our last resort. The time has come to abandon Friedhof.”

The soldier did not question Hermes's decision. He bowed his head, turned, and took off as fast as his legs would carry him.

"This'll be the last time I look down from this wall, I suppose," Hermes sighed. "How's a man supposed to face his forefathers knowing he's the one who failed in his duty?"

The town of his birth spread out below him. It was no glorious metropolis to bring the empire renown. The streets were rough and full of drunkards. Even so, it had ever been a place of respite for him. It was his home.

"If this rabble want Malaren, I'll make them bleed for every stone."

Sounds of destruction rose from the town—rampaging monsters, he supposed, ordinarily unthreatening but now agitated by the events at Friedhof.

"This debt won't go unpaid. Someday, this will be imperial soil once more."

Hermes tore his gaze away from the town and readied his spirit weapon. A dark figure was advancing on him, humanoid in appearance but covered in tattoo-like patterns—the marks for which the yaldabaoth were called "the branded."

The creature leaped at him, swinging a wicked-looking weapon. "Fall!" it spat.

"You fall."

Hermes grasped the yaldabaoth by the neck, slammed it to the ground, and brought a boot down on its face as it struggled to rise. For good measure, he plunged his sword into its neck and decapitated it, tossing the head from the battlements.

"Try again in your next life, son."

He kicked the spasming body away and fell upon the monsters who were attacking his men. His efforts alone would not turn the tide, but they might yet save some lives. He carved his way to a beleaguered officer and saved the man from the press.

"Gather the men!" he commanded. "We fall back to the rally point!"

"Yes, sir!"

The officer sounded the order, and the call went through the

ranks. The defenders formed lines on the ramparts and attempted a fighting retreat. The monsters overwhelmed them in many places, however, and only a scant few dozen made it back to Hermes.

"Fewer than I'd like," he scowled. "I hope the other checkpoints are faring better."

Checkpoints had been set up along the length of the wall, but the connecting passageways were now overrun with monsters, cutting off any communication between them. Still, it was hard to imagine the rest could all have been wiped out.

"S'pose we'll find out once we reach the rally point. You ready to move?!"

"Looks like we're the last, sir," the officer ventured.

Hermes cast a glance through the door to the inside of the fortress. Soldiers were descending the stairs—fewer than he'd hoped for but survivors nonetheless.

"Then we've little reason to stay."

He barked orders to the rest as he fended the monsters off. Once they were all through the door, he dove through and slammed it shut. His chest heaving, he looked over the survivors. A heavy impact struck the door, visibly warping its timbers.

"Move! A few wooden boards won't hold them off for long!"

They hurried down the stairs. It was only a matter of time before the door shattered and the monstrous horde poured in. Lingering would be suicide. Yet as they reached the bottom, they came to a halt. Ahead of them, an archon sank its teeth into a defender before another monster gouged out his viscera. Blood seeped across the floor to lap at their feet. There was fighting inside Friedhof. The enemy must have already overrun one of the other positions.

"Archons inside the Spirit Wall," Hermes muttered bitterly. "Walking around like they own the place. As soon they will."

"You go on ahead, sir!" a soldier cried from the foot of the stairs as he and his comrades pushed the monsters back. "We'll be right behind you!"

Hermes ignored the man. He caught a collapsing soldier with his left hand and swung at a pouncing monster with his right. Blood sprayed. The monster slumped to the floor, felled by a single furious

slash of his spirit weapon.

"Not on your life, son. You followed me into this hellhole. I'll see you out."

The man he had saved gasped a thank-you. Hermes clapped him on the shoulder and strode forward, striking down another archon. The beasts almost would have looked human if not for their rotten flesh.

He turned to his men. "Live or die, I'll be with you."

With that, he took the vanguard, unveiling the might that had made him a high general. Advanced though he was in years, it was not for nothing that he had held his seat for decades. An old hound's fangs were no less sharp. Experience had only tempered him.

"But I don't mean to die today! After me and we'll make it through this yet. If you see a man fighting, help him! If he can't walk, carry him! I'll hold these bastards off until every last one of you is safe!"

Hope rekindled in the soldiers' eyes. They bellowed battle cries as they found the courage to face their foes, conquering their fear.

Hermes looked around and nodded, satisfied that morale had been restored. "It'll have to do for now. They just need to hold until we reach the doors."

He and his soldiers laid into the monsters, fighting for all they were worth. Time lost its meaning. The corridors ahead seemed endless. Yet they bought one step, then another, then another still, until at last light glimmered ahead of them. Morale surged as they saw escape beyond the melee. They poured through the entrance and slammed it shut behind them. The sturdy double doors had been an annoyance in peacetime, but every escapee was grateful for them now.

They breathed a sigh of relief...and turned to find themselves in a worse nightmare than they had just escaped.

Corpses littered the ground—corpses, corpses, corpses as far as the eye could see. Every last one was dismembered, crushed, or otherwise disfigured, and little wonder: They rained from the sky, some screaming before they struck the ground. There was no need to speculate what was happening above. The monsters had taken

the battlements and were making sport of the defenders.

"Forgive me," Hermes murmured.

A young soldier came tumbling down, still alive until the moment he struck the ground. His body bounced with the impact. A limb detached. His eyeballs burst from their sockets in a spray of gore. Hermes approached the corpse, its face contorted in agony. He closed its empty eyelids and rose to his feet.

"To the rally point," he growled. "We'll regroup and stop these vermin before they get any farther."

"Yes, sir!"

The party mounted the horses they had stationed at the foot of the wall and fled across the snowfields. Once they reached the rally point, they could mount a counteroffensive. Those hateful creatures would not hold Malaren for long, Hermes told himself. Crashes and screams echoed from behind him. He bit his lip in shame and urged his horse faster.

At last, they came to the rally point a short distance outside the town. A handful of soldiers had gathered there already, every one gray of face. Hermes dismounted before them. They numbered perhaps five hundred. Even the addition of his escapees would not make seven.

"This is too few to fight with, sir," one of his subordinates said. "Perhaps they could take care of the scrawny pests that roam the wilds, but the monsters back there... They were something else."

Hermes knew the man was right. They did not have the numbers to consider a counterattack. There were far fewer soldiers here than he had anticipated. Most of Friedhof's defenders had never made it out.

"Aye," he said. "And I wouldn't ask more of them in any case."

Every soul before him had fought their way here over the bodies of their comrades. His heart was not black enough to send them back to die. There was only one thing to do, and he could not delay it any longer.

"We retreat," he said.

"That will mean letting the monsters run riot, sir. If we don't hold them here, towns and villages will burn."

A thunderous boom echoed from behind them. A pillar of fire rose over Malaren, setting buildings alight and belching black smoke over the town. The blaze would spread slowly in the snowfall, but that was little consolation. No one was coming to put it out. The explosion was clearly not natural, but neither Hermes nor his soldiers looked surprised as they watched their hometown collapse in flames.

"At least one thing's gone to plan today," he grunted.

He would rather see his hometown burned to ash than become a den of monsters. Leveling it had always been his intention. After that, he had meant to lead the soldiers gathered at the rally point to one last battle. The Crow Legion was supposed to have joined them armed with spirit weapons, but evidently they hadn't arrived in time.

He took a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket. "I remember how my heart soared when this came. But even if they'd made it, they would have just died with the rest of us."

With grim finality, he tore Muninn's letter in two and turned back to his men.

"We failed today, but the warning's gone out to the nearby settlements. They'll be well on their way to safety. It's only ourselves we need to worry about now."

"But our friends died back there," the soldier said. "How could we face them if we ran away?"

Most of Friedhof's garrison had given their lives in its defense, but pockets of resistance were likely still holding out, hoping someone would come to save them. Hermes knew all too well how bitter it would taste to leave those survivors to their fate.

"The battle's lost, son," he said with a heavy heart. "Throwing away our lives won't change that. Save ourselves today and we can save more tomorrow. Until then, we'll have to swallow our pride."

There was no shame in this retreat. If they wanted to ensure as little blood was spilled as possible, they had to fall back and rebuild their strength. They were not running away; they were living to fight another day.

Hermes clapped the soldier on the shoulder and turned to the rest. "Get the wounded mounted up," he commanded. "And get messengers sent out. The rest of the empire needs to know what

happened here.”

“Yes, sir!”

“This is no time for them to be squabbling among themselves,” he murmured. “If they can’t fight together, the whole north will run red.”

At that moment, a severed head rolled across the ground and came to a stop at his feet.

“What in the blazes?”

It was the soldier he had just been speaking to. He picked it up dumbly and turned to see where it had come from.

A short distance away stood a man, stripped to the waist. Intricate patterns covered his bare skin. His lips pulled back in a gleeful grin, revealing a pitch-black mouth filled with elongated teeth that glinted with drool.

“Flee not, cowardly ones. Your stunted souls may be inferior, but they will make fine offerings for our Lord.”

“Those markings...” Hermes breathed. “A bloody yaldabaoth. And a higher one, to boot...”

The yaldabaoth led the archons—indeed, it was said the latter were failed examples of the former—but they also had their own hierarchy. Those whose markings covered their entire body were supposedly the most powerful of them all, as well as capable of understanding human speech. Hermes had never seen one like this in all his years leading the defense of Friedhof.

“Never thought I’d hear a yaldabaoth speak the common tongue,” he grunted. “None of the ones I’ve met could manage more than a few words.”

“We begin,” the yaldabaoth said.

He clearly had no interest in talking. The exhausted soldiers got to their feet as best they could, forming a circle around him. At that moment, a rain of arrows thundered down on top of them. Hermes managed to raise his shield, but most were not so lucky. They fell to the ground, some groaning in pain, others slain outright. Hermes scowled as he caught sight of an approaching band of monsters.

“A dishonorable showing,” the yaldabaoth said. “Forgive me. We care not for fighting fair, only for sating our Lord’s hunger.” He drew

his sword from its sheath. “Rejoice, decrepit warrior. At last, your life will have meaning.”

Hermes grinned to himself. “Guess this was how the rest felt as they stared death in the eye.” He looked around. They were far from surrounded, but whether he could shake this yaldabaoth was another matter. He raised his sword. “Looks like this old warrior still has one fight left in him.”

“Come,” the yaldabaoth said.

They raced toward one another, clashing with terrible force before springing apart again. One blow was all Hermes needed to know he faced a mighty foe. The weight of it rang in his numbing hands. This was easily the strongest yaldabaoth he had ever faced.

He clenched his blade tighter and surged forward once more. A battle cry tore from his throat as he swung his spirit weapon, bringing all his strength to bear. The blade bounced back, deflected, but he corrected his stance with sheer strength and struck a second time. His feet left furrows in the ground. The snow vanished from around him, melted away by his fervor, flung skyward in dancing flurries by his radiating might. He struck with the implacable strength of a surging river.

The yaldabaoth’s eyes widened at the assault. He seemed surprised to find himself pushed back. Seeing his hesitation, Hermes roared like a tiger, as he had when he had ruled the battlefield in his younger days. The yaldabaoth leaped away, overwhelmed.

“What’s wrong?!” Hermes cried as he lunged after his prey. “No one as strong as me up in the Sanctuarium?!”

He kicked the yaldabaoth off-balance, lopped off an arm, drove a fist into his face, then grasped his head and snapped his neck. A swift decapitation ensured the creature was dead.

“Decrepit?!” he roared. “Aye, but still a high general!”

At that moment, a snowdrift in front of him erupted in a flurry of white. His eyes widened as a colossal shadow loomed over him.

“Bugger me,” he murmured. “You’re a big one.”

The yaldabaoth before him must have been three times his height. Before he could so much as ready his spirit weapon, the creature’s swing sent him flying.

“High General!”

The soldiers cried out in horror, but he didn’t answer. Indeed, he didn’t move at all. A gargantuan foot descended on him with a sickening squelch. Blood sprayed. The yaldabaoth lifted his foot from the spreading red pool, smiling like a child.

“Humans break so easily,” he chuckled. “Need stronger playthings. Stronger playthings for Sieben.”

The giant yaldabaoth—Sieben—spat at the puddle of indeterminate gore that had once been Hermes. For a long moment, the soldiers could only watch, stricken by dismay at the high general’s ignoble end. Soon enough, however, they returned to their senses and readied to fight, intent on avenging his death.

“Foolish. Weak. Your souls will be food.”

Sieben sent three men flying with an open-handed slap, then brought his fist down on two more. The punch shook the ground, causing the soldiers to lose their footing. A horde of monsters poured past Sieben to fall on them. Resistance was futile. Before such overwhelming strength, they could only die, their rage unspent, their cheeks stained with tears at their own impotence. Screams resounded across the snowfields for a while. Before long, the only sound was the unpleasant crunching of the monsters and archons devouring the corpses.

Sieben cast the rest only a glance as he stared into the distance, drool spilling from his mouth. “Greater delicacies await beyond the horizon,” he rumbled. “Save your appetites for stronger foes.”

By all rights, the monsters should have had no capacity to understand him. Nonetheless, they obeyed the command, spitting out the flesh they were devouring and forming ranks. They moved with the discipline of trained human soldiers.

The giant yaldabaoth pointed an enormous finger toward the horizon. “Onward. We march to our Lord.”

The horde of monsters ground into motion beneath the leadership of the yaldabaoth. No more was the darkness unseen and unknown. Now it marched across Soleil beneath the light of the sun.

* * * * *

The hill was devoid of life beneath its blanket of white, a lonely place where only dead trees grew. A hand emerged from the hollow of a tree trunk. Falling flakes turned to dew on its lilac skin, running and dripping down to seep into the snow. The fingers squeezed tight, chilled by the wintry air, yet warmed from within by infernal rage at the sight they beheld.

Flames engulfed the town. Masonry crashed. The great wall shuddered and groaned.

"I'm sorry, High General. We were too late."

From the cover of the shadows, one of the only pureblood zlosta in Soleil watched Malaren burn.

"Such destruction... Barbaric, in truth."

A human foe would have occupied the town, but the horde of monsters cared nothing for the possessions or riches they might have been trampling. They seemed content to raze it all to the ground.

"Sounds like a few are still fighting, poor souls."

Human shouts came drifting on the wind between the crashes of larger-scale destruction. Pockets of resistance still seemed to be holding out, but they would not last for long.

Garda leaned out from the cover of the tree for a better view. A harrowing sight awaited him. Trained soldiers fell to the overwhelming might of the yaldabaoth like wheat before a scythe. The branded figures led like intelligent commanders, crushing the life from the defenders with hosts of monsters and archons organized into recognizable formations.

"Monsters, fighting like men... Had I not seen it with my own eyes, I would not have believed it."

They lacked the training or coordination of human troops, but their sheer physical strength was enough to make up the difference. Seasoned warriors lined up and readied their shields only for the monsters to tear through their formation like an avalanche, shrugging off rains of arrows as they came. Despair washed over the soldiers as they saw how little their vaunted discipline availed them.

"What of High General Hermes, sir?" one of Garda's subordinates asked. "Should we look for him?"

Garda's heart urged him to rescue Hermes—and the rest of the defenders besides—but the cost to his own soldiers would be too great. Even with spirit weapons, their casualties would be tremendous. His plans did not allow for unnecessary losses.

"I cannot send my soldiers to their deaths," he said. "We turn back. If the enemy discovers us, all will be lost."

"What about the monsters, sir? Should we not try to learn where they are going?"

"The One-Eyed Dragon has his own plans, or so he claims. We have our orders and our destination."

"Understood, sir."

"One more thing." Garda produced three letters and handed them over. "Ensure these reach their recipients. The One-Eyed Dragon, Second Prince Selene, and Queen Claudia."

Claudia's letter had been penned by Surtr's own hand. The soldier bowed his head, conscious of the burden he now carried, and hurried soundlessly away into the darkness.

Garda turned back to the horde of monsters before raising his eyes to the sky. "What now, One-Eyed Dragon? Your foresight has failed you."

Surtr had expected that Friedhof would hold until the Crow Legion and their spirit weapons arrived. As a precaution, he had prepared for the possibility that it might not, but there was no denying that the yaldabaoth had broken the wall far quicker than he had predicted.

"Now that these beasts are loose, they will not be easily brought to heel. Only with the Spirit Wall could the empire engage them on equal terms."

With Friedhof having fallen, it would take more than the Crow Legion to stop the monsters' advance. How much of this had Surtr foreseen, Garda wondered. More to the point, this was far from the only time a tiny detail might become a fatal snag. No man could account for everything. He felt a creeping worry that the situation had deteriorated beyond even the Black-Winged Lord's power to salvage.

"I fear, One-Eyed Dragon, one of your foes may have finally

slipped your net."

He heaved a sigh as if physically expelling his doubts. Hardening his heart, he took another glance at the dust cloud trailing behind the monsters before stepping away from the trees.

"We fall back. There is nothing left for us in this place, and we must make haste." The screams of dying soldiers rang out behind him as he issued orders to his men. "Leave no sign that we were ever here. One trace and they will sniff us out like hounds."

"Yes, sir," they said as one.

"All we can do now is pray Selene prevails over House Brommel."

Friedhof had fallen, and still the northern nobles were preoccupied with their ugly squabble. Power struggles blinded the participants to their true foes. More than one nation had fallen that way.

"For what it's worth, High General Hermes, I hope you can forgive me."

With one last look over his shoulder, Garda turned toward Reisenriller and, with a stony expression, began to march.

* * * * *

The eighth day of the eleventh month of Imperial Year 1026

Two tides of human bodies crashed together with a cacophony of battle cries. They raised their shields, thrust with their spears, chopped wildly with their swords. The souls of hundreds expired in an instant. The blood of thousands arced through the sky. The voices of tens of thousands became a deafening roar. Thudding impacts shuddered through the earth, and the air trembled with the zeal of human beings asserting their desire to live before heaven. Thousands of corpses littered the nameless tundra. The snow ran red with blood, and countless footsteps had churned it to mud that stank of iron.

