Author: Tatematsuri
Illustrator: Ruria Miyuki

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Tatematsuri / Illust. Miyuki Ruria

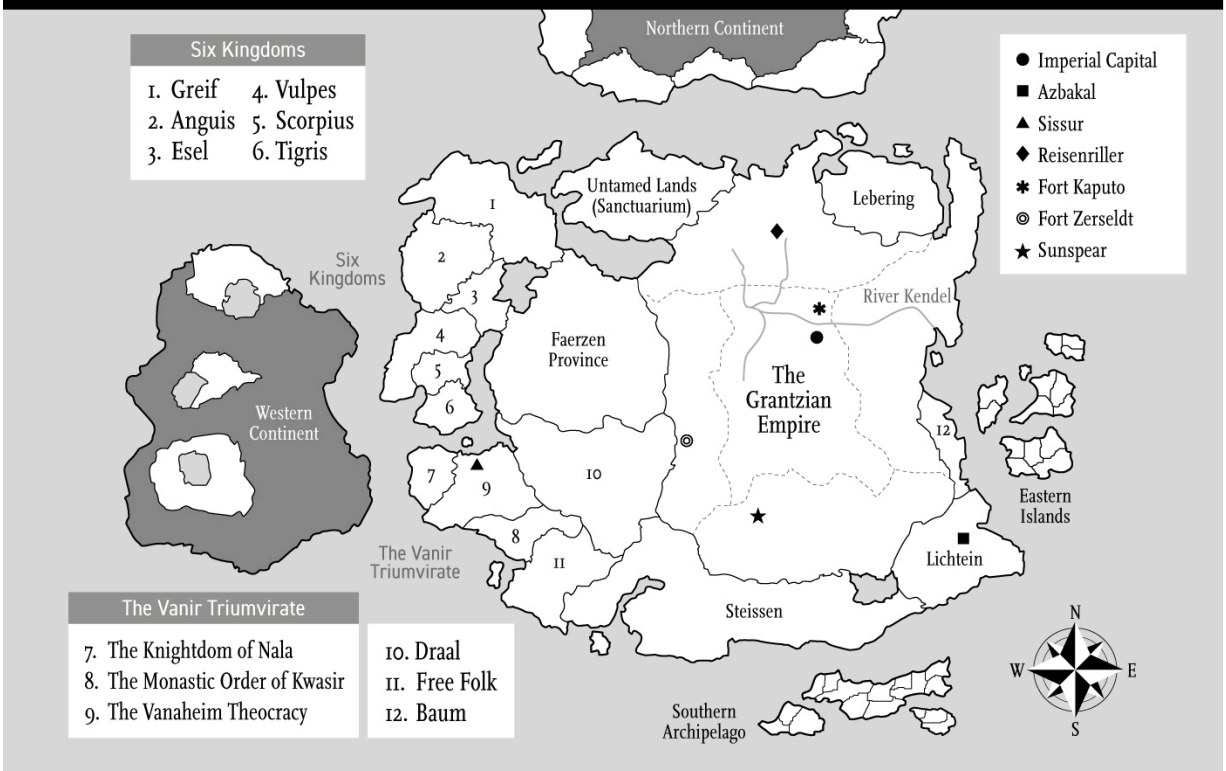

"Maybe you'll even surpass the War God."
Liz
?
"If I'm going to call myself the Warmaiden, I should live up to my name."
"NOT IN A THOUSAND YEARS."
Aura

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.

After two years, Hiro and Liz clash, each driven by their desire to save the other. Yet with the return of the Demiurgos and the fall of Friedhof, chaos threatens to consume 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 now rules Baum as the masked king Surtr after feigning his death to pursue goals unknown. The wielder of Excalibur, Dáinsleif, and Mjölnir.



Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz

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



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.



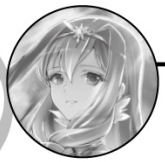
Culann Scáthach du Faerzen

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. The wielder of Gáe Bolg.



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.



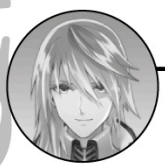
Luka Mammon du Vulpes

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. His corpse now serves as a vessel for the Demiurgos.

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Prologue

No more would the boy lament his lot. From that day forth, he would stand resolute, no matter what cruelties fate dealt him or what scorn fell upon him. Whether that made him stronger or weaker, even he did not know. He had no time to consider the answer. Every moment spent thinking about it was another miracle left unworked, one more grain of happiness that slipped through his fingers and scattered before him on the wind.

To that end, he abandoned hope.

If wishes and prayers would not avail him, he would cast aside his ideals and look reality in the eye. The heavens held no salvation. There was only one way: to cloak his heart in cruelty and bring about the miracles he sought with his own hands. To receive charity was indolence. To grow dependent was death. He would grasp what he needed and take it for himself by strength of arm. The defeated forfeited all they had. The victor took all. That, he now knew, was the way of the world.

And so he sought power. He crawled on his belly through the muck, enduring shame and disgrace, pursuing the realism that would grant his vision. He struggled through the mire of his own dream, sustained by thoughts of his companions' shining ideals. And at long last, he found it: a blackness darker than midnight, a shadow more brilliant than dawn.

"At last... I'll find what I've been looking for..."

Narrowing his eyes against the light, the boy walked an unseen road. Not long now, he knew. Soon, he would have everything he wanted.

"You will find nothing," a voice replied.

Its words slid from the boy's ears like water. "It's there. I know it. The world I wished for..."

The voice sighed in disappointment. When it spoke next, it was to

utter words the boy would remember until the day he died.