House Scharm, the rulers of the north, had clashed at last with their rivals, House Brommel. Neither had attempted subtlety. This was a simple battle, both sides advancing toward the other, proud and unafraid. While House Brommel had twenty thousand more

soldiers than House Scharm, not all of them were participating in the fighting. Some nobles were watching to see which way the wind blew, some trembled in fear, and some awaited their chance to pounce.

House Scharm's forces were fighting the most valiantly. Their commanders watched the front lines carefully, judging the flow of battle and issuing orders to battalions of aides.

"Tell the second cohort to loose their arrows," Second Prince Selene said. "Use that cover to retract the center of the first cohort and move the flanks forward. If the enemy are foolish enough to charge, it will be the last thing they do." He kept his eyes on the field as he addressed one of his retainers. "Phroditus, how fares the rest of the field?"

"A stalemate all around, Your Highness. More nobles are sitting back than we expected. So far, we and House Brommel are the only ones to bare steel. I confess, I expected a fiercer assault. Do you suppose they're planning something?"

"They have more reserves than we do, so I wouldn't put it past them," Selene said, "but even so, their offensive lacks teeth."

So far, this battle had barely been more than a skirmish. Neither side could strike a conclusive blow as long as they kept holding back to see what the other would do. Selene had expected House Brommel to be more aggressive, putting more faith in their superior numbers, but if anything, they seemed to have an overabundance of caution. Their efforts so far had been feeble. They were succeeding at one thing, however: wasting time, which Selene and House Scharm had in short supply.

"As far as we can tell, our agents are embedded in their camp," Phroditus said, "but they have yet to send word."

"Could they be trying to flank us?"

"We are sending out all the scouts we can, Your Highness, but no enemy troops have been sighted."

"Then what are they doing?" Selene thought for a moment. "Has there been any word from Reisenriller?"

"Nothing, Your Highness. I do not believe that is their goal. Our reconnaissance teams in the area have reported nothing. As best I

can tell, House Brommel's attention is focused on this battlefield."

"They have the greater numbers, but they make no attempt to use them... They're scheming something, there's no question of that."

Selene sank into thought. What did the head of House Brommel hope to achieve? Wasting time ought to have been as undesirable for him as it was for House Scharm. Both sides wanted to bring the conflict to a swift resolution—House Scharm to send reinforcements to Friedhof, House Brommel to consolidate their control of the north before the rest of the empire stabilized.

As Selene pondered, Herma approached. "Your Highness."

"Ah, Herma. Do you have some news for me?"

"Yes, Your Highness. There is a disturbance in the enemy encampment."

"A disturbance? What kind?"

"We don't know, Your Highness, but they appear to be in some disarray. We have sent more spies into their ranks, but it may be some time before word comes back."

"More waiting, hm? No, I have a better idea." Selene grasped his horse's reins and hauled himself into the saddle.

Herma ran up to him, alarmed. "What are you doing, Your Highness?!"

"There's no telling when those spies will get back to us. I may as well do what we can in the meanwhile."

"Surely you don't mean to take to the field yourself?!"

"But of course. House Brommel's first cohort is charging into our trap as we speak. I want to make certain our soldiers finish them off."

Selene turned his horse about, drove his heels into its flanks, and set off for the battlefront. Herma could only watch him go. As he stood in stunned silence, another horse raced past him bearing his sister, Phroditus. She, it seemed, had better anticipated Selene's actions.

"I assume you won't be dissuaded, Your Highness?" she asked as she came abreast of him.

"I'm afraid not," he replied. "Will you join me?"

She nodded. “My sword is House Scharm’s to wield.”

“Then fetch a hundred of my guards. That should be enough to take care of their frontline troops.”

“Yes, Your Highness!” Phroditus gave a nod of acknowledgment and pulled away, heading for where the prince’s honor guard were stationed.

Selene watched her go fondly. Once she was out of sight, he turned to her brother, who was still staring, slack-jawed, some way behind him. “Herma!”

“Um...yes, Your Highness!”

“You’re in charge while I’m gone!”

Herma bowed his head respectfully. “Fair fortune to you, Your Highness!”

Selene stroked his horse’s neck before giving it a slightly stronger thump. “Well, then! I daresay it’s time to make a return to the battlefield!”

He rode away at top speed. As the soldiers fell back to let him pass, his honor guard fell in behind him, led by Phroditus, who pulled up by his side. The imperial lion fluttered on their banner, and fear rippled through the enemy lines as they saw who was bearing down on them.

Selene was too seasoned a warrior not to seize the moment. He whipped his twin swords from their sheaths and lopped off a soldier’s head. As the enemy troops reeled back in shock at his appearance, the rest of his honor guard crashed into them like a juggernaut. A cavalry charge with sufficient momentum was a force to be feared. The second prince and his knights were unstoppable, and the enemy’s nerve failed them. More than a few soldiers cowered on the spot, covering their heads as if waiting for a storm to pass. With the charge to open the way, House Scharm’s first cohort poured into the breach, striking without mercy at those left behind. House Brommel’s vanguard rapidly descended into panic.

Selene flicked the blood from his blade as he spurred his horse faster. He turned to Phroditus. “Any movement on their back lines?”

“None, Your Highness. They seem to have given their vanguard up for lost.”

"Because they're confident in their numbers, do you think?"

"The battle has only just begun, Your Highness. An early defeat will undermine morale. If they think they can abandon their front line without consequence, they are fools."

"In that case—"

Selene cut himself off as drums began to beat. Banners went up near House Brommel's core. Shouts rose from all around as enemy officers barked orders in answer.

"It looks like they've decided to save their soldiers after all," Phroditus said. "Judging by that dust cloud, their second cohort is on the move."

"They certainly took their time." With a shrug, Selene turned his horse about. "Time to return to safety, I think. There's no point staying here."

"Now, Your Highness?"

"I've learned everything I wanted to. I'll know whether I'm right once our spies report back."

"Very well."

Selene was obviously being circumspect, but Phroditus trusted him, even if his decision had taken her by surprise. She turned to the rest of the honor guard and began to issue orders.

Selene sighed and stroked his chin, staring up at the sky. "I hope I'm wrong...but there's no harm in planning for the worst."

He had held a nameless suspicion ever since the first stirrings of discontent from House Brommel, and he found no pleasure in knowing he might be about to discover its shape.

* * * * *

The tenth day of the eleventh month of Imperial Year 1026

In a fort on the Lebering border, an amethyst-haired woman sipped daintily at a cup of tea. Several stern-faced zlosta watched her in silence. Every one of them was stout and muscular, nothing like her delicate grace, but they waited on her with unquestioning loyalty. She commanded their utter devotion. Still, they frowned a little as they watched, their eyes taking on a hint of reproach.

Claudia, for her part, remained impassive in the face of her nobles' disapproval.

Eventually, one of the men laid a hand on the desk, attempting to inject some urgency into the proceedings. "Your Majesty, battle has been joined between House Scharm and House Brommel."

"Has it, indeed... What news from Friedhof?"

"Nothing yet, Your Majesty."

"A shame. I was concerned about that most of all. What to do..."

Her courtiers would only tolerate inaction for so long. If she did not make a decision soon, there was a risk of some ambitious noble taking matters into their own hands. She would have liked to think none of them would be so foolish, but there was no question that their patience was running out.

She looked up from the map to the advisors around the table. "I would hear your thoughts. Should we lend the empire our support or take their land for ourselves?"

One man stepped forward. "If I may, Your Majesty, I believe we ought to ally with the empire. We have nothing to gain from going to war with them."

"And why do you say that?"

"Lebering's soil is poor, Your Majesty. We import much of our food from the empire. Without them, we could not feed our people. A prolonged conflict would mean subjecting ourselves to famine."

Claudia's eyes sparkled with amusement. "Even if we seized the fertile land in the south of the northern territories?"

The noble harrumphed. "If we could hold it, we would certainly be victorious, Your Majesty. But that land is far from Lebering. Our supply lines would be stretched dangerously thin."

"And is that your only reason?"

"No, Your Majesty. Putting the empire in our debt would be its own reward. With our help, the imperials would have no difficulty pacifying the northern territories. We may be able to obtain the land we want by peaceful means. At the very least, the empire would have to recognize our value as an ally. We would gain a great deal of leverage."

"I see. You have made your case." Claudia clapped her hands.

“And what of the argument for going to war?”

Another noble stepped forward. “First and foremost, we would expand our territory, Your Majesty. The conflict between House Brommel and House Scharm appears set to continue for longer than we expected. We will have ample time to secure the north’s most fertile lands and establish a buffer zone.”

“And what if their battle ends sooner than you think? Are we to simply hold out?”

“Indeed, Your Majesty.” The noble flashed a confident smile and laid out pawns on the map. “The victors will no doubt attempt to take back their lands, but they will be exhausted from battle, and our soldiers are strong. Moreover, the rest of the empire will be too beleaguered to send reinforcements. We may not be able to defeat them, but if we can hold our ground, that will be enough.”

Claudia leaned over the table, intrigued. “For the empire to fall in on itself, I assume?”

The noble nodded. “Indeed, Your Majesty. The Vanir Triumvirate and Free Folk’s march to war presents a golden opportunity. The empire will exhaust itself long before our battle in the north is concluded, its nobles will turn on one another, and the time will come for Lebering to become a conqueror.” He returned to his seat with a satisfied smile, evidently confident that he had made a persuasive argument.

Claudia smiled, clearly pleased. “Thank you all. I am glad to have such insight to advise me.”

“Have you reached a decision, then, Your Majesty?” one noble asked.

The relief in the room was palpable. Whatever she chose, it would at least mean the end of this interminable waiting. Lebering would finally make something, anything, of this moment.

Claudia dashed their hopes with a radiant smile. “Yes. We will remain here a little longer and see how the situation evolves.”

“With respect, Your Majesty, any longer and this opportunity may pass us by.”

“Perhaps. But better that than choosing wrong, don’t you think?”

“Are you suggesting that you mean to find another way, Your

Majesty?”

“So I hope. But you have my word that I will make my final decision in three days’ time.”

“I... Very well, Your Majesty.”

A smile played on Claudia’s lips as she watched the consternation spread among her advisors. As far as she was concerned, she had plenty of time. Lebering could make an ally or an enemy of the empire whenever it wished. The real question was this: Would it satisfy itself with a modest victory, risk disaster to dream of greater glory, or forge blindly into the unknown in pursuit of a third way?

She giggled. “Well, no matter how all this turns out...for what I desire, there is ample time.”

Three days. More than enough time for his letter to reach her.

“Don’t keep me waiting, Lord Surtr.”



* * * * *

There was no moon that night. A black pall hung over the stars, swaddling the world in darkness. Only wavering torchlight remained to illuminate the path ahead. Metal jostled and clanked with every step. Nickers and whinneys rang loud in the night air. Slight noises combined into a far louder whole, announcing the passage of the Crow Legion, the elite soldiers of Baum, along the road. A carriage trundled in the center of the pack, bearing its commander and his entourage.

Luka regarded Hiro, cocking her head. "Do you intend to tell me where we're going?"

"To regroup with Garda."

She frowned. "To what end?"

"I'm going to repay an old debt."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"That all will be one." Hiro opened the window, heedless of the chill breeze that blew in, and called out into the dark. "Muninn?"

"Here!" Muninn pulled his horse alongside the carriage.

"Could you ride ahead and help Garda?"

"Be my pleasure!"

The thunder of hooves rattled the glass as Hiro shut the window. For a while, the carriage was quiet.

"Friedhof has fallen," Luka said at last, strangely uncomfortable with the silence.

"So Garda wrote," Hiro replied.

"Do you suppose this will mean the end of the north?"

"It wouldn't have if House Scharm and House Brommel had made peace like they should have, but with them still at each other's throats...it doesn't look good."

"Is there no hope for a truce?"

"House Brommel committed to their course the moment they rebelled against a great house. Besides, a truce won't erase what they've done."

"So they anticipate punishment either way."

"This monster invasion will take longer to repel than the Vanir Triumvirate, and there's no prizes for guessing what will happen to House Brommel once the rest of the empire is free to turn its attention to the north." Hiro patted his neck suggestively. "Truce or no truce, they've already sealed their fate."

Luka snorted dismissively. "So they'd rather save their own skins than their nation. What do they expect to happen to them once the north is a den of monsters?"

Hiro blinked. "Everyone wants to live, not just the powerful."

He looked down at Garda's letter again. One line in particular jumped out at him. *"Saved by a woman named Meteia." Hmm...*

Surely that could not be right. Meteia was a name from a thousand years ago. She had once served as a member of Schwartz's Black Hand.

But she didn't survive the war.

She had perished in a trap laid by the Demiurgos. Hiro could still recall the battlefield that had marked her grave. It had been a grisly sight. None had survived the fighting, and the corpses that remained had been disfigured beyond recognition. He had sought out and leveled zlosta encampments throughout the land hoping to find her captive, but to no avail. His hopes of finding her alive had slimmed to nothing when Hydra had declared he had slain her personally. Hiro had ensured the primozlosta bled for that after the war was over.

If I could meet her face-to-face, then I'd know for sure...but I don't know where to find her.

After saving Garda from the archpriestess—Nameless, Hiro corrected himself—and treating his wounds, Meteia had vanished. Her goals, it seemed, were a mystery. Why had she hidden rather than revealed herself to him?

Perhaps someone else has assumed her name. Then again, only a handful of people in history could have fought off Nameless. There's no real way to tell without seeing her for myself.

Luka's voice interrupted his musings. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing important."

"Is that so." Luka scowled, effectively having been told to mind

her own business.

Hiro tried to head her off before she grew difficult. “Do you think the dead can come back to life?” he asked.

“Most certainly.”

His eyes widened. That had not been the answer he had expected. “Really?”

“Igel has been reborn as Huginn, has he not?”

“That’s not what... Hmm. Actually, that’s an interesting way of thinking about it...”

Reincarnation, not resurrection. In that case...

The Spirit King, maybe. He...or rather, she *could have done it.*

Almost as soon as he had returned to Aletia, Hiro had sensed something of her in Liz’s shadow. In light of that, perhaps Meteia’s miraculous rebirth was not such a surprise.

Meteia always was Rey’s right hand.

She had been fiercely loyal to her mistress. The Spirit King could have made good use of that devotion.

The real question is, where has the Spirit King gone? She’s been pulling all sorts of strings this whole time, but she’s nowhere to be found. Or, no...she has shown herself, now that I think about it, although only briefly...

She had appeared before Hiro a handful of times, but not to do anything of note—only to seemingly mock him before disappearing once more. She really hadn’t changed; she still believed the whole world danced in the palm of her hand. Yet while he’d played his part in her schemes a thousand years ago, he would not do so again.

“What are you smiling about?” Luka asked.

“Was I smiling?”

“You were. Planning something nefarious, I don’t doubt.”

“Not at all.”

Hiro brought a hand to his face and was surprised to find that she was right. But who could blame him? Soon, he would come face-to-face with someone he had been waiting a very, very long time to meet.

“Maybe I’m just in a good mood,” he said.

“And why is that?”

"I'm going to see an old friend soon. I'm looking forward to it."

He smiled, but his teeth clenched bitterly at the back of his mouth. He had come to Aletia as a puppet, and even now, he was still dancing on the same strings. Yet soon, he would confront the one who knew the truth of it all: his blood-brother's legacy, Rey's illness, the spark within Liz, and his return to this world.

"Soon, Spirit King, we'll see how well I understood your game."

All would be one. The only question left now was what she would choose. His path was set, written in stone, its ultimate destination unchangeable.

"A pity, Liz. If only I could have seen you take the throne."

* * * * *

Licht, the capital of Esel, remained under the control of occupying forces. While the imperial encampment was still under heavy guard, however, the atmosphere was relaxed and the soldiers did not seem to expect trouble. It was hard to blame them. The empire and Six Kingdoms were now at peace. Indeed, Queen Lucia of Anguis—in her new capacity as the representative of Six Kingdoms—had offered the heads of the commanders of Vulpes, Tigris, and Scorpius as proof of the newfound trust between them. She had also executed a great number of álfar, whose corpses were still being cremated in the blackened ruin where their encampment had once stood.

Liz stood in the imperial camp, watching the fires burn. A petite figure slipped up behind her: her chief strategist, Aura.

"We're ready," Aura said. "Or at least, as ready as we'll ever be."

"How many did you manage?" Liz asked.

"Two thousand."

"Then we'll work with that."

"I've told the rest to march once they're ready."

"You don't sound as worried as I thought you might be," Liz remarked.

"There's nothing to worry about as long as Lucia keeps her word."

Aura turned to stare at the glow on the horizon. Far in the distance, the armies of Anguis were burning thousands upon

thousands of álfar corpses. She could only imagine how much resentment it must have taken to produce such bloody revenge.

Liz laid a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. "That's between Anguis and the rest of Six Kingdoms. It's not our place to interfere."

"I know. We'll make it right someday."

Liz nodded in agreement before turning to the woman standing stoically in the darkness. "Are you sure you're healed?"

Scáthach nodded. "With Gáe Bolg returned, I daresay I've never been better."

"Right," Liz said noncommittally. As far as she knew, Gáe Bolg had been in Hiro's possession. Why had it returned to Scáthach? Spiritblades were bound to their chosen by a covenant, but Scáthach's had been broken. The severity of her injuries had been proof enough of that.

Scáthach saw her staring and shrugged, seeming to read her mind. "Some vestige of our contract must have remained. Stovell's curse riddled me so deeply that even Gáe Bolg couldn't excise it. That must have been why I suffered the spirits' curse."

By an unfortunate convergence of circumstances, it had appeared that she was forcing Gáe Bolg to her will. The Spiritblade had been serving her willingly, but the Spirit King's bindings cared not for such things.

"Sensing the threat to my life," Scáthach continued, "Gáe Bolg fled to Lord Hiro's side."