"Tell me," it said. "What do you know of despair?"

And the world of his dreams ran pitch-black.

Chapter 1: Five High Generals

A charred stench filled the air. Crimson flames set the night ablaze as they spread unabated. Black smoke rose from the walls, and burning shapes tumbled from within, their bestial howls promptly swallowed by the noise of battle. Yet the melee in the burning fort was not fought between beasts, but soldiers—men and women who dealt in death. Once one foe lay still before them, they looked around for the next with blood-crazed eyes, brandishing their swords with wild abandon as they charged back into the fray.

On the battlefield, it was kill or be killed. The combatants thought only of living to see the sunrise. Survival instincts left no room for good conscience. What they deemed a foe, they pounced on like rabid dogs. No rationality stayed their blades. They killed without hesitation, surely and deliberately, loosing cries of elation as they snuffed out their foes' last breaths.

"A sight to set the heart aflutter."

A woman's voice stirred the night—a remark at odds with the hellish bloodshed, cast into the chaos like a stone into a well.

"One order, and hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands bleed." A shiver ran through her body as she hearkened to the shrieks of the battlefield. "Wondrous, is it not? The strong live to see another day, while the weak are left at their mercy. Was the world ever more equal?"

The question was addressed to the woman before her, one beside whom the world looked gray. To look at her was to be struck by her beauty. Her face had both the serenity of the álfar and the geniality of the beastfolk, and two white-furred canine ears protruded from the top of her head. Her name was Vias, and she was one of the five high generals of the Grantzian Empire.

"Your name is Verona?" Vias asked.

The first woman nodded meekly. "Indeed. I am honored you

thought it worth remembering."

"I'll put it from my mind once you're dead. I have to say, though, you look awfully unhurried for someone here to take our heads."

Vias glanced at the main gate. Word of the fighting had spread to the camp outside, and now imperial soldiers were pouring in. It was only a matter of time before her forces filled the courtyard. By the same token, Verona's Free Folk could no longer maneuver so nimbly with the exit blocked. One by one, they leaped from their mounts and transitioned to fighting on the ground. It was clear which side had the upper hand. Soon, the battle would be decided by sheer numbers. Now that the Free Folk had no escape, they would fight to their last breaths, but their resistance would mean little in the face of such overwhelming odds. Yet Verona seemed unconcerned by her worsening situation. She stood basking in the clamor of battle, smiling as if she were still in full control.

"Only a true champion may fell me," she said, "and I see no worthy opponents here. Unless you are suggesting you have strength enough to satisfy me?"

"I don't know about that, but I have strength enough to take your head." Vias drew her sword from her belt. It was a curious weapon, composed of interlocking bladed segments of uniform size, and it emitted a soft, metallic keening.

Verona cocked her head. "Your blade hums like a living beast. Ah, now I see. Thus your confidence."

Vias narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Its song is known to me." Verona positively glowed with delight. She forgot herself enough to walk a few steps closer before returning to her senses. "Darkness hangs thick in the air. At this hour stirs the power of the Black-Winged Lord—so any babe would once have known. Yet Surtr fell centuries ago by a young boy's hand, and now only echoes of his might remain. You hold one such relic in your hand: Fragarach of the Dragon Lord's Drakeblades."

"You know a lot about the Black-Winged Lord, I see," Vias said, her eyes as wary as ever. "But I have one question."

Verona was correct—Vias did indeed wield the Drakeblade Fragarach—but the Noble Blades were hard to come by, and the

Drakeblades even more so. No one in the modern world had ever seen Fragarach in person. It had been far more widely known in the past, during the closing days of the great war, but anyone who remembered those days was surely long dead.

"Its song was known to you, you said, but how did you recognize it?"

"I have faced a Drakeblade before. Tyrfing, the Claws of Madness, wielded by a warrior named Skadi."

"That was not what I meant." Vias shook her head and raised her guard. Behind her, Rosa frowned, struggling to follow their exchange. "How did you recognize it as Fragarach?"

Fragarach had only ever had one wielder in all of history: the woman who held it now. Only someone who had seen it a thousand years ago, when Vias still called herself Meteia, could have identified it. In that sense, Verona's identity was clear.

"I knew the álfar were long-lived," Vias said, "but surely you cannot have fought in the great war?"

Verona laid a hand on the hilt of her own sword. "You are half correct and half mistaken."

Vias's eyes slid to the weapon on the woman's hip. The blade issued a strange aura, and the air seemed to grow weightier as she looked upon it, as if it were trying to intimidate her.

"So that's why you're looking for worthy opponents. You think that if you end up surrounded, you can just cut your way out with your Dharmic Blade."

"Again, you are half correct and half mistaken." A smile flitted across Verona's lips as she tapped the hilt of her sword. "Allow me to rectify your misconception. While often taken for one, this is not a Dharmic Blade."

She leaped high, sailing weightlessly through the air. With her left hand holding her scabbard and her right poised on the hilt, she bore down on Vias.

"And although my appearance may be misleading, I am not an álf."

Long before Verona came into range, Vias swung her sword. The blade moved to point at her foe. From where she stood, the motion

did not even serve as a threat, let alone an effective strike—no sword could cover such a distance. Yet her blade gleamed in the night, and with a dull clang, Verona spun away as though she'd been struck. The woman quickly recovered, pirouetting into a graceful landing as though she had found a foothold in thin air. A small gust of wind rolled out from her feet. Silence fell between the combatants as dust danced around them, carried upward on the breeze.