"And when he healed you, he gave it back?"

"So I believe. That is a kindness he would do."

There was no hesitation in Scáthach's words. She evidently had a great deal of faith in Hiro's character. Liz, however, only found herself more confused than ever.

"I just don't understand him. That was why I wanted to keep him where I could see him, but he still managed to slip away from me."

If only she had managed to capture him, she might at last have known some peace, but Lucia's intervention had put a stop to that. What was more, he had taken the truce as an opportunity to vanish once more under the pretence of regrouping with the Crow Legion. Even her eyes could not find him now.

Scáthach peered at her with concern, seeing her frustration. “Do you not trust him, my lady?”

“I do. I just hate that he never tells me anything.”

Again, he was trying to take everything on his shoulders, thrusting all help away as he marched toward some goal that only he could see. That was no way for anyone to live. It would crush him. There was no happiness waiting at the end of his road.

“We have to stop him,” she said.

Scáthach nodded. “We do.”

Liz still did not fully understand what Hiro intended, but he had made clear that whatever becoming a god meant, Lævateinn was an integral part of it. They would meet again, that much was certain. Once she had attended to the dangers facing the empire, she could track him down and prize an explanation from him.

“First, we have to deal with the Vanir Triumvirate,” she said. “Then we can worry about him.”

“I doubt we shall need to stay our hands. When the time comes, all the strength I can bring to bear is yours.”

Smiling despite herself, Liz gestured to Aura, setting her cloak aflutter. “Aura! We’re leaving!”

“Understood.” Aura raised a hand. Three soldiers stepped forward, leading their steeds.

“I’m sorry to ask,” Liz said as she mounted up, “but do you know the Triumvirate’s numbers?”

Aura was fighting a losing battle against the height of her horse. She typically used a platform to mount up, but it seemed to have been misplaced. Eventually, Scáthach took pity on her and gave her a boost. Aura settled into the saddle, red-faced but otherwise trying to act like nothing was amiss.

“They’ve split up to march through Draal,” she said. “Our spies are struggling to get a proper count, but they estimate over eighty thousand.”

“We should hurry to San Dinalle. We need to meet up with Ludurr and head them off at the pass.”

Aura nodded. “I’ve sent messengers ahead. There’s something else too. Second Prince Selene and House Brommel have clashed in

the north."

"Of course they have. Just as the Triumvirate and the Free Folk are coming up from the south."

The situation was dire, but haste would only lead to mistakes. Besides, anxiety in command would filter down through the ranks. The best thing they could do now was act as though everything was in hand.

"The empire is on the brink of an unprecedented crisis," Liz continued. "One mistake could send it over the edge. But we'll manage, I'm sure of it."

The existential nature of the coming battle was hard to comprehend. The empire had ruled Soleil for a thousand years. No doubt most of the soldiers would find a world without it unimaginable. No comparable threat had faced the empire in recent years, and its vast breadth made problems over the horizon easy to ignore. It was not a matter of pride or complacency, but a failure of imagination.

"On the bright side," Liz added, "that means they can focus on the problems in front of them."

The soldiers could afford to ignore the true weight of the burden they carried, focusing solely on remaining alert for the next battle. They were already tired from the Six Kingdoms campaign, and maintaining their morale would be crucial in the days to come. In that sense, Liz found herself oddly thankful for the empire's formidable size.

Aura pursed her lips. She seemed to have come to the same conclusion. "We should be grateful," she said. "There's a lot to worry about. The nobles are turning on their people."

"Agreed. But for now, all we can do is hurry."

The rank and file might have had the luxury of ignoring the larger picture, but in the seat of command, Liz and her allies all felt the chill touch of the reaper's scythe on their necks.

* * * * *

As the imperial troops advanced under cover of night, a figure

watched from afar. Flames crackled at her back, and she smiled as she wafted away the stench of burning flesh with her fan. She was Queen Lucia of Anguis, and now that her schemes had come to fruition, she as good as occupied the throne of the High King.

Seleucus approached. "Will you simply let them leave, Your Majesty?"

"They may. I have my truce. I would not ask for more."

"It seems like a golden opportunity, Your Majesty. They suspect nothing. If we struck now from behind, the battle would be ours. We could sweep through Faerzen. Regain all we have lost."

"I have no interest in such paltry fare. And to aid the Vanir Triumvirate? Why, I shudder to think of it. I would much rather the empire dispose of the álfar, and I shall stop at nothing to see it done...short of contributing my own soldiers, perhaps."

That was the very purpose of their truce. Lucia was glad to have limited the imperial losses. All her plans required the empire to prevail over the Triumvirate. She could only hope that Liz and her allies would make themselves useful.

"Just a suggestion, Your Majesty," Seleucus said. "It seems to me that our future could be made a great deal easier if we disposed of the heir apparent to the imperial throne."

"For now, she is better left alive," Lucia said curtly. "Only my foes would rejoice to see her dead." She turned and directed her fan at Seleucus. "How goes the reorganization of our forces?"

"Smoothly. I take it you mean to march forthwith?"

"Of course. What is this truce for if not to ensure that I bring Six Kingdoms under my rule?" Her eyes narrowed. "Unless our troops are not ready after all, and this is some manner of double bluff?"

Seleucus raised his hands. "Of course not, Your Highness. Would I do that?"

A carriage pulled up before Lucia. Seleucus opened the door and gestured for her to get inside, then followed suit once she had boarded. As the wheels began to move, he produced a stack of papers.

"We still have several thousand álfar captives whose fates are undecided," he said. "What shall we do with them?"

"Relieve the superior officers of their heads," Lucia said. "Have the rest put on cargo ships and sent back to their homeland."

"As you command, Your Majesty." Seleucus shuffled his papers. "Next, Queen Jilbe's whereabouts and status remain uncertain. There were traces of a massacre in the palace. It appears that her retainers have been slain."

"You shall not find her. Not if what Lady Celia Estrella told me at the treaty signing is to be believed."

It appeared that Jilbe had become a Fallen and carved a bloody swathe across the battlefield to the imperial camp, where she had been slain by the former princess Scáthach of Faerzen, High Consul Skadi of Steissen, and the turncoat Luka du Vulpes. It was impossible to say what had set her on that wretched path, but it was hard to imagine her life would have been any better had she survived. The times were not kind to inept leaders. It was perhaps a blessing that she had perished poetically in battle.

"Leave a handful of officials behind in Licht," Lucia continued. "I shall leave the choice to you."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"What news from our spies in the other kingdoms?"

"Vulpes and Scorpius have fallen to rebellion, Your Majesty. The ruling families have been taken into custody. What would you have us do with them?"

"I have no pity for puppets of the álfar. Have their heads lopped off and strung up on the streets. That ought to serve as an example."

"It will be done, Your Majesty. As for Tigris, it appears that our allies are struggling to gain a foothold. The Triumvirate's influence is particularly strong there, and resistance is fierce."

"I see. Tell them they are to fight conservatively and await my arrival."

"I will send a messenger." Seleucus quickly jotted down a letter, opened the window, and beckoned to a soldier.

Once the message was handed over, Lucia turned to the next topic. "What of the other matter?"

"They have already left Anguis, Your Majesty. They ought to

arrive at their destination around the time we make it to Tigris."

"Splendid."

"Indeed. All is unfolding as you planned."

"So I should hope! I have not schemed so scrupulously for nothing."

Seleucus raised his hands helplessly. "Please don't forget that one mistake would have spelled the end of Six Kingdoms, Your Majesty."

Lucia gave a bark of laughter. "Indeed, indeed! But to tell the truth, 'twas not so hard. The Triumvirate is eminently predictable."

"They and Nameless may come to regret how sorely they abused us."

"Quite so. They made fine use of us, did they not?" Lucia's eyes took on a distant look. A grin spread across her face as she curled her fingers into a fist. "Long have we suffered under the heel of the álfar, debasing our human dignity, trembling in fear of their ire. We cowered in ignominy until even our own countrymen spat on us, yet still we endured."

Her fingers trembled and her teeth clenched to recall the shame she had suffered.

"Soon, we shall be truly free, and all the world shall know why Six Kingdoms is here."

Now, she voiced the true ambitions hidden in her breast, steeped in resentment and barely suppressed rage.

"It shall not be the empire or the Triumvirate or even Nameless who laughs last." Her eyes narrowed as she raised her fan to cover her mouth. "It shall be me."

* * * * *

"How fares the war to the west, I wonder?"

Selene gazed up into the starless night, his voice swallowed by the crackling of the bonfires. House Scharm's camp was heavily guarded, but between the cold and the austere atmosphere, it was not a place of much chatter.

"I do hope Liz is well."

The sound of approaching footsteps interrupted his thoughts. "It

was as you suspected, Your Highness."

He turned to see Phroditus behind him. The despondency fell from his face as he reassumed the solemn mantle of the second prince and the acting head of House Scharm.

"So Typhos von Brommel is not with his armies."

"No, Your Highness. I can only speculate as to where he has gone, but that is why his camp is in such confusion and why his nobles were so hesitant to act."

"Then that's the truth behind their lackluster offense. Their commander is missing in action. I admit, I'm a little surprised his nobles haven't deserted him already."

"Perhaps they are uncertain whether he has truly fled," Phroditus said. "His soldiers are still here, after all. But doubt will be spreading among them. We ought to help it on its way."

"I'll leave that to you," Selene said. "I recall that's your field of expertise."

"As you command, Your Highness. Still, I do wonder where he's gone. He may be staging an ambush, perhaps, or trying to flank us."

"What do our scouts say?"

"There have been no suspicious sightings in our vicinity, Your Highness. Might he have struck out for Reisenriller?"

"I doubt it, but I suppose I ought to send a messenger just in case."

Phroditus frowned. "Do you have some idea where he is, Your Highness?"

"Some. But not enough to act on, I fear."

"Is that why you have assembled a task force?"

"A precaution, nothing more. I hope it will not prove necessary."

"If I may, Your Highness... If he doesn't want Reisenriller, then what does he want?"

Phroditus's question pierced clean to the heart of the matter. From there, it was only a small step to the answer.

"If he truly means to deal the empire a fatal blow, there's only one place he would go."

Phroditus's eyes widened as comprehension dawned. "Surely not..."

At that moment, Herma arrived. He drew close to Selene and whispered into the prince's ear, "A messenger has arrived from the Crow Legion, Your Highness."

"Surtr's forces?" Selene asked.

"The very same. He appears to be in something of a hurry."

"I'll hear him. Double the camp guard and have him sent to my tent."

"At once, Your Highness." Herma nodded firmly. "I will assign your honor guard to the perimeter immediately." With that, he hurried away into the darkness.

Selene shot Phroditus a meaningful glance, and they returned to his tent. After a short while, footsteps sounded outside the entrance and Herma's stern voice requested admittance.

"Enter," Selene commanded.

The tent flap drew back, and a messenger came in. "Your Imperial Highness," he began, "it is a great honor to—"

Selene silenced him with a wave. "Save the formalities. Tell me why you're here."

The messenger nodded. "Friedhof has fallen, Your Highness. A tide of monsters has poured through, laying waste to Malaren."

"Impossible!" Phroditus stepped forward. "Friedhof is under my fathe— High General Hermes's protection!"

The messenger was taken aback for a moment but returned her gaze. "It is the truth, my lady. I bring word from our commander, Garda." He produced a letter and held it out.

Selene took the letter and skimmed it over. An uneasy silence filled the tent. A bead of sweat trickled down the messenger's cheek as the air grew tense. It pooled on his chin and dripped down to the floor.

Selene looked up again. "It seems your claim is true."

"Are you certain, Your Highness?" Phroditus asked. "Baum may be our ally, but can they really be trusted?"

It was all too clear that she did not want to believe her father had been defeated, but she would have to face the truth if she was ever to move forward. The situation was too urgent for doubts.

"They would have nothing to gain from the deception," Selene

said.

"I cannot believe my father would allow Friedhof to fall so easily."

"Nor can I, but nevertheless..." He paused. "This letter says nothing of Hermes. Do you know what has become of him?"

The messenger looked down. "We are still not certain whether he is alive or dead, Your Highness. No body has been recovered."

"Malaren was in a dire state, I take it."

"Yes, Your Highness. The townsfolk evacuated southward, but the garrison stayed and fought. They died valiantly at their posts. Under yaldabaoth command, the monsters were formidable."

"Do you know where those monsters are bound now?"

"South, Your Highness."

"Not Reisenriller, then. South would take them to the western territories... Faerzen, perhaps?"

Surely not. Faerzen had nothing that the yaldabaoth would want. Nobody would care about conquering such a war-torn land. But in that case, where could they be going?

Selene racked his brains. At last, he arrived at the answer. "The capital!" he cried, rising to his feet.

Phroditus looked skeptical. "Are you certain, Your Highness? Certainly, striking at the central territories would cripple the empire, especially with its armies elsewhere, but are monsters capable of that kind of strategy?"

"Ordinary monsters aren't, but yaldabaoth are."

Yaldabaoth were just as cunning as humans. If they wanted to topple the empire, they would aim straight for the heart. What was more, Rosa had led her forces south to engage the Vanir Triumvirate. The capital was said to be impregnable, but that reputation would be worthless without a garrison to defend it.

"We were blinded by presumption," Selene muttered. "We thought the collapse of the north was the greatest danger to the empire, but if they sought to bring down the Spirit Wall all along..."

Phroditus and the others glanced at one another, but Selene paid them no mind. His eyes widened in realization.

"Of course... That was House Brommel's goal all along!"

At that moment, the tent flap flew open and a bloodied soldier

stumbled through. “Your Highness!” he shouted. “We have found Typhos von Brommel!”

“Where?!” Herma barked.

“South,” the soldier gasped. “He is making for the capital with three thousand men!” With that, he collapsed on the spot.

With a word of thanks, Selene rose to his feet. “And so the full picture reveals itself. Tend to him. I will take two thousand soldiers and make for the capital.”

Herma stepped forward. “But Your Highness, what of the battle?!”

Selene silenced him with a look. “My Twinfang Generals will take command in my stead. End this farce as soon as you are able and follow me. We now know that Typhos von Brommel is absent. Spread that knowledge among our foes, and they will capitulate in short order. You are capable of that, I trust?”

Herma and Phroditus nodded, cowed. Refusal was clearly not an option.

Selene turned back to the Crow Legion messenger. The man straightened up as the prince’s eyes fell on him.

“Take word back to Lord Surtr,” Selene commanded. “I request that he join forces with me at once.”

“Yes, Your Highness!” The man turned and left.

“Well,” Selene said once he was gone. “I suppose I ought to be going.”

Phroditus and Herma bowed. “Fair fortune to you, Your Highness.”

“And to you. When next we meet, may we all have good tidings to share.” With one last wave, Selene stepped out of the tent. “And as for you, fair Vernesse...” he murmured, “what will you make of this?”

Much would depend on Claudia’s actions. If she wanted, she could seize control of the north. The Twinfang Generals would not be strong enough to stop her forces. It would be hard to make decisions with that knowledge hanging over him, but he could not afford to hesitate. Now that he knew what Typhos von Brommel intended, there could be no going back.

* * * * *

The twelfth day of the eleventh month of Imperial Year 1026

The imperial fort burned before Claudia's eyes. Soldiers groaned in pain beneath the rubble of the ruined wall. Lebering's armies had struck swiftly and decisively, leveling it before they could respond.

She watched for a while from the main camp, a cold glint in her eyes, before an approaching aide caught her attention.

"Your Majesty," the man said, "we have taken prisoners, perhaps a hundred. What would you have us do with them?"

"Let's see..." she mused. "Let two or three go free, I think. Behead the rest."

The aide looked shocked. "Are you certain, Your Majesty?"

She giggled. "But of course. We have already crossed the border and burned a fort. The die is cast, as the saying goes."

"Ought we not execute them all, in that case?"

"Then who would tell the rest of Soleil of the terror of the zlosta?"

"I see. We shall sow fear as you command."

"Good." Her voice grew cold. "Ensure that every human who takes up arms against the zlosta is met with death."

The aide nodded and rode away. Claudia cast one last glance at the ruined fort before mounting her steed, her interest already fading.

"We ride south," she said to another aide. "Dispatch scouts ahead of us."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

She brought a hand to her chin, turning her plans this way and that in her mind. The road to her ultimate goal was clear, but war was nothing if not uncertain. Overthinking was foolish, but not planning at all was worse.

"Once we have claimed the fertile soil in the northern territories," she mused, "I think we ought to make for the capital."

Her aide frowned as he overheard her. "Our supply lines will be stretched thin, Your Majesty. It will be nigh impossible to hold any land we take."

"I highly doubt any of the turncoats who sided with House

Brommel will have the spine to resist the zlosta. Nonetheless, I have taken precautions just in case."

The aide's frown persisted despite Claudia's reassurances, but he did not have the nerve to disobey his queen. In the end, he gave up and nodded meekly.

Claudia smiled, concealing her disappointment. "It would be wise to forbid our forces from plundering, don't you think? And from harming the commonfolk too. We will only take up arms against our enemies. Any who violate this must be punished swiftly and severely, even the lowliest foot soldier." She brought a finger to her chin. "And write to the northern nobles demanding their surrender. We must spread word that the zlosta have come."

"As you command, Your Majesty."

"And so I choose the third path," she said under her breath. "But whether for better or for worse, only the gods know."

She took out a letter and cast it into a pile of smoldering rubble on the ground. Her eyes narrowed as it started to burn.

"Now, let us see if Lord Surtr can take responsibility for what he has done."

A smile came to her face, pitiless in its beauty.

Chapter 5: Those Who Seek the Heavens

"At long last, sister," the golden-haired youth said, "our dream lies within our grasp."

"Indeed." The woman smiled. "It has been a long road."