Verona was the first to speak. "I am pleased to see that your skills have not dulled."

Rosa raised her spirit weapon, ready to fight. Vias shot her a meaningful look. She nodded and fell back a few paces, understanding that she would only get in the way. As she moved out of harm's way, Vias flicked Fragarach. Wind whistled around the blade.

"Whoever you are, no distance will save your heart from my sword."



She twisted at the waist and whipped her arm out to the side. The blade segments decoupled, extending along a central thread, and bore down on Verona faster than the eye could see. Yet just before they made contact, Vias flicked her wrist, and the blade coiled away like a snake. It was a technique to catch an expectant opponent flat-footed. Their mind would lurch when the blow they anticipated never came, leaving them open—just in time for the whiplike blade to lash out mockingly from the most unexpected angle, impossible for any ordinary combatant to predict.

Verona, however, was no ordinary combatant. She smiled defiantly. "Blind I may be, but I can still sense you."

Sparks burst in midair, and Vias's sword bounced away.

Vias frowned. Her attack had been repelled, that much was clear, but how? She had detected no motion from Verona at the moment the sparks appeared. Even now, the woman's hand rested idly on the hilt of her sword.

"That's a curious trick."

Vias kept her distance, lashing at Verona again and again as if probing for answers, but to no avail. All her blows skittered away. It was clear the woman wielded one of the Noble Blades—common steel would have long since shattered beneath Fragarach's assault—but she denied that it was one of the Dharmic Blades prized by the álfar. Nor was it one of the Dragon Lord's Drakeblades; Vias knew them all, and none of them matched the sword in Verona's hands. That left only the human Spiritblade Sovereigns, the zlosta Archfiend's Fellblades, and the dwarven Supreme Dawnblades.

At that moment, she recalled Verona's earlier words. "You're not an álf, you said?"

"Indeed. Although I am often taken for one, an álf I am not."

"And you sound too clear about that to be a half blood."

Verona nodded. "There are many among the Free Folk, so it is easy to assume as much, but again, you would be mistaken."

"Then there's only one thing you could be."

"I would have told you, had you asked." Verona sighed, giving the slightest of shrugs. "You might have saved yourself all these theatrics."

Vias's voice hardened. "You're an auf. A zlosta changeling."

"Marvelous. And so you reach the truth." Verona cocked her head. "Ought I give you a round of applause?"

All at once, she surged forward, kicking up a plume of dust behind her. Her every movement radiated impatience. It was odd that she would suddenly let her emotions show, Vias thought. Was she running out of time, or had she simply grown tired of talking? Then again, she supposed, it didn't really matter either way.

"Now that I know who you really are, I have no reason to hold back." She snapped her sword back to its original form and reversed her grip. "If only you weren't a member of Orcus, I would have made your death quick."

"Truly, I have no secrets from you. Would it please you, then, if I said I was one of the twelve primozlosta?"

A shiver ran through Vias's body. It was not the trepidation of knowing she faced a mighty warrior, nor was she quaking in terror. She felt only icy fury—a surge of animosity at absolute zero that sliced the air to ribbons.

"Whether or not your words are true, now that you have spoken them, I can't leave you alive." She thrust Fragarach into the earth and regarded Verona with cold fire. "You will pay in blood for breaking my lord's heart."

*

Night hung over the world. It was a time for distant howls, for roving brigands, for paranoias born from the worst excesses of the mind. Yet scattered across Soleil were points of light—towns and cities, lit by the warmth of those who dwelled within. Candlelight spilled from thousands of windows to illuminate the dark. High walls engendered security, and a handful of late sleepers scorned the night altogether, stumbling drunk from taverns to collapse in nearby alleyways without regard for their work the next day. Perhaps a few would meet unfortunate fates at the hands of miscreants before the night was through. Yet they were far safer within civilization than without. Even perhaps the most orderly city of all, the imperial

capital, afforded little protection beyond the reaches of its walls. Those who set foot outside its gates risked being stripped of their belongings by ne'er-do-wells or being attacked by monsters. It was all too clear which side was heaven and which was hell.

Tonight, however, even the most malign of creatures would not dare walk under the moon.

In a place far from the capital, a battle was joined in darkness. Animals trembled in the undergrowth at its violence. In nearby villages without the luxury of walls, commonfolk abandoned their homes and fled to safety. None dared come to watch, no matter how great their curiosity. This battle was a glimpse of hell, where monsters and men fought with all their might to slay before they were slain. Hopelessness, anger, fear, and confusion swirled over the field, rising into the night in a great, air-shaking maelstrom.

In the eye of the battle was a lull that none of the combatants dared enter. They fought like blood-crazed beasts, but even beasts could sense danger. Every instinct warned them not to approach, and so they kept their distance, creating a dead zone in the heart of the storm. There, two figures faced each other beneath the night sky. Their sheer hatred for one another hung like a weight in the air, further ensuring they were left alone.

One of the figures, a black-haired boy, held a sword that lit the field with its brilliance. Yet while his weapon shone bright and reassuring, his eyes housed a darkness deeper and blacker than the night. His mantle billowed wildly as if to reflect his heart—far wilder than the wind, like it had a mind of its own.

"Such obsession. A lingering curse that yet persists even now, long after the body is gone."