A dream, Meteia thought. Yes, that was the word. This could only have been a dream; a memory of happiness that had once been hers. How else was she to explain the presence of the soft-featured boy with the black hair? How else, come to that, was she to explain the presence of two people who were long dead?

"I'll cure you, Rey," said the boy. "I promise."

The woman laughed gently. "You are very kind, Lord Hiro."

An impossible hope. An inexplicable malady. Rey smiled, although every breath brought her pain. She knew her time was short. They all did, and yet they could not bring themselves to face the truth.

"There's a physician in the land we're going to. They say he can work miracles. I'll bring him back with me—"

"I'm not going to drop dead just yet, Lord Hiro. I am quite content to wait for your return."

"I'll be back before you know it."

Rey nodded, still smiling. "Be careful."

Hiro turned away and set out, glancing back over his shoulder as though reluctant to leave. The mood changed with his departure. Silence fell over the chamber. The air grew heavier, more oppressive. Meteia would have turned and fled if her legs had known how to move.

"Will you take care of him, Artheus?"

The golden-haired youth snorted good-naturedly. "Who do you take me for, sister? Rest and regain your strength. You shall hear word of our success soon enough."

He turned around, his cape swirling, and followed Hiro. With his departure, only two people remained: Rey, on her sickbed, and the knight-priestess who served her.

"My time grows short, Meteia," Rey said. "We both know it."

"Your Grace, you mustn't—"

"My death will come, and soon. The Spirit King has foreseen it."

Meteia's protest died in her throat. The word of a being as close to divine as a Lord of Heaven was as good as a decree from fate itself.

"You will have to take care of them in my stead."

Rey's face had an air of acceptance, although no one would have blamed her for weeping, but she only smiled to spare her loyal knight pain. Meteia had served her long enough to glean some insight into her heart. For that reason, she refused to give in.

"I will, Your Grace." Meteia feigned agreement, unwilling to cause her mistress needless distress. In her heart of hearts, however, she still held out hope. She would find a cure.

Her resolve remained firm, but the flow of time was cruel, and the struggles of those caught in its pull often came to nothing. The current dragged her ruthlessly on, and when it finally seemed as though her screaming lungs would have a reprieve, she found only despair waiting. She would have stopped the clock if she could have. But the memories kept coming, heedless of her attempts to avert her eyes or drown them out, unearthed from their graves one by one by some force beyond her control.

All at once, it was raining. The water felt clammy on her skin. She strode through the silent encampment and came to a stop before his tent.

"Hiro!" she barked. "I know you're in there!"

A human presence stirred inside the unlit tent. "Meteia? What are you doing here?"

It was so dark inside, she could not even see the boy. She let her senses lead the way, frowning as her foot brushed against something unpleasantly sticky.

At last, she came before him. "Where is the archpriestess?" she asked. "Where is Rey? Is she safe?"

He gave no reply.

She scowled as she looked down at him. Anger surged through her, and she lifted him up by the lapels. “Answer me! Where is she?!”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I was too late.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s dead,” he said, his voice grimly calm.

Her rage reached boiling point. “This is no time for jests! Tell me the truth!”

“The Demiurgos killed her before I ever reached her.” He looked down at her, his eyes dreadfully clear. “She’s dead, Meteia.”

“Truly?”

“Truly.”

“Why were you not there?! How could you let this happen?!” She flung him to the ground, only to trail off as she noticed the stickiness underfoot anew.

“What in the world?”

The hairs on the back of her neck bristled as her hand came away warm and wet. Hiro slipped out from beneath her and straightened up. A sword the color of powder snow manifested before him. Its radiance was undeniably beautiful, but it belonged in Rey’s hand.

“Is that Excalibur? But why...?”

She trailed off again as the Spiritblade’s glow illuminated their surroundings. The ground was littered with corpses, every last one hacked to pieces. She wrinkled her nose at the stench.

“Rey left it to me,” the boy said. “To take revenge on the zlosta in her name.”

“She said that?”

Rey would never have wished for such a thing. She had loved all the peoples of Soleil equally, and she would never have saddled Hiro with as cruel a burden as vengeance.

“No. She smiled to her last breath.”

Hiro grasped Excalibur by the hilt and speared a severed head. The grisly sight struck Meteia dumb with fear. As he lifted the head to regard it with lightless eyes, she wondered if he was even the

same person she had once known.

"She was kind," he murmured. "So kind. And that was her undoing."

"Hiro, what are you talking about? What have you done?"

"I will carry on her legacy. I must."

Hiro flicked his sword, sending the head flying, and strode from the tent. Meteia forced her trembling legs to follow him, but she did not get far before stopping in her tracks. Near the tent, the ground fell away into a sheer cliff over a fatal drop. Hiro stood on the edge, looking down. Where an idyllic sight ought to have unfolded, there was instead a sea of flame.

"Hiro," Meteia repeated hesitantly, "what have you done?"

Screams drifted from below, a storm of anguish rising to the sky against the driving rain. There had been a city there once, Meteia recalled—a picturesque place that any traveler would have done well to visit, agreeable in every respect but for the fact that it was ruled by the zlosta. Now, there was only an inferno.

"I will purge the zlosta from this world," Hiro said. "Eradicate them, man, woman, and child."

He turned back to her with hollow eyes, the burning city behind him. A crack of lightning threw his face into stark relief. In that moment, she knew he was a broken man—broken beyond repair. She felt the ground crumble beneath her feet. Darkness swallowed her vision, and then all was black.



A dream. Just a dream...

She opened her eyes to the sight of her own forelegs—white-furred paws housing sharp claws. She was in her wolf form, it seemed.

I should be ready to change back now.

She yawned and arched her back. Her body began to glow. The light reformed into a humanoid shape before subsiding again, revealing a nude female form. She reached irritably for the pieces of the archaic military uniform lying around her bed. She had just finished getting changed when there was a knock on her door.

"Are you awake in there, High General Vias?" came von Grax's gruff voice. "Lord von Muzuk wishes to speak with you."

"I've just woken up. I won't be a moment."

She emerged into the corridor to find von Grax leaning against the wall.

"What's this about?" she asked.

"A letter's arrived from Chancellor Rosa. He wants to discuss its implications for our future plans."

They set off together down the corridor.

"A letter from the chancellor..." Vias mused. "Dare I hope for good news?"

Von Grax snorted. "In times like these? You must still be half asleep."

"Perhaps, but it's nice to dream."

Their idle conversation continued all the way to a large door. The sentries took hold of the handles and let them inside. Beto von Muzuk and his aides were within, as was Liz's uncle, Margrave von Gurinda.

"High General Vias." Beto inclined his head. "I apologize for summoning you on such short notice."

"Think nothing of it." Vias took a seat, and the strategy meeting commenced.

"As I am sure none of you need reminding," Beto began, "the Vanir Triumvirate has divided its forces to advance through Draal. Previously, we did not know whether they were making for the southern or central territories. Now, we have our answer."

He clapped his hands, signaling for a soldier to unfurl a map across the table.

"They are marching for the imperial heartlands. This means they will pass through the western territories, undoing what progress has been made on reconstructing the region. Chancellor Rosa considers this unacceptable and desires to stop them at the border. Lord von Bunadala is assembling a force to hold them off, but his numbers so far stand at fewer than ten thousand."

Lord von Bunadala was father to Aura, the chief strategist of the imperial army's western contingent. He had never commanded much influence at court, but now that House Münster had fallen to Six Kingdoms' invasion, he and House Bunadala had been tipped to replace them as a new great house. While some protested that he was only under consideration on account of his daughter's position, his competence was beyond dispute.

"What of the chancellor's own forces?" a southern noble asked.

"They are no longer joining us," Beto said. "She writes that they have changed course for the Draali border."

"I see." The noble nodded. "So we are to hold off the Free Folk with our current numbers, then?"

"No. We too will be sending reinforcements to the west."

"With the Free Folk bearing down on us? Will we not need every sword we have?"

"It seems we might not." Beto produced a parchment scroll. "Our agents report that Steissen is putting up fierce resistance. The Free Folk are struggling to gain ground."

"You are certain of this?"

"I am. Perhaps they will break through eventually, but their strength will be greatly diminished by the time they reach us. They will offer little resistance."

There were nods all around the table, but while the rest of the attendees seemed satisfied, Vias was not.

"I don't know about the rest of you," she interrupted, "but I fail to understand why they are coming through Steissen at all. By the map, it would make far more sense to go through Draal. If the Vanir Triumvirate has safe passage, why would they not do the same?

Come to that, why would they attack Steissen at all when their ultimate objective is the empire?”

The imperial forces had made two assumptions: that the Free Folk would cross the border from Steissen, and that the Vanir Triumvirate would attack the south. But where had that information come from? She turned to regard the man at the head of the table: Beto von Muzuk.

“I wondered the same thing,” he said, “but there is no denying the evidence before our eyes. The Free Folk are invading Steissen. Perhaps they are seeking to settle old scores. Perhaps they simply hope to take the High Consul’s absence as an opportunity to expand their territory. Who can say?” He moved a few pawns across the map and turned to Vias. “But consider, High General: If the Free Folk had gone through Draal, they would have needed to pass through the western territories, making it harder to play the tricks they have. An invasion from one angle is easier to predict and easier to hold off. That, I assume, is why the Triumvirate opted for a two-pronged assault. I doubt they ever expected the Free Folk would find themselves bogged down in Steissen.” With a smirk, he removed all but one imperial pawn from the southern territories. “My nobles’ own forces will suffice.”

“And what of my eastern nobles?” Vias asked. “Are we to join the chancellor?”

“Exactly. The clear and present threat is the Vanir Triumvirate. We need as many soldiers on the western border as possible.” It was all too clear that Beto could not wait to oust the eastern nobles from his lands.

Vias nodded. “Then that is what we will do.”

He seemed surprised that she would accept so readily, but she saw the sense in what he said. If the Free Folk truly were stuck in Steissen, leaving soldiers in the south was a waste of good steel.

“With allowances for certain uncertainties, of course,” she added.

“Such as?”

“The possibility remains that they have outmaneuvered us. I would like General von Grax to remain in the south, just in case.”

That would forestall any unexpected surprises. Whatever Beto

was planning, he wouldn't dare act on it with von Grax and ten thousand men on Sunspear's doorstep.

"A generous offer. With a former high general safeguarding our lands, we will have nothing to fear."

"Good. In that case, I must excuse myself. I have preparations to attend to."

Vias stood up and left the room. Beto's gaze followed her out. He clearly wanted to say more, but she had no intention of listening. She had compromised as much as she was willing to. Now, she would have her way.

As she strode on, thoughts of the future swirling in her mind, von Grax caught up behind her. "I'm surprised you took his words at face value," he said. "The man's scheming something, no doubt about it."

"That's why you're going to watch him. I'm giving you ten thousand soldiers. Use them as you see fit."

"With pleasure. Want me to station them in the city?"

"It would be wise. Don't let him so much as breathe out of turn until the war with the Triumvirate is over."

Von Grax thumped his chest confidently. "Consider it done."

At that moment, a woman appeared in the corridor ahead of them.

"Lady Selvia?" Vias asked.

Selvia bowed her head. "May I borrow a moment of your time? There is something I wish to discuss."

* * * * *

The seventeenth day of the eleventh month of Imperial Year 1026

The Vanir Triumvirate's forces had split into six to march through Draal. The contingent containing the Holy Emperor and the rest of the Triumvirate's leaders had assumed control of a Draali fort, making it their base of operations while their scouts gathered information. The commanders had gathered in the temporary command center to present their reports to the figure at the head of the table.

“The order has gone out, Your Holiness,” one retainer said. “Our armies are converging.”

Nameless nodded beneath her disguise. “Very good.”

“With respect, Your Holiness, is it truly necessary for our tactics to be so...circumspect?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Forgive me if I am overstepping the mark, Your Holiness, but our morale is high and our forces are many. If we had simply marched for the empire instead of dividing our forces, we would have reached the central territories by now.”

“Possibly, yes. But without a strategy, we would soon have been forced to retreat.”

“Surely mere humans pose no threat to us, Your Holiness,” the other said.

The álfar were quick to bristle at any comparison to the other peoples of Soleil, but Nameless waved the objection away as if shooing off an unruly dog. “That very pride will be our downfall if we are not careful. We must be vigilant and thorough if we are to deceive our enemy’s sight.”

“You hope to confound them?” one of the álfar commanders asked, barely containing his laughter. “Surely that would not be hard.”

“All great ploys are simple tricks at their core,” Nameless said, deciding he could do with a little humbling. “They grow complex in the eye of the beholder. And they are especially effective on commanders who believe themselves above their foes. Commanders like you.”

A snicker arose from somewhere in the chamber. The álf sat back down, red-faced.

Once Nameless was satisfied that there were no more objections, she spoke again. “Just because our plans are easily understood does not mean they are easily enacted. Nonetheless, I believe they represent the best and shortest way to paradise for the álfar. If we stay the course, victory will be ours. If you have any further concerns, by all means, speak. You need fear no reprisal.”

Her words were met with silence.

"Good. Then let us move on to the next matter."

"An issue has arisen, Your Holiness," said the aide in charge of proceedings. "With our supply lines stretched so thin, our provisions are dwindling. We have reached out to the Grand Duchy for assistance, but their response has been reluctant. Our food stores remain adequate for the present, but they will not last forever."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the álfar commanders descended into uproar.

"We should have expected as much," one said. "Draal has still not decided whether its loyalties lie with us or the empire."

"Still?" another piped up. "Bah. They made their choice when they allowed us passage through their lands. Word will have reached the empire by now."

"So long as they don't spill imperial blood themselves, they can always concoct some excuse or other. It would be easy enough to claim they were under duress."

"Do you mean to say they might still side against us?"

"Just biding their time, I expect. Once the empire starts to falter, they'll be tripping over themselves to win our favor."

"We never should have trusted them. If it's supplies we need, I say we find some Draali nobles to squeeze them from."

"I have to object. I don't doubt those gutless cowards will bow and scrape when they see our numbers, but we may regret making enemies of them in the long run."

"Then are we to let our own soldiers starve?"

"I'd far rather offend a few Draalis."

The discussion was barely a debate; it was more like a venting of the various speakers' grievances with Draal. Nameless sighed in frustration and raised her hand to silence them.

"Enough," she said. "We shall purchase our supplies with coin from nearby towns and villages."

"Your Holiness?" one aide asked.

"We would be fools to court the resentment of those who could stab us in the back. Ensure that the local people are treated with respect. We have nothing to gain from making them our enemies."

"As you command, Your Holiness. We shall contact the local

authorities and work with them to make the necessary arrangements."

"A fine idea. Now, the next matter."

"Six Kingdoms and the empire have signed a truce, Your Holiness," another álf blurted out, although no one had given him leave to speak. "The war is over."

At once, the room was in uproar once more.

"What of Vulpes, Scorpius, and Tigris?" one commander demanded, half standing from his chair.

"Queen Lucia of Anguis brought the armies of Greif against them in punishment for disobeying the High King. They have been slaughtered."

"Preposterous! The leaders of Greif are puppets on our strings. They would never have allowed such a thing."

"Then we may assume they have been relieved of their posts," Nameless remarked.

Her aide nodded. "It seems likely, Your Holiness. We have been unable to contact them for quite some time. Queen Lucia now leads Greif's armies. It would appear that Six Kingdoms is no longer under our control."

"So be it. They have served their purpose."

If Vulpes, Scorpius, and Tigris had managed to defeat the imperial forces, all the better, but Nameless had only ever intended them to buy time for the Triumvirate's schemes to bear fruit. Her term as the chancellor of Greif had shown her all too well that Six Kingdoms could never defeat the empire. Admittedly, that was true of the Vanir Triumvirate as well, but at least the Triumvirate had influence. While the álfar leadership was no less corrupt than their human counterparts, their armies were within spitting distance of matching the imperial military. Now that the latter had grown frail, the contest was either side's to win.

"With respect, Your Holiness, is this not dire news? Now the bulk of the empire's forces will be free to move against us."

"That many soldiers cannot march so far in a day," Nameless said. "We ought to be concerned, yes, but there is no cause for panic."

"And if they did hurry back as fast as they could," her aide added,

“would they be able to hold their swords? That campaign would exhaust even the empire’s armies. Our troops are fresh. The odds would still favor us even if they did join the defense.”

“Precisely,” Nameless said. “As such, I ask that you keep word of this truce to yourselves. The news would only cause needless anxiety in the ranks. Our plans shall proceed unchanged.”

Her opinion proved decisive. The commanders nodded. Everyone present expected that would be the end of the meeting, but the aide laid one more letter on the table.

“This will have no bearing on proceedings, Your Holiness, but word has come from Vanaheim that Cardinal Snorri has passed.”

Nameless took the letter and read it through. It explained that Cardinal Snorri’s headless body had been found in the courtyard of Vana Vis. They had been slow to find it, she mused, but she kept her amusement to herself as she offered a eulogy.

“None devoted themselves more to preparing for this campaign than Cardinal Snorri. If not for his efforts, we would not be here today. Please, join me in praying for his soul and a brighter morrow for us all.”

The rest of their room nodded and bowed their heads in prayer.

“No doubt he looks down on us now from the Faerie King’s side. He died dreaming of an end to imperial tyranny. May we see that glorious future come to pass.”

“Yes, Your Holiness,” they said in unison.

Their hearts were one as they marched unquestioningly to the battlefield, by the command of their greatest enemy and in the name of a false deity. Could there have been a more comical sight? As Nameless prayed for the soul of a man slain by her own hand, it was all she could do not to clutch her stomach in laughter.

* * * * *

As schemes and conspiracies swirled across Soleil, Liz arrived at last in San Dinalle. The officials she had left to care for the city seemed to have proven equal to the task. It was more or less as she had left it, with peace and order maintained. Nonetheless, as she

arrived at the governor's mansion with Aura and Scáthach in tow, she could not help but notice some uncomfortable looks on the southern nobles' faces. Ludurr, whom she had left in charge, was nowhere to be seen.