Opposite Hiro stood a young man with golden hair and golden eyes. He wore the face of Artheus, the first emperor of the Grantzian Empire, but something far more dreadful lurked within. He was the Demiurgos, one of the Five Lords of Heaven—beings who had existed since Aletia's creation and were worshipped by its people as gods. Once, a thousand years ago, he had led the zlosta to war against the humans in a bid to rule the world. Hiro had thwarted his plans at Artheus's side, a feat that had earned him a place in the

imperial pantheon as Mars, the War God. Yet the Demiurgos's ambitions had lived on. For a thousand years, he had awaited his chance, steadily undermining imperial rule, until the time was ripe to make his return.

"The Black Camellia," he said, narrowing his eyes fondly. "Does your hatred still burn so strong, after all these years?"

Hiro only stared back with a lightless gaze.

"To entrust your wishes to another," the Demiurgos continued, "leaving only the shadow you once cast... How absurd. What vindication is there in that? What satisfaction, when your soul is dust? What curse remains will only burden those you leave behind."

"Surtr was tired. Of the fighting, of all of it. So he left his mantle to me."

Hiro patted his chest to reassure the Black Camellia. As if reading his mind, the garment fell still, little different from any other black cape. Yet there was no mistaking the hostility with which it regarded the Demiurgos.

"Tired, you say? Ridiculous. The words of one who failed to understand why we were made at all."

The Demiurgos spread his arms wide and looked to the sky, like a player on a stage. Though he stood on a battlefield of his own making, he wore the face of a saint who wept to see bloodshed.

"Kings on the earth, yet no god in the heavens."

Ruefully, bitterly, he closed his fist, lowering his eyes to regard Hiro with a piercing gaze.

"The Lord who claims the Empty Throne will rule this world. They will become the god it has so long lacked, and they will learn why the Great Creator made and abandoned us."

"And what will you do once you know?" Hiro asked. "What if there isn't some big, important reason they left? What if they just got bored one day and found something else they cared about more?"

No one had ever met, let alone spoken to, the god who had created Aletia. Its people had turned them into an object of reverence, but as far as Hiro was concerned, their absence had inflated them to greatness they had perhaps never possessed. He was not even sure they had existed at all.

“We don’t even know if there *was* a Great Creator.” His dismissive snort fell on the Demiurgos’s impassioned speech like cold water. “You’re chasing a ghost, trying to understand something you don’t even know exists. And even if it does, the truth would only disappoint you. What would all this effort be worth then? A thousand years of planning, all for nothing.”

“Then for what do you seek godhood? To what end do you seek power?”

“To prove you wrong. To shatter the dream you and your minions cling to.” Hiro walked softly forward—one step, two steps, three. “To prove the godhood you’re chasing is an illusion. Something any ordinary person could achieve.”

Five steps, and he broke into a sprint. Straight and true he ran, eyes on his foe, swords spread out behind him like a pair of wings.

“To show the Lords are nothing special...”

The air tore asunder, and black bled through the cracks. Space rent apart, and darkness surged forth.

“No different from any other human.”

The sky transformed, growing blacker and heavier. The spreading darkness drowned out any light. And then... And then...

And then the heavens fell.

Even notions as simple as speed grew uncertain in the dark. Its arrival heralded confusion and, shortly thereafter, terror—or at least, it would for any mortal man.

“Hmph. Is that all?” The Demiurgos thrust an arm out into the blackness, closing his fist around some incoming object. “Did you truly believe this would give me pause?”

There was a grisly crunch as his fingers squeezed, and then something splattered the ground like drops of rain. All was dark. He could feel something in his grasp, but there was not enough light to tell what it was. Nonetheless, he felt no threat. If anything, his voice took on an edge of arrogance.

“You mock me, boy.”

A noise issued from between his fingers—a hideous wail echoing in the dark, like the howl of some flayed beast. Yet it was not a beast or a man, or any other living thing. The sky itself was crying, a

sound dreadful enough to bring anyone's hands to their ears.

Hiro, however, was undeterred. He took hold of the Black Camellia. "I've waited a long time for this day."

An earthshaking rumble filled the dark. The Black Camellia burgeoned and swelled, propelled by some eruption from within, but Hiro was unharmed. He shrugged off the blast and flicked the mantle back.

"Now I'm going to take back everything you stole."

Sparks sprayed as the two clashed. The sound of their battle was ugly and metallic, but the sight was a painting in motion. In a night deep enough to drown all life in nothingness, their passions blazed bright. Unblemished light and unending dark—this was a contest for the ages, a miraculous moment that ought to have shone on for aeons, holding all who saw or heard of it in thrall. If any contest had ever deserved to be committed to canvas, it was this. Yet with no master painter to capture their likeness, their battle would endure only in memory, and any who might have borne witness were fighting desperately for their own lives. This moment would never be celebrated by history. It belonged to them alone, a clash of ideals for ideals' sake.

"Have you spent these thousand years asleep?"

The words left Hiro's mouth unbidden. Neither of them had landed a single blow, but the Demiurgos felt too feeble for a Lord who had spent a thousand years building his strength.

"Indeed. A thousand long years I have slumbered. My time ceased to flow until you set it into motion once more."

The Demiurgos knocked Hiro's strike away and came to a stop. Rather than exploiting the opening, Hiro kept his distance. The Demiurgos gazed down at Ipetam's glowing red blade, which looked disconcertingly like it was slick with blood. He raised it before him and narrowed his eyes.

"We are both of us Lords. Nothing more, nothing less. Now that you have usurped Surtr's mantle, you, too, are counted among our number. One Lord may struggle for a thousand years while another lives a life of ease, and their battle will still end in stalemate. There can be no supremacy between us, as vexing as it may be." He

looked up at the night sky and sighed. “The weakest Lord is a Lord still. The mightiest Lord is a Lord still. One cannot be greater or lesser than another. And how I despised being spoken of in the same breath as my siblings.”