"May I ask where Lord Ludurr is?" she said.

The nobles bowed their heads as one. "Apologies, Your Highness. I fear we do not know. He has vanished without a trace."

"Vanished?" Liz narrowed her eyes.

The noble she was addressing paled and lowered his head further. "It is the truth, Your Highness. I swear it on the Spirit King's name."

"And he left nothing to explain his whereabouts? No parting message?"

"Nothing, Your Highness. Believe me, we are just as confounded as you are."

"Have you tried looking for him?"

"Yes, Your Highness. We have scoured the mansion, the city, and the surrounding countryside, but we have found no trace of him or his aides."

She could see in their faces that they were telling the truth, a judgment that her new eyes supported. In that case, where could Ludurr have gone?

"Perhaps he's deserted, or maybe he was abducted by one of our enemies." Liz clapped Aura on the shoulder. "In any case, Lady von Bunadala will be in charge now."

Embarrassed to have allowed their commander to vanish on their watch, the southern nobles were in no position to object. They turned to Aura meekly. "By all means, Your Highness. Lady von Bunadala, we are at your disposal."

"I'll need to be updated on the status of the city," Aura said. "Show me to Ludurr's chambers."

With the southern nobles to guide them, the party set off. On the way, Scáthach stopped and turned to Liz.

"May I excuse myself?" she asked.

"You want to meet with the Resistance, don't you?"

She nodded. "They will be worried about me."

“I can arrange an escort—”

“There’s no need. They have arranged to come here. Is there a room we might use?”

“Of course. You must have a lot to talk about.” Liz beckoned to one of the southern nobles. “Show her to a spare room, if you would. And have some refreshments prepared for her and her guests.”

The man nodded. “Consider it done, Your Highness.” He turned to Scáthach, bowing. “This way, my lady.”

Once the pair were out of sight, Liz entered the governor’s chambers. Aura was already inside, poring over the reports on the desk. Liz approached with a rueful smile and perched on the edge of the table.

“What do they say?”

“Nothing good. And regarding the north, very bad. Friedhof has fallen.”

For a moment, Liz was too stunned to speak.

Seeing her stiffen up, Aura continued. “Do your eyes tell you anything?”

“Not much. It’s all cloudy, like looking through mist. I can’t even tell what I’m looking at. Maybe they aren’t working properly for some reason...”

Aura’s eyes glistened anxiously. “Are you okay?”

Liz gave a reassuring smile. “It’s fine. I don’t want to get too dependent on them anyway. How bad are our losses?”

“Malaren has been destroyed. The monsters have moved on to the nearby towns and villages.”

“What do you think we should do?”

“We’ll save the most people if we drop everything and ride straight there. But we can’t just turn our backs on the Vanir Triumvirate. They’ll know you’re in San Dinalle. If we go north, they’ll come for our heads.” Aura paused. It seemed that was not her only concern. “We don’t know enough about what’s happening up there. It would be dangerous to act on so little information. We should focus on the Triumvirate first. That way, we can deal with the monsters without needing to watch our backs.”

Liz was only one person, even if she sometimes didn't seem to realize it, and she could only do so much. Moreover, her forces had not yet fully reassembled. What if she rode north with what she had only for Faerzen to descend into chaos as well? She would end up having to split her troops, and she did not have the numbers to spare.

"All right," she said. "We'll write to the northern nobles. Order them to evacuate the commonfolk."

That was all she could do for now. She could mount a proper rescue once the Vanir Triumvirate was dealt with. A flame of determination kindled in her chest.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. "All is ready, Your Highness," said a voice from the other side.

"I'll be right there."

"Whenever you are ready, Your Highness."

Liz turned to Aura. "I have to go. You're in charge while I'm away."

Friedhof had fallen. A horde of monsters was pouring south. Yet her plans to face the Triumvirate were too far along to abandon now. The empire's problems seemed unending, but she would simply have to address them as they came.

"Would you tell Scáthach where I've gone?"

"Of course." Aura nodded. "Don't try to do everything yourself. Focus on the Triumvirate. I'll decide what to do about Friedhof."

"Thank you. I'm sure you'll come up with something."

"One more thing." Aura hesitated. "Maybe this isn't the time, but...what about Hiro?"

Liz sighed. "Off goodness knows where doing goodness knows what. What else is new? But I told myself I'd trust him, and I'm sticking to my word. I won't give up on him, no matter what."

That would never change. Until the day she heard the truth from his own mouth, she would trust he was trying to do what was right. A quiet passion had smoldered in her breast ever since their parting years before, and she would not betray it now.

Aura nodded. "All right. I'll try to track down the Crow Legion."

"What was that about not trying to do everything yourself?" Liz

grinned ruefully. “All right. I’d better go.”

With one last reassuring smile, she hurried out.

* * * * *

The twenty-sixth day of the eleventh month of Imperial Year 1026

Twenty-three sel—sixty-seven kilometers—from the imperial capital

As the sun began to dip below the horizon, a host of cavalry thundered along the high road. At its head was Second Prince Selene.

“There!” he cried.

An armed force came into view ahead. While it flew no banners, it could only be that of the missing Typhos von Brommel. Selene estimated their numbers to be around three thousand. By comparison, he had brought two thousand of his best troops.

The drumming of their hooves was too loud to disguise, and there was no way to hide their approach in the exposed grasslands. Nonetheless, a cavalry charge was a terrifying sight even if one expected it. Alarm spread through House Brommel’s forces as they realized what was bearing down on them.

“Run them down!” Selene roared.

“Your Highness!” cried an aide. “I have a report from our scouts!”

“What do they say?!”

“The monsters are moving south! You were right to think they’re making for the capital!”

“Send word to Chancellor Rosa! We’ll take care of this rabble!”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

Selene reached for twin blades at his belt. “Móralltach! Beagalltach! Lay waste to my foes!”

He stood up in the saddle, slicing expertly through his foes as he passed. The disordered soldiers of House Brommel could barely muster any resistance. Their numerical advantage was slight at best, and the shock of the attack had thrown their chain of command into chaos. The battle was as good as his—or so he thought until he

came before Typhos von Brommel.

"The illustrious second prince," a voice drawled. "It's an honor, I must say."

Selene's horse's head flew from its neck with a spray of blood. He sprang from the saddle as it fell, landing nimbly on his feet. The corpse of his steed slid across the ground in a cloud of dust, but there was no time to mourn it. He regarded the approaching man with wary eyes.

"Typhos, I assume?"

The man nodded. "In the flesh."

He spread his arms wide. Two hooded figures materialized beside him. Selene's nose wrinkled at the stench of death. He had seen them before. Three hundred years ago, they had supposedly slain an emperor, a feat without equal in history.

"Orcus."

Typhos gestured theatrically. "Are you surprised?"

"I suppose so. I've never seen you before in my life."

The man's eyes were shining gold, and his golden hair streamed in the wind. Despite his pompous finery, he clearly had the well-honed musculature of a warrior. Yet nothing about his appearance matched Selene's recollections of Typhos von Brommel.

"Typhos was brown of hair and blue of eye, scrawny and short of stature..." Selene paused. "Of course. Now I see."

That was why the man felt familiar. This was the second time they had faced one another. Comprehension filled his eyes, and he grinned savagely.

"You've evidently come to some revelation," Typhos said. "Would you care to share?"

"Friedhof has fallen. An unusually organized horde of monsters is marching straight for the capital. And the head of House Brommel is accompanied by members of Orcus. Even I can put those pieces together."

"And what do they tell you?"

"That you're the Demiurgos."

"Impressive." Typhos clapped his hands in what appeared to be unreserved praise. "But should I be so surprised? This is not the first

time you've seen through my disguise."

Selene found no pleasure in being right. The memory of his previous defeat was still fresh in his mind. "Answer me this, then," he said. "Why do your soldiers follow a man who is not their master?"

"With eyes such as these, their loyalty is easily bought. Tell me, is this body truly so unfamiliar to you?"

Selene frowned, searching his memories. Who did Typhos resemble? He found his thoughts turning to the portraits on the walls of the imperial palace—portraits of a man whom no history book could ignore, a man as old as the empire itself.

"The first emperor," he breathed.

"Indeed. Did you believe I risked an assault on the palace merely to duel with you and your blades? No, no. It was this body I desired."

Given how the Demiurgos had assumed Graeci's identity, Selene shuddered to think what he might have done with the first emperor's remains, but the result stood before him now.



“That doesn’t explain why your soldiers follow you,” he said. “The commonfolk might know the first emperor’s name, but would they recognize his face?”

The portraits in the palace were only accessible to the nobility, and while the statues of the Twelve Divines were visible to all, only the most fanatical believers would have memorized the details of their features.

“As I said, with eyes such as these, their loyalty is easily bought. The originals eluded me, but a millennium proved more than enough time to acquire passable imitations.”

“Eyes of gold... Caelus, the Leonine Sight.” Selene raised a hand to his eyepatch. “That’s why...”

He had wondered why the Demiurgos had taken his eye before leaving him for dead. Now, he understood. The Demiurgos had desired the Leonine Sight, the eyes that had given Emperor Artheus command over his fellow humans.

“Those of thinner blood are diluted in strength,” the Demiurgos continued, “but still sufficient in potency to command those who knew Typhos by sight.”

“I see.”

Selene had certainly had his suspicions. The previous head’s abrupt illness had been the Demiurgos’s work, no doubt, and he had likely disposed of the real Typhos at the same time. Then, he had used the Leonine Sight to seize control of House Brommel for himself.

“So what now, second prince?” the Demiurgos said. “You have pursued me valiantly thus far, but I trust you recall how our last meeting ended.”

“I do,” Selene replied. “But I can hardly turn tail and run now, can I?”

“Then bring your best to bear. And perhaps you will prove welcome entertainment.”

“Please.” Selene readied Móralltach and Beagalltach. “I’d never dream of fighting you with anything less.”

The two hooded figures stepped forward. “My lord,” one ventured, “let us teach this human the price of his insolence.”

“You shall not. Did I not say I was in need of a diversion?”

“My lord—”

“Silence.”

All at once, the air grew heavy with a crushing pressure, its ire directed at the members of Orcus. Space itself screamed beneath its weight.

At last, one of the hooded figures bowed their head fearfully. “Forgive my presumptuousness, my lord.”

The pressure abruptly vanished, but it had been enough to tell Selene how thoroughly he was outclassed. Nonetheless, retreat was not an option. He had commanded his Twinfang Generals to stay behind while he rode on alone; no doubt they were following his orders faithfully, trusting that he would prevail. And more to the point, he had two scores to settle with the Demiurgos: the shame of his own defeat and the death of Graeci, who had raised him like his own son after his mother’s death.

“I should like to face you on more even terms,” the Demiurgos declared. A sword appeared in his hand. “This should suffice to balance the scales. It is an unruly blade, select in its wielders. After it devoured the last, I thought better of giving it to another.”

The weapon was Ipetam, Fatal Mystery, one of the five Archfiend’s Fellblades. The length of the blade was scarlet, as if engorged with the blood of its victims, and its crossguard and hilt were a gory red. Móralltach and Beagalltach gleamed in Selene’s hands as he regarded the ominous blade with wary eyes.

“I shall stay Longinus this time,” said the Demiurgos. “I would not have this battle end too soon.”

“Did no one ever tell you pride comes before a fall?”

“Perhaps a fall might be interesting in itself. Now, face me, second prince. Your infantile resistance hardly merits my full attention, but I shall condescend to play with you awhile.”

Selene grinned. “Don’t think too highly of yourself.”

He launched forward with all his strength, closing the distance in an instant. He struck high with his right sword and low with his left, bringing the blades into a sweeping cross. The air shuddered. The force of the strike scored furrows in the earth. Yet the Demiurgos did

not move a step, raising Ipetam to catch both swords with ease.

"Nothing but bluster," he scoffed.

"Don't be so certain."

Selene unleashed a flurry of strikes at astonishing speed. All around, House Scharm's soldiers tore through House Brommel's ranks, inspired by his performance. The hooded members of Orcus could perhaps have turned the tide, but they made no move to leave their master's side. Selene's brow furrowed. Something was wrong.

"Am I so little threat that you can let your mind wander?"

The Demiurgos lashed out with Ipetam. Selene leaned out of the way with ease, only to realize that his cheek was grazed. He wiped the blood away, but it continued to flow.

"Wounds inflicted by Ipetam bleed endlessly," the Demiurgos drawled. "Not even its own wielder is immune. As I said, an unruly blade. As rebellious as your own."

The golden-haired man bore down on Selene, wielding his Fellblade one-handed as though it weighed no more than a twig. Selene ducked and dove between his strikes, but he could not land a blow. It was not a stalemate. The Demiurgos was toying with him. Yet that in itself presented an opportunity. A single lucky strike could become a path to victory.

As he fought, clinging to that hope, he felt a change in the air. The sounds of battle behind him had changed in tenor.

"What in the world?"

He glanced back to see a third force sweeping through the melee. A colossal yaldabaoth covered in tattoos carved through House Scharm and House Brommel alike, a horde of monsters at his back. So dumbfounding was the sight that Selene let his guard slip.

"Foolish," said the Demiurgos's voice.

Selene spun back around just in time to see Ipetam's bloodred blade sink into his shoulder and tear down along his flank. He staggered back, grimacing in pain.

"Why so dismayed to see your soldiers fall?" the Demiurgos asked. "Surely you knew you led them to their deaths."

"It will take more than this to stop me," Selene growled.

"Please. You are no longer in any position to face me."

The Demiurgos gestured to Selene's chest, where a prominent swelling was now visible. The second prince quickly covered the hole with an arm.

"Your curse falters, restoring you to your rightful form. A sign that death draws near."

The Archfiend's Fellblades carried a curse just as potent as the Spiritblade Sovereigns. Yet while the latter cursed wielders who tried to bend them to their will, the former instead cursed those who were not zlosta.

"Tell me, second princess. How did it feel to be the second prince?"

Selene grinned. "A damned pleasure."

He—no, she—sank to her knees, pale-faced. Blood wept unceasing from the wound in her flank.

"Let me tell you something before you die. One last gift to ease your passing."

"Oh?"

"It was I who slew your brother Stovell. Had I not lent him and Nameless my power, perhaps he would still be alive."

Typhos's laughter rang through Selene's head as her awareness began to fade.

"And one more thing. The first empress consort's massacre at the inner palace—that, too, was my doing. Your mother perished there, did she not? Such a shame..." The Demiurgos trailed off as Selene finally collapsed. "Done so soon? A pity. I shall retrieve Móralltach and Beagalltach, at least. I will need them in the battle to come."

He stooped to retrieve the weapons, only to stop as a shadow fell over him. He looked up to see the giant yaldabaoth peering down at him.

"Sieben," he said, unintimidated. "You appear to have left your army behind."

"She looks tasty," the yaldabaoth rumbled. "Food for Sieben?"

Typhos's nose wrinkled, but he only shrugged. "If you so desire. Just be careful to leave her blades."

"Tastier than High General?"

"You tell me. Did you not sample one for yourself at Friedhof?

What did you do with that decrepit old man?”

“Sieben too strong. Man went splat.” Sieben’s face fell. “So that was High General...”

On the ground, Selene stirred. Her fingers twitched, and her face twisted into an angry grimace as she struggled to rise. “You...killed...Hermes?”

“Ah! You knew him! Puny man. No fun.”

“So you did,” she growled. “Then I’ll make you regret it!”

Her fury exploded. With a wordless howl, she thrust out with Beagalltach. The giant yaldabaoth caught the strike with one hand, but as the sword sank into his palm, a great slash opened down his flank in a spray of blood.

“Hmm?” The yaldabaoth sank to his knees, watching dumbly as his own blood seeped into the earth.

Typhos nodded in understanding. “Ah, transposition. Beagalltach’s power. It can impose its wielder’s injuries onto the body of another, while Móralltach grows more vicious as their wounds grow. Trying weapons to master, to be certain, but truly powerful. Yet they are wasted in the hands of the unworthy.” He peered down at the gray-faced Selene. “You hoped that if your first ploy failed, you might slay me thus. If not for Sieben, perhaps you might have succeeded. Yet you see now the folly of your scheme. Transposing your injuries does not restore blood shed, nor strength bled.”

“Silence,” Selene spat. “Once I’m done with him, you’re next.” She advanced on the kneeling yaldabaoth, intent on ending his life.

“Worms. Little men. Know your place!”

Sieben struck first, revitalized by his inhuman fortitude. His wounds made him sluggish enough for Selene to see the blow coming, but his colossal fist struck her nonetheless, sending her fragile form bouncing across the ground in a cloud of dust. She had not failed to react in time; her body was simply no longer in a fit state to fight.

“Ngh...”

She struggled to rise, but she did not have the strength. Sieben’s hasty blow had not even done her the mercy of knocking her unconscious. As she hauled herself across the ground, grimacing in

pain, something warm and wet dripped on her from above. She looked up to see Sieben glowering down at her, eyes burning with loathing. Blood poured from the wound across his chest to dribble onto her head.

"I'm impressed you're still alive," she said.

The yaldabaoth had bled enough to die, but still he stood tall. Drool dripped from his mouth in anticipation of biting into her flesh. She recoiled in horror from his blackened teeth, but she didn't have the strength to run. His mouth yawned before her to swallow her whole—and he halted as Typhos laid a hand on his leg.

"Impressive as he is, he pales before the fiend we Lords of Heaven crafted in days of old. I have experimented with many methods over the centuries. Forced many humans to take spirit elixir, only to watch in dismay as they turned to archons. Only a small handful were strong enough to become yaldabaoth, and breeding them together produced only monsters." He sighed in disappointment. "So I abandoned hope of recreating that success. Our original subject was simply too exceptional. I resigned myself to knowing there would only ever be one true fiend. Yet in time, my brethren and I discovered that even our nigh divine powers could not create a human being. And we wondered if, by some happenstance, our creation had not realized our dearest wish and entered the domain of the divine—if he had not been sculpted by our own creator."

Typhos caught himself and covered his mouth with a hand, realizing he had said too much. "But those words are not for your ears. Fortunately, they will not be your concern for long." He patted the yaldabaoth on the back. "Sieben, slay her."

Given leave to spill blood, Sieben issued a thunderous howl. His hand swung down on Selene.

"Curses..."

She tried to move, but to her shame, her body would not listen. Móralltach and Beagalltach's regenerative capabilities could not keep pace with her wounds. It seemed Typhos had been correct—they could not return the blood she had lost. She had not known that. How absurd that the discovery would be her last. She bit back a

laugh. With the last of her strength, she tried to crawl with her chin, but the effort did not avail her.

At last, the impact came. Her vision flickered as the ground shuddered violently. For an instant, she was floating, and then something smacked her hard in the back, driving the breath from her lungs and snapping her eyes open. The blue sky spread above her, streaked with red rain. At first, she thought it was her own blood, but then she realized she felt no pain. Sieben's shriek split her ears, shocking her awake, and she rolled over onto her back. Above her was Sieben, howling to the sky, impaled by countless spirit weapons like a colossal pincushion.

Then Selene saw what was above him, and she gasped.

A black dragon split the sky in twain. It bore straight for Sieben, a streak of raging darkness striking so hard that the yaldabaoth's arm spun from his body. He fell to the ground, writhing in pain, and a boy in black garb now stood in his place.

"I was aiming for your head," the boy said. "You're quick for something your size."

How many years had it been since Selene had seen that nonchalant figure? A sigh of relief escaped her mouth unbidden. Yet that moment of reminiscence did not last long. Something was wrong. Typhos's two members of Orcus sensed it too, staring in dumbfounded silence. Even the surrounding monsters froze as they gazed at the boy. Soldiers from both houses looked around in confusion as the assault suddenly relented.

Selene glanced at Typhos, curious what he made of the boy's arrival. He alone was looking on in savage glee, his lips pulled back as far as they would go. The boy occupied his attention fully. He had no eyes for anything else. It was as if he were witnessing the return of a long-lost lover.

"A thousand long years since last we met. Mars, my enemy. Held, my rival. Surtr, my nemesis!" He spread his arms wide but then abruptly paused and cocked his head. "But forgive me. I forget whose body I inhabit. Perhaps I should call you Hiro, my brother!"

Hiro smiled thinly. "Falling for cheap taunts cost me your head a thousand years ago. But I've learned since then."

Animosity billowed from him, rolling across the earth like a winter chill. The plants and flowers around him wilted where they stood. Cracks webbed through the ground, the air split, and dark clouds began to gather in the sky above.

"You still labor under the delusion that you might have succeeded," Typhos said. "Allow me to correct you. You could never have taken my head."

Hiro did not reply. He only raised Excalibur. "Let's settle this once and for all, Demiurgos. I'll show you that I'm the stronger one."

"As much of a pleasure as that would be..." The Demiurgos looked around. The Crow Legion was taking advantage of the monsters' distraction to sweep across the field, not hesitating to take on creatures several times their size. With several formidable warriors in their midst, the monsters were at their mercy.

"The Faerie King's discarded plaything and my own abandoned child," Typhos said. "I see you retain your penchant for taking in strays."

Even with those two champions aside, the rank and file were fighting just as fiercely. Typhos regarded them with suspicion at first, but he nodded in realization as he saw the arms they carried.

"And an army equipped with spirit weapons. The Spirit King's meddlesome legacy. If not for them, mere humans would pose us no challenge. Do you not agree, Surtr?"

"They allowed us to face the zlosta on even terms."

"And with power too great for you in your hands, you duly shattered the peace. How obliging you were a thousand years ago, sowing chaos as the Spirit King willed."

"You were the one who shattered the peace. You manipulated the zlosta into conquest."

"Please. The other Lords of Heaven hardly needed me to make war in their own time. You of all people should know how the Spirit King hides in the shadows. At least I had the courage to lead from the front. Was I not the consummate general?" The Demiurgos planted a hand on his hip, leaned back, and sighed. "Tell me, Surtr, have a thousand years not taught you to be more than the Spirit King's pawn?"

Hiro said nothing. The Demiurgos continued to taunt him, trying to give him pause.

"Have you never thought to live for yourself? Was the record of your service not written in the blood of those whom you held dear?"

"Blood you spilled, Demiurgos."

"There you are mistaken. I took nothing from you. No, I gave you strength. The strength to protect those you loved. The strength of a fiend."

Hiro snorted. "And I'm grateful for it. You gave me the power I used to end your reign."

"You did foil me once, it's true. And in so doing, you sentenced me to a thousand years of waiting."

Hiro stepped forward. "Then I'm sure you'd be glad of an end to your suffering."

The Demiurgos watched him without anger or mirth, his face an emotionless void. "Let me ask you this: Are you content with the path you have chosen?"

"You know my answer."

"No doubt. But surely you know the Spirit King will steal away all you win. As she did a thousand years ago, she will bind you to this land and take your every victory for her own." The Demiurgos spread his arms wide, his voice a cold enumeration of fact. "For she seeks the same as I."

He seemed to expect that to be a revelation for the ages, but Hiro's face did not so much as twitch. With a dismissive snort, he regarded the Demiurgos with a piercing gaze.

"I know. Don't worry, you can go in peace to your grave. Once I've dealt with you, I'll devour the Spirit King too."

A sudden squall sent his black mantle billowing. Excalibur glimmered brightly in his hand as if given strength by his conviction.

The Demiurgos took a step back, wary of his arrogant nonchalance. "You would spit in the face of the heavens?"

"You and the other Lords did that before I ever could."

* * * * *

Four years prior, the Grand Duchy of Draal had collaborated with Six Kingdoms to expel the empire from Faerzen. Hiro had crushed their ambitions. The Grand Duke's firstborn son, Puppchen, had perished in the fighting, leaving his brother, Handhaven, to inherit their late father's title. Yet Handhaven had proven a weak-willed ruler, allowing other nations to gain a foothold in Draal. Now, the Vanir Triumvirate were marching freely through his lands in their quest to destroy the empire.

It was on those same lands that Liz now set foot. The sun had slipped below the horizon, veiling even her beauty in the dark of night.

"Our presence does not appear to have been noticed, Your Highness," an anxious voice said behind her.

She did not turn around, keeping her attention on the Triumvirate encampment before her. Both she and her aides were speaking in hushed tones. The hill where they had taken position was practically under the enemy's nose, and the cover of darkness would not stop an errant noise from giving them away.

"What's the situation?" she asked.

"The Vanir Triumvirate is recalling their scattered forces, Your Highness. Their ranks will be vulnerable while they reform."

"Then now's the time. Once I set off, signal the rest to charge."

Liz drew Lævateinn from her side and drove her heels into her steed's flank. In an instant, she was barreling down the slope. The drumming of one horse's hooves soon became a roar loud enough to split the night. The Triumvirate's sentries surely realized a night raid was upon them—even the most slack-witted soldier would have noticed the din—but their disorientation fatally slowed their response.

"We're under atta—!"

The sentry could not finish his sentence before Liz clove his head from his shoulders. She peered into the night, guiding her steed skillfully over the palisade. The riders behind her emerged into the light of the bonfires, pouring into the Triumvirate camp where its defenses were weakest.

"Strike fast and keep moving!" Liz called to one of the officers

behind her. “We’ll charge clean through and regroup with Aura!”

She had only brought two thousand—far from enough to rout the Triumvirate’s forces, which came to over seventy thousand soldiers. Nonetheless, she had to cull their numbers as best she could, preferably by causing enough chaos that they turned on each other. Her mission was to slow their advance and buy time for the empire to assemble its defenses. Her allies put the camp to the torch as they thundered along behind her. The flames quickly spread, turning the encampment into a nightmare vision of blood and screaming, and she knew the ploy had succeeded.

Her success was short-lived, however. She sensed a surge of animosity and raised Lævateinn to guard. A stunning impact numbed her arm, its sheer force dragging her from the saddle. Her troops turned as they sped past, their faces colored with shock and dismay.

“Keep going!” she cried as she saw them start to turn. “I’ll find my own way out!”

The order fell on deaf ears. The soldiers banked around her, splitting off into smaller squadrons that forged deeper into enemy lines. They were drawing attention to themselves so she could escape.

“We’ll see you at the rally point, Your Highness!”

Roars echoed from all around. The Triumvirate’s forces seemed more concerned with the cavalry charge carving through their ranks than with Liz, and few soldiers tried to approach. Not wanting to waste her troops’ sacrifice, she raised her hand high. Wind swirled around her arm and spread out into a whirling tempest. The tents burned all the faster as the gale fanned the flames.

As she watched the inferno spread, someone tapped her on the shoulder. She whirled around to see a hooded figure wearing a ghastly grin.

“First Lævateinn, now Gandiva,” the figure said. “How marvelous.”

“Nameless,” Liz said. “Or would you prefer that I call you ‘archpriestess’?”

“Call me what you please. I must say, though, I wasn’t aware you knew. Did Lord Hiro give me away?”

Liz nodded. “I could hardly believe my ears. Why would you do

this?”

If Hiro and Lucia had not told her the truth in advance, she likely would have been too stunned to speak. She had only been half-convinced as it was, but she could no longer deny the evidence of her eyes.

“Why, for vengeance, of course,” Nameless said, uncaring of Liz’s dismay. “Vengeance against the house of Grantz.”

“The third emperor’s crimes were unforgivable, but that’s no reason—”

Nameless silenced her with a hand. “Against the house of Grantz, I said. I do not seek revenge against humankind as an álfar, but against the royal family as myself.”

Liz frowned, uncomprehending.

Nameless gave an exasperated sigh. “But you would not know, would you? It was before your birth. Tell me, do you know of the darkness that lurks within the royal family? The house of Grantz’s darkest secret?”

“I’ve heard the rumors. That the royal family is not the first emperor’s—”

“They are not rumors. They are the truth. After Orcus slew the emperor, House Krone and House Scharm took advantage of the chaos to purge the royal family. They parted ways as their interests came into conflict, and House Scharm succeeded in placing one of its own on the throne—a bloodline that continues to this day. Emperor Greiheit maintained particularly close ties with House Scharm, did he not? And seeing their grasp on power slip away, House Krone formed a plan: They would merge the true royal bloodline with their own.”

“Do you mean—”

“Indeed. They arranged for their daughter, the future first empress consort, to wed the high king of Greif.”

A child born between the two would give House Krone a legitimate claim to the imperial throne. Realizing the danger their union posed, Greiheit had used his imperial authority to seize the daughter of House Krone as his own wife. Yet she and the High King had already courted and were due to be married. With its future

queen snatched away on the eve of her wedding, Six Kingdoms' ire was great.

"But Greiheit cared nothing for Six Kingdoms' objections," Nameless continued. "Why would he? Thus, their relations soured. Common opinion began to turn against him. He found himself needing to set an example, and so he invaded Six Kingdoms' ally, Faerzen."

He had claimed the glorious victory he sought, although the events he set in motion would eventually lead to Faerzen's utter destruction in the campaign that had won Aura the name of Warmaiden. Stricken by fear in the face of the empire's might, Six Kingdoms had chosen to cower rather than send reinforcements to its ally.

"And so Greiheit believed he had foiled House Krone's plans. Little did he know he had played right into their hands."

The head of House Krone had intended all along for the emperor to steal away his daughter, knowing a position as father of the empress consort would grant him access to the halls of power. Not long after, his daughter had announced her pregnancy...before giving birth to twins, one human, one álfen.

"Now," Nameless said, "why would that be so damning? Half-bloods are not uncommon in this day and age."

"It wouldn't be," Liz said. "The first emperor's sister was an álf."

"Ah, but they were born of different mothers. Artheus's parents were both human. And as you are no doubt aware, the third emperor was a racial purist, obsessed with protecting the royal line from the blood of those he called outsiders. He set certain strictures in place that his successors have observed ever since."

"But if it's true that the royal line was broken, why couldn't they have álfar blood?"

"The royal family did not stop trying to keep their blood pure. Their efforts continue to this day. An álf cannot be born to the house of Grantz. Yet the empress consort's pregnancy had already been announced. It could not be taken back. What to do? And so the human son was admitted to the royal family and given to the care of House Krone, while the álfar daughter was declared to be too sickly

to remain in the capital...and given to Frieden."

Liz's mouth fell open as she realized what Nameless was implying.

Nameless smiled, seeing that she understood. "I was raised in blissful ignorance in Frieden's care, but Stovell was not so lucky. Bereft of Greiheit's blood, he never knew a father's love, and he grew up painfully caught between the royal family and House Krone."

How House Krone must have laughed. Not only had they merged their bloodline with the true royal lineage, they were now the house of the crown prince and privy to Greiheit's darkest secret. Yet their triumph would not last for long.

"The unthinkable happened, dear Elizabeth. Greiheit met your mother and you were born, a child with red hair—the sign of the twenty-second emperor's curse."

The lineage of the first emperor and the current royal bloodline had converged in Liz. Her birth marked the miraculous coming of a true heir. Yet to House Krone, she was nothing less than a devil child. Her very existence robbed them of their claim to the throne and their leverage over the emperor.

"Greiheit plotted to disown Stovell and oppose House Krone in earnest."

Little had he known that his actions would lead to the massacre of the inner palace.

"My mother was heartbroken. She had been snatched away from the man she loved, kept from seeing her children, confined to the inner palace. She became a shell of herself. They say that she aged decades in mere years."

With her failing body, she could not possibly have perpetuated the slaughter. The ones to carry it out had been Orcus, House Krone—and Stovell.

"I only came into that knowledge recently, of course. In my innocent youth, all I knew was that the massacre rocked Soleil to its foundations. I never dreamed it had anything to do with me."

The archpriestess of the time had told the young Nameless that she was a war orphan. Only when she was older and more worldly-wise had she been informed of her royal heritage. She had been

surprised, but not dismayed. She felt no attachment to a city she did not remember, nor love for a mother she had never known.

"But things changed as I came into my own as a priestess. Perhaps those who had exiled me feared that I might seek vengeance. Who can say? At any rate, assassin after assassin came for my head. Perhaps it was Greiheit who sent them. Perhaps it was House Krone. Perhaps it was both."

The archpriestess's protection had kept her safe, but the constant threat of death took its toll. Night after night, she lay awake, wondering why she had to suffer so.

"And then, one day, Greiheit came with you to Frieden. He looked at me, but he did not recognize me. Can you imagine? He took my mother from me, sent his killers after my life, and he did not even know my face."

How her gut had twisted to see him smile with Liz in his arms. In that moment, she had sworn vengeance upon the house of Grantz, House Krone, and the empire that had forced this cruel fate upon her.

"What they did to you was wrong," Liz said. "But it doesn't change anything. I still have to stop you."

"I don't doubt it. I did not tell you this story to beg for your pity. I thought it was right for you to know the truth, that's all. We were born under similar stars." A bell staff descended from above and settled in Nameless's hand with a solemn chime. "I bear you no ill will, dear Elizabeth, but the empire's highest authority must pay for its crimes. I will make you watch, your life slipping away, as its people bleed and its royal household burns."

"Why do the people have to suffer? They've done nothing wrong!"

"Then fight for them, dear Elizabeth. The happiness of those you hold dear is written in the tears of those you do not."

"With pleasure. Whatever the royal family has done to you, you don't have the right to take revenge on them!"

In reply to her conviction, flames surged from Lævateinn and formed a ring around them. Now no one could intrude on their battle, and Nameless could no longer escape. Her intention was

clear: She meant to extinguish her foe here and now.

Nameless brought her own power to bear, creating a host of clones, but a wind stirred the ring of fire, sending it lashing out like a tangle of serpents. Their fangs sank into one clone, then another and another, burning them from existence. Nameless remained undeterred, but her clones vanished almost as quickly as she could create them, and her offensive faltered before Liz's sheer power. She could not advance a single step. Liz simply stood nonchalantly, and yet she could not approach.

"Well, now." Nameless laughed derisively. "You have hardly given me a fighting chance."

She struck the ground with her bell staff, producing a harsh chime. A rent in space appeared in front of her. In the same instant, Liz struck the ground with her fist. There was a moment of silence, and then the rent exploded with flame. Nameless's burning body tumbled through the air.

"This ends now!"

As Nameless stood up, still ablaze, Liz closed the distance and drove Lævateinn through her chest. The spray of blood boiled away before it could fall. Nameless did not cry out. She only gave a pained grimace that might have been a smile.

"Fine work...but you will not have my corpse."

She hauled Lævateinn's blade from her breast and hurled herself into the inferno. The act was tantamount to suicide, but she laughed wildly as she danced within the flames.

"Do your new eyes show you the truth, dear Elizabeth? Or merely what you wish was the truth? Heed my words: So long as you see the world you hope for and not the one that is, you will never be more than a puppet."

She bowed her head and collapsed into the blaze.



Liz did not know what to make of the woman's peculiar end. She had seemed oddly undaunted by the prospect of her death, but there was no time to examine her body. The Triumvirate's troops were converging on the disturbance in their core. She called Gandiva's gale to make a path through the wall of fire and whistled for her steed, grasping the reins to pull herself up and galloping from the battlefield.

* * * * *

The wind howled in the night, blowing warm, sticky air in through the open window. In the lightless room, a woman looked down on a cradle, smiling as she hummed a lullaby.

"Soon, all will be over...and you will no longer have anything to fear."

Selvia von Muzuk crooned in the moonlight, her face a picture of motherly grace.

"Shall we go for a walk once you wake? It has been far too long." Her smile was pure contentment. Discarded baby toys lay scattered on the floor around her. "Let's all go together once Soleil is at peace. You, me, and your father. Would you like that?"