At last, he raised a finger and pointed at Hiro, a smile filling his face. His eyes sparkled with joy, like a child that had discovered some priceless treasure.

“But at last, I found my answer.”

“Your answer?”

“Indeed. It was given to me by a lowly human, worth less than dust if not for the role the Spirit King so thoughtlessly shackled them to. When I saw the ordinary become extraordinary, when I watched all my designs come to nothing...finally, finally, I found what I sought.”

Hiro paused. “I...”

“We both know the truth, boy. Mars the Hero King, mighty god of the Grantzian Empire and beloved of its people, is a falsehood. A fiction. There was never anything remarkable about you. You were weak. Fragile. Useless. A burden to your friends and allies. It was sheer chance that you even survived, and you stand where you stand by the grace of good fortune.”

Hiro clutched his chest and ground his teeth, pressing his lips together so hard they turned white. The Demiurgos continued, driving deeper into the chink in his armor.

“It was you, pretender, that set the gears out of joint. You snatched away the glory your comrades rightfully deserved.” He expelled a sigh, his voice almost mournful, and raised a hand. Ceryneia and Khimaira stepped forward. “But I cannot imagine you plan to settle our score on so small a stage. You are plotting something, I am certain.”

Ceryneia held out a cloak. The Demiurgos took it and put it on.

“You have entertained me, and I acknowledge you as a fellow Lord. I will concede victory this day.” He gestured at the ground with amusement. “But when next we meet, I will see you crawl upon the earth.”

With that, he and his two followers melted into darkness. They

left behind their horde of monsters, but the battle was almost done. Most of the creatures had fallen to the Crow Legion's charge. Whoops and cheers filled the air as the troops sensed imminent victory.

Hiro alone had no thought for celebration. He simply stood, staring at where the Demiurgos had been standing.

"I know I'm a pretender. I always knew..."

*

The battle between Verona and High General Vias brooked no interference. Any mortal who stepped too close would be decapitated, torn limb from limb, cut down before they even knew they were dead. Their clash was formidable—and yet not quite what Rosa had anticipated. She had expected them to move faster than the eye could see, but that could not have been further from the truth.

Vias maintained her position, her back to Rosa, keeping her distance. Verona stared her down from a low-slung stance, her hand on the hilt of her sword. The auf had not moved a step since the battle began. Rosa still did not quite understand how they were fighting. A fierce battle was clearly taking place—sparks exploded in the space between them, and the air shuddered with the clashing of steel—but it was one she could not follow beyond staring in amazement. Only the combatants themselves, two individuals who had transcended the bounds of humanity, could understand their desperate duel to the death.

While it was impossible to tell which of the two had the upper hand, the wider battle was easier to read. The Free Folk were gradually being overwhelmed. With Verona preoccupied with Vias, the raiders found themselves in an unenviable dilemma, lacking orders to follow yet unwilling to abandon their commander. One by one, they fell to imperial swords.

"A fine pair we make," Vias murmured. "It's hard to tell who has whom at a disadvantage."

She stood with her sword thrust into the ground and both hands

on the hilt, her eyes on Verona a short distance away. Her onslaught had found no purchase in her opponent's guard. She had not dealt so much as a scratch. They had traded easily over a thousand blows, and the storm showed no sign of abating. There was no strain on Vias's brow, and Verona had not shed so much as a drop of sweat.

"Were you not intending to make me pay in blood?" Verona said. "If you thought this would suffice, I must say, you are mistaken."

An impact struck Fragarach, knocking it askew. The shower of sparks illuminated Verona's face. Vias saw that the auf was smiling, but she dismissed the provocation with a snort and redoubled her assault.

"I will not let anger cloud my eyes. Victory will require understanding your strengths and weaknesses alike. I am not so naive as to think I can best you with force alone."

"Indeed." Verona nodded. "You always were clear of mind."

"There it is. That's what so annoys me about you. Why will you not tell me how you know me? The name Verona means nothing to me. I have never seen your face before. Surely it would irk you too if someone you had never met addressed you with such familiarity."

"As you say. But where would be the fun in giving the game away?"

"Very well, then. I'll pry the truth from your dying lips."

Vias raised a hand and snapped her fingers. A host of blades thrust upward from the earth around Verona, snapping together and contracting around her like a giant serpent coiling around its prey. The whirlwind closed over the auf's head until it formed a dome. Eventually, she was visible only through the occasional gap in the forest of steel. Yet although she had no hope of escape, she continued to smile softly as if there was nothing to fear.

"Should you manage to deal me a mortal blow," she said, "I will be happy to tell you on my deathbed."

The blades contracted into tiny spheres like glass beads, so small a child could swallow one whole.

"Then I hope enough of you remains to answer," Vias growled.

Her finishing stroke came in the span of a heartbeat. It afforded Verona no hope of evasion, no chance to escape—and yet, after it

was done, a voice sounded from atop the battlements.

"My troops have fallen. That will do for tonight."

Vias spun toward the voice and scowled. There was no moonlight to see by, but she could sense who was there well enough.

"Never fear. Our plans are proceeding apace." With a tinkling laugh, Verona hopped down from the wall and into the night.

Vias looked around the courtyard, still wary. Only once she was certain the threat had left did she let down her guard. "The primozlosta always did skulk in the shadows," she murmured. "A thousand years evidently haven't changed their habits."

As Vias withdrew her sword from the earth, Rosa stepped forward. "Has she fled?"

"Had her fill, more like." Vias glanced back. "But yes, she's gone."

Rosa's brows pulled together. "All this, just to come and throw taunts... I don't like it one bit."

The bodies of the Free Folk littered the ground. Every last one had fought to the end rather than surrender, and the imperial troops had bled for the privilege. Tallying the losses would come after, but a glance at the battlefield was enough to tell that there would be many wounded.

"Perhaps we should find a new fort," Vias said. "We won't be holding this one in a hurry."

The raid had reduced the gate to a burned-out ruin. Still, it appeared that the Free Folk's objective had not been to destroy the fort but to slay Rosa and Vias. In that sense, they had failed.

"Fortunately, that won't be much of a setback," Rosa said. "We were never planning to dig in for a siege. It was our heads they wanted—and whatever deaths they could cause in the confusion."

"We'll need to restore order in the ranks. The encampment is large. The soldiers on the other side must be wondering what's going on."

"Indeed. And once that's done, we can start asking why there were Free Folk behind our lines."

Vias was silent for a moment. "Do you think they were in league with House Muzuk?"

"I don't want to jump to conclusions, but I can't deny it's likely."

Rosa hung her head with a tired sigh, then set about flagging down officers. Her work this night was far from over.

Vias sat down and looked up at the sky. "No stars tonight," she murmured. "Clouds tomorrow, perhaps, or rain. Would that we were lucky enough for clear skies..."

Obscurity brought fear. Anyone would hesitate to venture forward when they could not see the road ahead—a sentiment that applied to the present state of the empire just as well as a moonless night.

"Nobody likes the dark. It makes you think of things you'd rather not."

Vias turned to face the southern sky, her thoughts flying to those she had left behind in Sunspear.

*

Sunspear, in the southern territories

The de facto capital of the southern territories was a nexus of continental trade, propelled to prosperity by its gold mines and the attention they attracted from the merchants of Soleil. It was ruled by House Muzuk, one of the five great houses of the empire. Thanks to its enormous reserves of capital, the house's status was second only to that of House Kelheit, whose acting head currently served as chancellor. Its authority was embodied by the golden palace of Glitnir. The structure was without equal in the empire, a feat of architecture only House Muzuk's vast fortune could produce. It formed a gleaming homage to their pride, their self-assurance, and the pretensions with which they masked their roots.

House Muzuk had not always been wealthy. The southern territories were a land of deserts, blessed only with a small swath of grasslands used to rear the horses that had originally formed the backbone of the region's economy. For a long time, House Muzuk had been looked down upon in noble society until it had discovered a vast quantity of gold beneath its mountains. Its fortunes had changed overnight. By lavishing its newfound wealth on wooing merchants and investing in municipal development, it had successfully reinvented Sunspear as a center of commerce. Its story

was one of a rise from ignominy, of a house gilding its ignoble origins in gold until it ruled one of the greatest cities in the empire. Nothing of House Muzuk's former modesty could be seen in Glitnir now. The palace towered over the city like a glittering beacon even in the dark of night.

This evening, however, an air of unease hung over the palace. Perhaps it had been brought by the guards beginning to converge there, or perhaps it was lent by the night itself. In any case, the first to sense something amiss was Margrave Rugen Kiork von Gurinda, uncle to the sixth princess and protector of lands on the Lichtein border. He hastened through the palace corridors with a host of soldiers in tow.

"And you are certain you heard screams?" he asked with no small amount of urgency.

One of the soldiers nodded. "Yes, my lord. I checked the corridor, but I saw no sentries at the door. Perhaps I should have looked inside, but..."

"No, you did your duty. Exactly as General von Grax commanded."

General Robert von Grax had instructed his men to report to Kiork outside the chamber if anything roused their suspicions—a precaution in case his meeting with the southern nobles went sour. His fears had borne out, and Kiork was now heading to the strategy meeting with von Grax's soldiers.

"Something's wrong."

He could sense it as soon as he turned the corner—an unnatural silence that sent a chill down his spine. It was almost enough to make him think better of pressing onward, but there was no turning back now. He drew a deep breath to center himself and turned to the soldiers behind him.

"No sentries and no patrols. How many men were supposed to be on guard?"

"Twenty-five of General von Grax's finest, my lord."

An ill premonition settled in Kiork's chest, but he steeled himself and set off again. He came to the chamber to find the door ajar. A foul smell oozed from within. He winced, covering his mouth and nose. Nothing good awaited within, he could already tell, but

hesitation would only prolong the inevitable.

"Stay on guard. There's no telling what we'll find."

The soldiers replied with tense nods. As if on cue, one of them roared and kicked the door down. The rest poured in, drawing their swords, but they slowed to a halt and blanched as they saw what lay inside.

Kiork surveyed the carnage, mouth still covered. "By the Divines..."

The room had been painted red from wall to wall. It was quite literally a bloodbath, strewn with miscellaneous limbs and trailing viscera. The chairs were broken, the desk was shattered, the formerly white walls were coated with gore. Kiork grimaced at the squelch of blood underfoot. His eyes widened as he recognized the largest of the bodies submerged in the sea of blood.

"General!"

He ran to the man's side and lifted him upright, but he was already dead. It was hard to make out his wounds through all the gore, but the sheer amount of blood left no doubt they had been mortal. A woman lay nearby, her skull crushed to pulp. Nausea surged up Kiork's throat at the sight, and he rose to his feet, clapping a hand to his mouth again. With her head all but missing, it was hard to say for certain who she was, but judging by her clothes, he was likely looking at the corpse of Selvia von Muzuk.