She reached down into the cradle...and from beyond the open door came the gruff voice of General von Grax, appointed by High General Vias as her guardian.

"All is ready, my lady," he said.

She sighed and turned reproachfully to the door. "I won't be a moment, but I would thank you to lower your voice. My child is sleeping."

"Apologies, my lady. I'll wait out here."

She turned back to the cradle. "Now, your mother has important business to attend to. Be good until I return, won't you?"

She withdrew her arm and left the room, glancing back over her shoulder as she went. The cradle rocked in the wind, but there was no baby inside.

"Beto and the rest await our presence," von Grax said as Selvia closed the door behind her.

"Very good. What of the palace guard?"

"They've got the building locked down tight. Not a mouse could squeak inside without their notice."

"And Margrave von Gurinda?"

"Retired to his chambers. They wouldn't want him to catch wind of their plans, I don't doubt."

They continued along the hallway, making idle conversation, until they came to a door. Selvia announced their presence with a light knock, then swept inside without waiting for an answer. Von Grax followed her in.

"It's only me, dear."

Beto was sitting inside, at the head of a gathering of southern nobles. He looked up in surprise. "Selvia...and General von Grax, I see. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Forgive the intrusion," von Grax said. "Your wife is here at my request."

"And why is that?"

"I heard you were holding important talks to which neither I nor Margrave von Gurinda were invited. A concerning rumor, I'm sure you'll agree. I thought I'd see the truth for myself."

"We are simply discussing municipal affairs. Nothing worth bothering you over, I thought. You are of the east, are you not? I would not trouble you with the affairs of the south."

"That so, is it? Then why is the margrave not present? Is Gurinda not part of the south?"

"It is far from Sunspear. I would not trouble the future empress's uncle with matters that have no bearing on his lands."

Selvia stepped forward, a diplomatic smile painted across her face. "Then you will not mind if I am present?"

Beto frowned in annoyance. "Frankly, I would prefer that you weren't."

She brought a hand to her mouth in theatrical surprise. "Why, dear! You aren't planning anything *villainous,* are you?"

"Excuse me?" Beto thumped the desk and stood up, his patience at an end. "Such words are not wise when we ought to be standing united. You are my wife, and as such I grant you a measure of

leniency, but I would ask you to think before you speak."

"Peace, my lord," one of the veteran nobles said, stepping forward to calm him. "Surely she can do no harm."

Beto shot the man a glare. "You know full well..."

"You see," Selvia interrupted, "I heard the strangest rumor. The southern nobles have been working in secret with the Free Folk to stab High General Vias and Chancellor Rosa in the back!"

"If that were true," Beto said slowly, "it would be a very serious matter."

"Why, it would be positively treasonous!"

Beto stared, breathing heavily. "Be very careful," he said, visibly composing himself. "You should know those words have weight."

"Oh, do excuse me. But if that is all unfounded, where is the harm in me staying?" She looked over the seated nobles. "None of you object, do you?"

"Do you?" Beto looked at them hard, but they said nothing, all in apparent agreement with Selvia.

"Then I hope you won't mind if I join too," von Grax said. "As it happens, I had something to say."

Beto's eyes flashed. "And what is that?"

"An assassin came for my head not long ago, and another for Margrave von Gurinda's. We bested them, though, and kept them alive long enough to ask who sent them. They claimed to be acting on your orders."

"Mine? Preposterous." Beto looked genuinely outraged, although it was hard to be certain whether he was genuinely innocent or merely putting up a convincing act. Nonetheless, the nobles around the table turned to him with accusing eyes.

"And that wasn't all. I found another man skulking around. A messenger, it seems, carrying a letter intended for the Free Folk." Von Grax laid a sheet of parchment on the table. "A letter signed with your name, Lord von Muzuk. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

Beto said nothing. He merely crossed his arms, staring at the parchment in quiet indignation.

Selvia drew closer. "Maybe this would be a good time to discuss

the death of the previous Lord von Muzuk...and your involvement in it."

Beto lurched toward her. "You! You did this!"

She smiled coolly. "Not a drop of my father's blood flows in your veins. You are a bastard child born between his wife and a merchant, and you murdered him so you could take House Muzuk for yourself."

Upon learning that he had no von Muzuk blood and thus could never inherit the house, Beto had set out to murder his predecessor. Once his position as the head of the house was secure, he had embarked on a purge of the southern nobles, executing those who knew the truth, his true father included. Along the way, he had discovered that Lord von Muzuk had fathered a child with a mistress.

"I was already wed," she continued, "but you wanted the von Muzuk bloodline for your own. I thought my husband and daughter died in an accident, but you had them killed!"

Stricken with grief after the death of the two people she loved most in the world, Selvia had found herself comforted by Beto, whom she had eventually remarried. Yet after Nameless told her the truth, her love had turned to hate. Beto had taken everything from her—and so every moment between that day and this, she had spent plotting his downfall.

"You cannot believe this nonsense!" Beto spluttered, turning to his nobles. "Will you trust me, a man who has been with you through joy and sorrow, or this deranged woman?"

The veteran noble looked at him, aghast. "What choice do we have? Lady von Muzuk's unfaithfulness was long suspected, and anyone familiar with court matters knows who Selvia's father is."

"It's over, Beto," von Grax said, stepping forward to seize the man. "The chancellor has ordered me to take you into custody."

Beto forced him back with a swipe of his arm. "This is ridiculous! It is absurd! Have you all forgotten who made House Muzuk what it is today?!"

At that moment, the doors burst open and a man tumbled through, chest heaving. It was Ludurr, freshly returned from San Dinalle. He looked around the room in confusion. "Am I interrupting

something?”

“Lord Beto is being taken into custody for the murder of his predecessor,” the veteran noble explained. “You ought to be the most outraged of any of us, Ludurr. Lord von Muzuk took you under his wing when you were but a boy, and Beto was not even truly his son.”

Ludurr turned to Beto, blanching. “My lord, is this true?”

He staggered toward the man and grasped him by the shoulder. With his other hand, he held up the letter he had received from Selvia. The parchment was heavily creased, speaking to how many times he had read it.

“Lord Beto,” he repeated, “is this true?”

“And what if it is?” Beto grinned sourly. “What will you do? Cut me down in my own chambers?”

Ludurr’s eyes shrank to points. The old Lord von Muzuk had been as good as a father to him, but he also owed a great deal to Beto.

“Enough,” von Grax growled. “I’m taking this man into custody.”

He seized Beto by the arm. Beto did not resist. He had no more allies here. Resistance would be futile.

“Wait,” Ludurr said.

Von Grax turned. “Wha—”

There was a sudden spray of blood, and von Grax’s colossal figure toppled over. His head bounced across the floor. A stunned silence filled the room. Ludurr looked down at the body, holding a bloodstained greatsword. His expression was as horrified as anybody else’s. Yet even as he looked around in confusion, he grasped Beto by the shoulder again.

“What are you—” Beto began.

Ludurr rammed the greatsword through Beto’s belly. The man fell lifelessly to the floor, and Ludurr staggered away, his mouth opening and closing like a goldfish. He seemed truly bewildered by his own actions.

“I never... I didn’t mean...!”

“Ludurr!” one of the southern nobles cried. “Have you gone mad?!”

That man became the next to die. Ludurr cut him down, then

spun and struck Selvia in the head with the flat of his blade, shattering her skull. Then he fell on the rest of the nobles, swinging his greatsword uncontrollably like a child with a stick.

"Run!" he cried. "This isn't me! I don't want to do this!"

One of the nobles rounded on him with fury in his eyes. "You cut down your own and dare pretend—"

The man's head flew from his shoulders. Ludurr stared in horror as brain matter soared through the air.

"No! You don't understand! It's not me! Stop this, Bebensleif!"

His objections did nothing to dull his greatsword's bloodthirst. Its razor edge sheared through body after body. At last, all of the nobles in the room lay slain, as did the guards who had heard the disturbance and hurried in to help.

"Why?! How?! Why would you do this?!"

The greatsword slipped from Ludurr's grip and fell to the floor with a dull clang. He stared, disbelieving, at his own bloodstained hands. A wail of despair tore from his throat.

At that moment, there was a noise from a dark corner of the room. Ludurr scrabbled for the greatsword and held it at the ready. A figure stepped forth from the shadows, clapping their hands as they approached.

"Fine work, Ludurr Freyr von Ingunar."

"Who are you?"

The figure's chest and lilting voice suggested she was female, but beyond that, it was impossible to be certain. Her skin was scorched and blackened. Scraps of melted clothing clung to her flesh. She ripped one off with an irritated grunt, and blood sprayed from the wound. The distinctive stench of charred flesh filled the room. Her injuries were so horrific, it was a marvel that she still breathed. Ludurr trembled in fear, wondering if he was looking at some sort of monster in human form.

"Bebensleif of the Archfiend's Fellblades," the figure murmured. "The Fiend of Creation. Mine at last..."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, Ludurr. Did I not tell you? You are merely a reflection in the mirror. My reflection."

“Are you...Nameless?”

“With so much of my power invested in you, I could scarcely lift a finger against Lady Celia Estrella. And she would be formidable enough at my full strength...” Nameless extended a charred hand. “But if that is the price of one of the Fellblades, I pay it gladly.”

“Stay back!” Ludurr swung the greatsword wildly, trying to drive her away.

She narrowed her eyes, and his limbs locked in place. Tears of uncomprehending terror beaded in his eyes as he watched her draw nearer.

“A reflection cannot defy the original...and you have played your part.”

“Don’t touch me!”

“All you felt, all you knew was merely a shadow on the wall. A creation of the Dharmic Blade Sudarshana and its Graal, Replication.”

“What are you saying?” Ludurr stammered. “This is madness.”

“My name,” she said, slowly and deliberately, “is Freyr Straea von Grantz.”

Ludurr’s eyes widened.

Nameless caressed his cheek, bringing her lips to his ear. “And yours is Ludurr Freyr von Ingunar. I granted you the name of Freyr to breathe life into you, then cast you out into the world for House Muzuk to claim.”

House Muzuk, Beto, Selvia, and Ludurr—Nameless had had them all dancing in the palm of her hand, in the short term to claim Bebensleif and in the long term to bring the empire to ruin. She raised her arm, and a bell staff appeared in her hand. With a stately chime, it began to radiate a fierce light. The room filled with unfettered laughter.

“Dear Elizabeth, my like in childhood. Perhaps you have already seen what transpired here, but know that the knowledge will not avail you. Soon you will feel my snares pull shut around you.”

The air shivered with the tinkle of bells.

“A new age is upon us, and the empire’s fall shall be the prelude. What say you, sister mine? May I have this dance?”

* * * * *

Between the reclamation of Faerzen, the chaos in the north, the encroaching war in the south, and the conquest of Six Kingdoms, Soleil was aflame almost from shore to shore. The fires were concentrated in and around the Grantzian Empire at present, but its sheer size meant they would quickly spread. The debt generated by the previous emperors' expansionism would now have to be paid. Many had warned of this exact thing coming to pass, but the empire had known only victory for so long that their voices had been dismissed.

Despite the spreading bloodshed, the recapture of Faerzen had been more or less successful, and the conquest of Six Kingdoms had concluded with an armistice that was in effect a victory. Nonetheless, the end of one war marked the beginning of another. Soon, battle would be joined in the western territories.

Fort Hundert lay on the Draali border, close to the second imperial city. It currently hosted Chancellor Rosa and the First Legion, who were reorganizing their forces in a bid to intercept the Vanir Triumvirate. The fort was full to bursting with noble troops. A camp had sprung up outside the walls to accommodate the overflow. Now, with the arrival of High General Vias and her Fifth Legion, it had grown so large that its bonfires turned night to day.

Chancellor Rosa was in the fort's war room, opposite High General Vias. She peered at the woman, cocking her head. "Have we met before?"

To the best of her knowledge, they were not acquainted, but something about Vias struck her as familiar. No, more than that—she was finding it strangely difficult to maintain a respectful distance. There was such a thing as personal space, which it was generally considered courteous to observe on a first meeting, but for some reason, Rosa found herself drawing closer than was proper.

Vias shook her head. "Not that I can recall."

"Of course. Forgive me. I'm in the strangest mood tonight."

Rosa's curiosity was far from appeased, and she couldn't help sneaking a few more glances at Vias's face, but she eventually

decided she was being rude and cleared her throat.

"I'm glad you're here. To be honest with you, this is the first time I've commanded an army of this size. I've gotten this far playing things by ear, but you can see what a mess I've made of the reorganization. I would like to place you in command, if you don't mind the responsibility."

By all rights, the task should have been done already, but it had dragged on and on under Rosa's inexperienced leadership. Aura would have done a far better job, she thought ruefully.

"You do me a great honor," Vias said. "One I fear I am not worthy of."

"Not at all. Your input has been supremely helpful. It has already saved us days. It pains me to admit it, but I'm no general. I'm hardly much of a chancellor either, come to that. Just a regional noble far above her station."

"Then why did you take on the position?"

Vias's question was a valid one, and her voice had a definite edge of reproach. It wasn't hard to imagine why she might disapprove. Rosa had invested an enormous amount of eastern noble capital into the chancellorship; if she was now complaining she was not a good fit, what made her different from any other unscrupulous aristocrat buying their position with coin?

"Tell me, High General," Rosa said, "what do you think will become of the empire after this war is over?"

"Lady Celia Estrella will become empress and lead the people into the future."

"So she will. She will take the throne, and at least for a time, she will not have to worry about outside threats. But what about enemies within her own borders?"

A great many nobles had chosen to watch and wait rather than committing their forces to the ongoing fighting. What would they do with their fresh forces once everything was over? Their desire for power could easily spark a civil war—one the nobles aiding Liz in the current conflict would be too exhausted to oppose.

"As soon as the fighting ends, I mean to punish every noble house that refused to take up Liz's cause. If they protest, I will bring

the full force of House Kelheit against them. I'm sure they will call me a despot, just as they did when I punished the central nobles, but that will be my final act as chancellor. I will accept the consequences of my actions and yield the position to someone more capable."

Liz's authority would need to be absolute. To that end, Rosa would rid the empire of any who would stand in her way, and if that meant dirtying her hands or her name, so be it.

Vias had been listening in silence, stroking her chin, but she bowed her head as she sensed Rosa's resolve. "Very well. I accept your request."

"Thank you." Rosa laid a hand on her shoulder. "My armies are in your hands."

Vias looked up again. "When will Her Highness join us?"

"Aura wrote to me not long ago. It seems Ludurr, the acting governor of San Dinalle, is missing in action. Aura and Liz intend to collect their remaining forces and launch a preemptive strike against the Vanir Triumvirate before meeting us here. We will know in the coming days precisely when to expect them."

"Ludurr was Beto's retainer, was he not? I left Robert von Grax in Sunspear to keep an eye on House Muzuk. Perhaps I ought to have stayed too."

"No need. I have taken precautions of my own. Whatever Beto is planning, he will not be able to act on it."

"Then—" Vias's furred ears suddenly twitched at a hurried noise outside the room: the metallic clanking of someone running in armor. It stopped outside the door. She stood, ushering Rosa behind her, and reached for her sword.

An officer stumbled through, sweating and panicked. "We are under attack, Chancellor! The tents are burning! The camp is in chaos!"

"Who is it? The Triumvirate?"

"No, my lady! It's the Free Folk!"

"What? But they're supposed to be in Steissen... Have we been deceived?"

Rosa rushed to the window and flung it open. The outside of the

fort was in uproar. She noticed, however, that only a portion of the camp was on fire. While the sheer size of the camp certainly helped, it also spoke to the attacking force being relatively small.

"Take us to the scene," she said. "We need to get this under control."

She let the officer lead them out of the room. Vias fell in silently behind her.

They headed along the hallway and down a staircase to the exit to the central courtyard. The guards opened the door on a scene of battle. Mounted soldiers poured into the fort, running rings around the imperial troops with skilled horsemanship. Rosa recognized them as the Free Folk.

A jet of blood arced suddenly across the full moon. The officer leading the way collapsed, his head shorn from his body. In a flash, Vias was in front of Rosa.

"Do not leave my side, my lady," she said. "They are here for you."

The riders had made a beeline for the fort, presumably aiming for the head of the army. Only someone extremely reckless would charge straight into such a large encampment, and there was no more dangerous foe than one who had made their peace with death. Vias drew her sword.

A woman stepped out of the night, picking her way between imperial corpses as she approached. "Chancellor Rosa," she said. "I have come for your head."

"Who are you?" Rosa asked.

The newcomer did not answer. Instead, she turned an intrigued look upon Vias. Her features gleamed with álfen beauty in the moonlight. "Your scent is peculiar."

"You say that like you can't see me."

"Indeed I cannot. But I have no need of light. Darkness has always been enough."

"Word games," Vias growled.

"My name is Verona." The woman drew her blade and sank into a low stance. "Come, nameless one, and join me in the dark."

Epilogue

The sun sank low, and night set in. A full moon shone in a sky filled with stars. On the earth below lay a deeper darkness, surrounded by corpses. All but a few of the bodies were inhuman, the creatures reviled as monsters by the peoples of Soleil.

A hulking shape hauled itself from a pile of corpses. "I'll kill you," it growled. "I'll kill you!"

The creature was a colossal monster of the kind known as a yaldabaoth. He lumbered toward a smaller figure, the speck of shadow. Yet the shadow did not remain so for long. A blazing light shone forth to match the darkness, and from between the two opposing hues, a boy's voice issued forth.

"Don't try it, Demiurgos. This failed experiment could never beat me."

The brilliance of Excalibur intercepted the yaldabaoth's fist. Behind it stood Hiro, black hair whipping in the wind. His words were for the third party on the field—the nonchalant figure of the Demiurgos.

"You speak as if you were my perfected vision. Do not mistake yourself, half-made creature."

Hiro gave a dismissive shrug. "Who really fell short of their potential? What is a Lord but someone who failed to become a god?"

"Hollow provocations. I may not be truly divine, but you still cannot slay me." The Demiurgos raised a finger, grinning. "Just as Artheus could not all those years ago."

"Enough. I don't need you to talk. I just need you to die."

Still holding off the yaldabaoth with Excalibur, Hiro summoned Dáinsleif in his other hand. The black blade traced a lazy arc. Blood sprayed as the yaldabaoth's head fell from his shoulders, yet even crimson could not prevail against the darkness, and the heavens remained veiled in night.

"I will devour all the Lords and become a god." Hiro spread his arms wide, greeting the downpour of blood with bitter resolve as if it were absolving rain. "I want to see what Artheus dreamed of and Rey saw: the farthest reaches of the cosmos."

Afterword

Thank you for picking up this copy of volume 11 of *The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles.* For those of you returning, welcome back. It's been too long.

A certain long-awaited character finally takes the stage in this volume. She's already appeared several times in various bonus stories and the After the Afterword page on the website, but this marks her formal debut in the main series. What did you all think? After a whole new life as Liz's little sister, some aspects of her appearance and mannerisms have started to take after her older sibling. I hope you enjoyed that and the rest of the volume as well.

Anyway, I'd better get to the thank-yous.

To Ruria Miyuki-sama, your gorgeous illustrations remain a blessing to my chuuni soul. I can't wait to see what you have in store for future volumes, but I know it'll be wonderful. To my editor, I-sama, I've caused you no end of trouble yet again, but I hope you'll continue to lend me your expertise. And to everyone else in the editing department, the proofreaders, the designers, and everyone else who helped to make this book a reality, thank you. I am more grateful than words can express.

And to you, my readers, I couldn't have made it to volume 11 without you. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

Until we meet again.

奉 (Tatematsuri)

Bonus Short Stories

Reunion with the White Wolf

Every day was hardly different from the last, but therein lay their value. If anything, she found comfort in the mundanity. A peaceful life was all she had ever wanted. She closed her eyes and yawned. Before her, a crimson-haired girl bathed in a forest spring beneath the gaze of two great statues and one floating, effervescent sphere.

A stray splash flew toward her, glinting in the light, and caught her in the eye. As she covered her head with a foreleg, an unexpected scent pricked at her nostrils. At once, she was on guard. Her claws glinted. Her lips pulled back, revealing pointed fangs. She was reminded anew that she was a knight no longer, but a proud white wolf—the one the crimson-haired girl called Cerberus.

What a vexing form...

She gazed down at her reflection in the water. The face that stared back at her would make a child squeal with fear. She yawned again and sighed, sitting back on her haunches and scratching her neck with a back leg. The only benefit of this body was the warmth its fur coat provided in the winter. Its disadvantages were far more numerous. She could not communicate with others as she liked. Summers were torturously hot. Worst of all, however, was that it rendered her weak. She could tear out an ordinary man's throat easily enough, but anyone more skilled—a trained assassin, for example—would easily get the best of her. She could not fight in the crimson-haired girl's defense. Nonetheless, she could serve as a distraction.

She set off in search of the offending scent. It was not far. Whatever it was had not moved. For a moment, she wondered if one of the commonfolk might have wandered into the forest, but she quickly dismissed the possibility. This was a sacred place barred to

all but the royal family. Of all the people in this land, only the crimson-haired girl was permitted to enter. That was her right and hers alone. For someone else to wander in would not only be improper but impossible.

Unless someone's broken the barrier...in which case, we're both in danger.

Still uncertain what to do next, she sprang growling from the undergrowth to confront the intruder. A soft-featured boy stared back at her. He slowly backed away, face crumpling in terror.

Him? It can't be...

She knew his face. Indeed, it was one she could never forget; one she had believed she would never see again. But this could not truly be him. He had returned to the world he called home, or so she had heard. What was this, then? Some manner of phantom?

Cerberus advanced on the boy, fangs bared. He backed away fearfully. Seeing that this was going nowhere, she sat down on her haunches and yawned, scratching her neck with a hindpaw. The desperation in his eyes allayed her previous concerns. She was content to watch him for now. If he made any sudden moves, she would tear out his throat and that would be that.

She laid her jaw on the ground, her eyes never straying from his face. Soon enough, another set of footsteps disturbed their stalemate—a pair she recognized. She sat back up as the crimson-haired girl emerged from the undergrowth.

"Hmm?" The girl looked at the black-haired boy curiously, still drying her hair. "Who are you?"

The boy's mouth opened and closed, but he did not otherwise respond. Cerberus saw at once that he had been struck dumb by the girl's beauty, but she herself seemed oblivious to that fact.

"Excuse me," the girl pressed. "I asked you a question."

"Erm...you mean...m-me?"

"Who else could I mean?"

It was hard to fault her for the question. There was no one there but the two of them and Cerberus, if she counted. The boy scratched the back of his neck sheepishly. "Right. Of course. Um...I'm Hiro. Hiro Oguro."

Cerberus's eyes widened. Not only did his face match her memories, his name did too. If not for his frailty, he would have been a perfect match. She began to wonder if he might be the real boy after all.

"Hmm..." The crimson-haired girl furrowed her brow as she looked him up and down. "Well, you seem the honest type. If you want to leave the forest, it's this way."

She set off, interrupting Cerberus's thoughts. She seemed to think nothing of turning her back on the boy. Seeing him follow her, Cerberus hurriedly bounded ahead and interposed herself between them. That way, no harm would come to the girl.

But if this truly is Hiro...what then?

He did not seem to have realized who she was. Would he even believe her if she told him in this lupine form? But no, that was silly. The boy she remembered would have known her at a glance. Why, then, was he acting like some terrified child? Was there some reason for this deception, or had she perhaps mistaken his identity after all?

She shook her head to clear it of the swirling questions, but she could not keep her tail from wagging. It had been a long time, after all, since last they met.

Artheus's Dream

"I fancied that I had grasped what I sought."

Artheus's face gave no clues as to his years. He looked too stalwart to be a green youth, yet too full of life to be feeling the onset of age. With golden hair and golden eyes, he sat at his desk. Three books lay before him: the Black Chronicle, the White Chronicle, and the first emperor's memoirs. All had been written by his hand.

He opened his memoir to an empty page and picked up his quill, but he stopped before committing it to parchment. There was nothing left to write. His tale had reached its end. With a rueful smile, he set the book aside and stood up.

A gentle breeze swirled around him as he opened the window

and stepped out onto the marble balcony. The view was nothing less than a marvel. What had once been an abandoned ruin had flourished into a human paradise, and its growth showed no signs of slowing. The population would continue to grow, and the town would continue to expand.

"One order from me and thousands of people would die, their lives dust on the wind before the might of the first emperor."

Artheus stretched out his hand. His fingers encircled the town with ease, such was the power vested in him. He could lay waste to a nation with a word, have the heads of other kings brought before him with a swing of his arm. He had the authority to make his desires a reality.

"And what of it? What good does it do me?"

His power was great, but it only went so far. Even the emperor of the Grantzian Empire was not omnipotent. He had paid in blood to cast the zlosta from Soleil, built a paradise for humankind atop the bones of those who had died to bring it about. His lifelong dream had been realized. And yet, for all that, he had only brought the people a modicum of happiness.

"Oh, Held, my blood-brother. What would you say to me now?"

The sky stretched away above him, endless and unchanging. No doubt the so-called gods were laughing even now as they looked down on him, mocking mortals and the way they lived bound to the earth. How comical he must seem in their eyes. How they must be clutching their bellies in laughter.

"And who could blame them? All the war we waged, all the lives we sacrificed, and still we could not win true freedom."

The years had gotten the better of him now. He was too old to accomplish much more. He had needed far more time than he had been given. Every passing second marked another step toward passing the torch.

"I had a family, but it was not the one I truly wanted."

He had taken many wives, and of all his children, two had emerged as worthy successors. They respected their parents, loved their nation, and cared for the people. The others did not possess the same spark, but they were good children all the same, and he

was proud of them all. Nonetheless, he regretted the childhoods he had given them. They had been forced to grow up in his shadow, and the pressure to follow in his footsteps had placed an unfair burden upon them.

"Sometimes, I wonder if I accomplished anything at all."

He had steered his children as well as he could, but eventually, they would have to step forth on their own. Both of his heirs seemed equally worthy, and he did not relish the prospect of choosing between them.

"How much easier this would be if there were a clear better. Yet while they are both talented enough, neither shines so bright as Held."

Talent was talent, far better present than absent, but neither son compared to the comrade-in-arms with whom Artheus had brought the world to heel. Factions were already forming. It was all too clear how the nation would be split after his death. He could only do what he could with the time he had.

"What would you say if you were here, Held? How would you chide me?"

In the past, his blood-brother had been his guiding light, but now nobody dared contradict him. The curse of power was that his subjects feared his wrath.

"I have done all I can. Everything else, I leave in your hands."

Nobody in the coming age would have the strength to resist the Five Lords of Heaven. Champions such as Hiro were not born in times of peace.

"And so I entrust my strength to the world to follow."

The current age would die with the anomaly that had been Artheus. His passing would usher in a new age of strife. He could already see it.

"Someday, the Time of Turning will come. Perhaps in a hundred years, or two hundred, or five hundred, or a thousand...but it will come."

Artheus lifted a hand to the heavens. It failed to grasp the sun, failed to pierce the clouds, failed even to encompass the sky above his head.

"Grasp what you seek. This time, you shall not fail. All that I have, I leave to you."

He clenched his fist so tight that it drew blood. His thoughts flew to the far future, and he bit his lip in shame at his own powerlessness, continuing even as crimson trickled down his chin.

"Rise or fall as you will!"

All he left undone, he would pass on—all his unfulfilled hopes for true freedom, left for his blood-brother to fulfill. And if the empire was the price of Hiro's happiness, so be it.

"Lay the gods to waste, Hiro, and live life as you please!"

Someday, the black dragon would spread its wings, and its roar would shake the world across space and time.

That was Artheus's dream.

Fighting by Her Side

Blood rained from the sky. Bodies lay on the ground, growing in number with every broken cry. The world bled crimson, the earth was filled with the dead, and the heavens could not breathe for screams. Hundreds of throats cried their last. Thousands of souls scattered on the wind. Tens of thousands of lives vanished in the blink of an eye. The ground had turned to bloody mud, churned beyond recognition by the uncaring tread of armored boots. The air had taken on a foul reek, soured beyond repair by the stench of exposed viscera. All around was death. Not an hour had gone by before corpses began to outnumber the living.

Hiro stared into the heart of the nightmare, trying to keep his stomach from rebelling.

"If you aren't up to it, you'd be better off back in the rearguard."

A hand clapped him on the shoulder. He turned his head to see Meteia, a beastwoman with white-furred ears and the distinctive pale complexion of the álfar. Aletia was not a friendly place for half-bloods, but she did not lament her lot. She had not always been so resilient—indeed, she had once confided to him that she had been much more rebellious in her youth—but Hiro knew that he could not

have smiled as she did if he had been in her place. She was one of the strongest people he had ever met. She insisted to a fault that it was the archpriestess who had shown her the way, but he knew it was her own purity of spirit that had allowed her to grow straight and true.

She glanced at the weapons in his hands. "Still using two swords?"

He shrugged, smiling despite himself. "That was how Artheus first taught me. It feels more natural than using one."

"That's your reason, hm? And not because you think it's... How did you put it? 'Cool'?"

He choked, caught dead to rights. What was he to say? Using two swords *was* cool. Drawing them felt freeing. Though he was yet to take a life, with two swords in his hands, he felt like he had contributed to the fight.

Meteia sighed. "Do what you like. Just take care it doesn't cost your life."

"I'm getting better with them. Artheus teaches me whenever he can. I barely even drop them nowadays."

"Would it not be easier to learn with one?" Meteia cocked her head. "If you get into bad habits, don't say I didn't warn you."

"I don't like fighting with one sword. It's not as exciting somehow."

"Well, as you please. With Her Grace in front of you and me behind, you should barely have cause to swing them."

Meteia looked back at the battle, chest swelling with pride. There stood Rey, surrounded by enemy soldiers, yet although her foes were twice her size, they were keeping their distance. Hiro could see at a glance that they were too intimidated to come any closer.

Rey saw their hesitation and struck, her silver sword gleaming as she surged forward. She moved as though dancing. It barely seemed that she intended to cut down her foes, yet blood arced high all the same. The soldiers fell one by one to the ground, but there was no anguish on their faces. They were too entranced by her beauty to realize they were dead.

It was an otherworldly sight. Even knowing she meant him no

harm, Hiro felt a chill run down his spine. The gleaming blade was as light as a feather in her hand, and its swings seemed painfully slow, but none could halt its path or stand in her way. It was as though her enemies leaped willingly onto her sword.

"There she goes," Meteia whispered. "No stopping her now."

All around Rey, innumerable rents appeared in thin air, too high up for the soldiers to see. Swords emerged hilt-first from the tears. By the time realization spread through the ranks, Rey was already gone, her presence reduced to the sounds of tearing air and keening steel. A gentle breeze blew outward. As dust danced high, streaks of silver light seared the air—one, then two, then three, then four. The soldiers looked around in confusion. Even Hiro could not truly see what was happening. He and they alike watched, frozen in time, as the world turned to quicksilver.

He had seen this sight many times before, but it never grew any less breathtaking. She was so far above her foes that he pitied them for having to face her.

She reappeared—standing in the very same spot, as if she had never moved at all—and the spell was broken. The world breathed again. She slid her gleaming sword back into its sheath with a soft *chink.* As if on cue, the soldiers' blood painted the sky red as their heads slid from their shoulders.

"That's it," Meteia breathed. "We've won."

Hiro nodded in dumb agreement. Rey was unmatched, positively untouchable—an unstoppable force, like a goddess come down to earth. For all the corpses around her, no blood stained her. But while he knew he ought to feel fear, he saw only beauty—a radiance sublime enough for any painting.

Bedside Reading

"'Yet even as it dawned upon Meteia that she had been deceived, Hydra's trap sprang shut.'"

A girl sat with a book open on her lap, reading by candlelight. Her silver hair was clipped above her shoulders as if to highlight her

youthful features. To those close to her, she went by Aura. She was reading to the figure laid out on the bed in the middle of the tent.

"'All at once, she was surrounded, with few allies to be seen and fatigue weighing heavily upon her.'"

From time to time, Aura glanced up from her page at the woman slumbering on the bed. Scáthach showed little reaction to the tale, but then, she never did. These readings had become a routine since she was found unconscious, and Aura intended to make her write a full report once she awoke. No doubt she was dreaming of some wondrous adventure. In that sense, it was hard not to envy her.

"'While her peril was great, Meteia resisted the temptation to send for aid, knowing that in saving herself, she would endanger the human cause.'"

Hydra had hoped to use Meteia to disrupt the human offensive, but his plans had come to nothing when she had refused to call for reinforcements. Indeed, she had resisted far more fiercely than expected. He had left the encounter with his nose decisively bloodied.

"If Mars had come to help her," Aura said, "the zlosta would have rallied and turned the tide. Her sacrifice secured our future. The humans lost a brave commander, but the zlosta paid a much higher price."

They had earned the anger of the War God, who had exacted bloody vengeance. He had swept across the land, burning zlosta encampments and slaying their commanders. The ploy Hydra had hoped would turn the tide had instead hastened his own side's downfall.

"A good plan in the short term can be a bad one in the long term. Hydra should have known better than to anger Mars. If he had captured Meteia instead of killing her, things might have been different. But Mars never found her body, so the zlosta gained nothing but his rage."

Aura closed the book and turned to Scáthach, noticing for the first time the pained twist to her lips. Perhaps her wounds were troubling her. There was little Aura could do to ease her distress but stroke her hair and try to make her as comfortable as possible. She

laid the Black Chronicle by Scáthach's pillow, hoping Mars would safeguard her dreams, but the woman's expression only grew more anguished.

"Your nightmares won't win," she whispered. "Not when you have the Black Chronicle with you."

Sweat beaded on Scáthach's forehead as if in protest. Aura wiped it off with a rare smile on her face.

"We'll read it together once you wake up, all right? And don't forget, I want a full essay on your impressions. You still owe me one from before."

Scáthach had still not submitted her last essay. Aura had been expecting it when tragedy had struck. Now, not only was Scáthach unable to finish it, but she could not even read the Black Chronicle without Aura's assistance. It was hard to imagine such torture. At least the book would be there by her bedside to reassure her when she woke. She might even hug it for joy. It was the one thing that kept her going, Aura knew. It would be no exaggeration to say it was a part of her.

"You can borrow it until you wake up. I want to read it too, but you need it more."

Aura did not make that decision lightly. The Black Chronicle had been her constant companion since childhood. In fact, she had been struggling to sleep without it, but that was a small price to pay to ease Scáthach's suffering.

"The Black Chronicle will save humankind. Once everyone knows Mars's greatness, their hearts will be at peace."

She spoke with a straight face, but her words would have raised an eyebrow if anyone had overheard them. And indeed, someone did. Liz watched through an opening in the tent, wary of entering for fear of the terrifying air Aura was projecting. She backed away a few steps and sighed.

"You know, Aura...you scare me sometimes."

Aura could become incredibly impassioned when it came to the Black Chronicle. She even experienced withdrawal symptoms if isolated from it for too long. Most likely, that was the cause of Scáthach's distress. Anyone would suffer nightmares after being read

the same book day in, day out by such a zealous narrator.

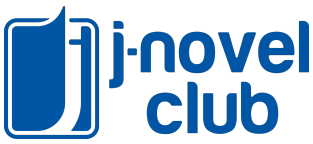
"I'll be back later."

With an apology to Scáthach, Liz fled the scene.









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by Tatematsuri

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