"What happened here? Who could have done this?"

As he distantly watched the soldiers begin the search for survivors, the blood drained from his face. A realization had dawned, not about the slaughter in the room, but about what was likely to happen next.

"Ah," he whispered. "We may be in grave trouble."

The murderer was not among the bodies. They had left no obvious evidence of their presence, and extracting more subtle traces from the carnage would be next to impossible. More to the point, Kiork and his men did not have the time to search. Most of the palace was occupied by the Fifth Legion—eastern noble troops. The first witnesses on the scene had been eastern noble soldiers and himself, a known ally of the east. The room was littered with the

corpses of southern nobles, eastern noble soldiers, and General Robert von Grax, all of whom appeared to have been locked in battle. To the casual observer, this would appear to have been an assassination plot.

"There must be someone... Someone from the south..."

He grimaced. Every southern noble of note had been present for the meeting. Who was left in Sunspear? Low-ranking nobles and their private troops? Would they be willing to listen to him after they learned of the death of their lord? It seemed unlikely.

"Assemble the officers from the south," he commanded. "We must explain what has happened here."

The situation was dangerously close to appearing like the eastern nobles had hatched a scheme to seize the south. One wrong move and Sunspear could burn, and if the empire's neighbors sensed weakness... Well, as dreadful as it was to imagine, they would not hesitate to join the fray. He ran an anxious hand over his face and bit his thumb, trying to marshal all the intellect at his disposal.

"Curses... There must be a way out of this, but what?"

As he swept his gaze around the room, he caught sight of Beto's corpse. The man had died in wide-eyed surprise. Beside him lay a blood-soaked letter. Kiork picked it up and squinted at it. The blood rendered large parts of it illegible, but he could just about make out a few snatches.

"Is this...?"

The furrow in his brow grew deeper and deeper as he read. Once he finished, he put a hand to his chin. A moment passed in silence, and then he set out for the door, still deliberating. As he passed through, he turned back to the soldiers.

"Post guards at the door and keep everyone out. The scene must not be disturbed. Once the southern officers arrive, would you be so kind as to send them to me?"

"Of course, my lord. But if I may, where are you going?"

"To Lord von Muzuk's chambers. Could I trouble someone to escort me?"

The only way to avoid conflict with the soldiers of the south was to prove his innocence. Given the chance, he would have liked to

have asked for Rosa's advice, but he had no time to wait for her reply. Besides, she had a war to fight. He would send a messenger to apprise her of the situation, but he would not make himself a burden. His niece was fighting courageously in a foreign land. The least he could do was his part.

"I have to make you proud of me sometime, hm?"

Determination glinted in his eyes. He would have to find his own way out of this mess.

*

Straea could not remember a time before she came to Frieden. She never felt out of place there, and she never questioned whether it was her home. She lived, learned, and grew up within its confines as though she had been born there. Sometimes, she grew curious about where she was really from, but the longer she spent there, the less the question seemed to matter. She was far from the only such child given to the Spirit King's Sanctum.

Yet that blissful ignorance would not last forever. One cruel night, she learned of her cursed fate. An intruder found his way into Frieden and slew her closest friends. Her mind went blank at the sight of their bodies lying in pools of blood, and she struggled to come to terms with reality. All the while, the assassin advanced on her, wicked blade at the ready. He swung his arm lazily and dispassionately, as if swatting an insect. The knife glinted in the dark.

Straea had been too young to understand. All she could do was close her eyes in terror and wait for the end. The end, however, never came. At last, she opened her eyes again to see the assassin lying dead—and the impassive figure of the third archpriestess glaring coldly down at his corpse.

"Forgive me," the woman said bitterly and took her in her arms.

Straea could make no sense of what had happened. All she knew was that the horror had passed. So she cried—not in sorrow, but in joy as she realized she would live. Her relief that she had survived surpassed her grief over the deaths of her friends.

“Why would I dream of such things now?”

Another Straea—Straea the archpriestess—looked on from afar, watching her childhood self embrace her predecessor. If the presence of the former had not been enough to convince her this was a dream, the latter would have been. The third archpriestess was long dead.

This was not reality. These were the repulsive memories she carried seared into her soul—the hateful past she had so striven to hide. A youth of blissful innocence, untainted by corruption, ignorant of the world’s true ugliness. Moments that sprang readily to mind as if they had happened yesterday, no matter how hard she tried to bury them. How naive she had been back then, still trusting that grown-ups wanted what was best for her.

“If I met you now,” she whispered, “I would wring your neck.”

The sight shifted. Space swirled, colors blended, and the memory blew past her on a silent gust of wind. She smiled ruefully to herself. Surely her mind could simply wake from this dream without all these theatrics, but she would humor it for now.

A new memory appeared, her younger self having become just a little older.

“My,” she murmured. “How I have grown.”

Her face still retained traces of youthfulness, but there was a darkness in her eyes—and she smiled, splattered from head to toe with blood that was not her own.

The elder Straea sighed in delight. “So very bloodstained. When was this again?”

She reached out to wipe the blood from her younger self’s cheek, but her fingers made no contact. She lowered her arm with a sigh but continued to study her own face, racking her brains to match the vision to a memory. At once, her eyes jumped to the human head in her younger self’s arms.

“Ah, of course. The day I killed the third archpriestess.” Her eyes burned with hatred. “Nothing but a fraud. Nothing but a pawn...”

Her gaze remained locked on the face of her younger self—or no, on the face of the young boy behind her.

“The Faerie King...” she breathed.

At that moment, the Faerie King spoke. “Now you, Straea, will be the next archpriestess.”

Her words could not possibly have reached him. Nonetheless, it seemed that he looked at her when he spoke rather than the younger Straea before him. But that could not have been so. For one thing, he was only a memory, and for another, his face was masked by a shroud.

“Thank you, my Lord,” the younger Straea replied. She bowed reverentially as she caressed the third archpriestess’s head.

“Do not forget our agreement, Straea. I grant you the eyes of a Lord and a Dharmic Blade, but not for your own gain.”

“I will not forget, my Lord. Yet if I am not mistaken, these eyes are...diminished.”

“Indeed. Their vessel has been shattered. But fear not. They will regain their power in time.”

“I look forward to receiving their full blessing.”

“Until then, you are to ingratiate yourself with the Spirit King. When the time is ripe, you must send for me.”

“Yes, my Lord. All will be as you desire.”

The young Straea bowed deep. Her smile remained all the while, unchanged since the memory’s beginning. Yet as she lowered her head, her face filled with triumphant glee like a child who had succeeded at some deception. The Faerie King nodded and disappeared, oblivious to the end, and she was left alone with the ugly, dark emotions that had taken root within her.

“Aha, aha... Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Is that a Lord? What a hideous thing! Stripped of his vessel, reduced to empty grandeur, but still he clings to this world! He truly is a pathetic creature!”

As the young Straea descended into a laughing fit, the elder narrowed her eyes fondly and turned away. She giggled to herself.

“And so let it be, forever and ever and ever.”

The world began to crumble. The memory flaked away, and her younger self vanished like a scab peeled from a wound.

“Let crippled Lords crawl upon the earth, while risen mortals crush them underfoot.”

All was black now. Straea looked up and stretched out with both

hands.

"Now, back to the real world, I think. The world I chose."

A smile tugged at her lips, and she closed her eyes. Waking was a quick and simple process, washing all the pain and sorrow of her dreams away into oblivion. The only price was a dull ache in her chest.

"Reality unchanging, forever and ever and ever."

She opened her eyes to darkness. Nonetheless, she could hazard a guess at where she was by the sound of chaos around her. A faint burnt smell crept in through her nose to fill her lungs, its acrid tang flooding her body as if to reaffirm that she was back in the real world.

"So it is dreams that are heaven and reality that is hell."

She was back in the Holy Emperor's private tent. The Vanir Triumvirate's encampment was still in uproar in the aftermath of the imperial raid. Little time must have passed since she had left.

"It smells like Lævateinn's fires are still burning."

Mere water would not extinguish a Spiritblade's flames. As likely as not, the Vanir troops had given up on putting them out, at least until other matters were attended to. Yet Straea cared nothing for that. She raised a hand to her face. Something was wrong.

"So I did not wholly escape the curse. I had hoped Ludurr's death would break it, but no matter. It seems the Fellblades are more complex things than I anticipated."

Burn marks spanned half her face. Her own skin felt foreign to the touch. There was nothing left of her beauty now. With a sigh of resignation, she drew her hood low over her head.

"Well, that was a price I was prepared to pay."

She sounded as if she was trying to convince herself as much as anything else.

There was a flurry of footsteps outside the tent. "Are you unharmed, Your Holiness?!" someone said.

"Yes, not to worry. I am quite all right." She kept her voice steady, unhurried, befitting of the Holy Emperor. Then she let a note of uncertainty creep in, playing the fool as if she had no idea what had transpired. "What happened while I slept?"

"Nothing worthy of note, Your Holiness. The imperial forces staged a night raid, but our defenses repelled them."

Straea let the soldier finish, then stepped outside. The smell was far stronger in the open air. It was more than just smoke; there were notes of a sweeter stench, like charred meat. She raised a sleeve to cover her mouth, as if holding back the urge to vomit.

"If that were all, surely it would already be in hand? Is there not something else—"

She cut herself off. The moment she turned toward the noise, she saw the problem for herself. A fire was raging in the middle of the camp. Soldiers swarmed about, fighting to put it out.

"Those are no ordinary flames," she said.

The fire moved like a living thing, jumping from place to place to flee buckets of water and burning all in its path. Even she had not appreciated that Lævateinn's flames were quite so tenacious. Whether they owed that to Lævateinn itself or its wielder's growth, she could not say, but at any rate, they would not be quenched.

As she sank into thought, one of her aides caught sight of her and dropped to one knee.

"Our losses are...I would like to say light, Your Holiness, but the fires are spreading faster than we can put them out."

"I see. Gandiva's handiwork, perhaps."

Gandiva's wind was likely keeping the flames alive as surely as Lævateinn itself. The Spiritblades possessed wills of their own and were known to act of their own accord—often with unwelcome results, but this appeared to have worked to Liz's benefit.

"Dear me," Straea murmured. "So stubborn in your affections."

"Your Holiness?" The aide did not seem to have heard.

She shook her head dismissively and set off toward the camp. "Never mind. Forget about extinguishing the fires and focus on evacuating the troops. Lives are more precious than tents, and soldiers who have spent all night putting out fires will be too tired to march. Besides, if our troops are injured, they will not be able to fight. We would only be playing into the empire's hands." She gestured to the blaze. "Let it burn. Clear the tents around the blaze so it can't spread further. If you do not think they can be saved,

destroy them."

"As you command, Your Holiness." The aide hurried away.

Straea looked around and grinned. "Now, dear Elizabeth, what will you entertain me with next?"

Liz's decapitating strike might have failed, but she had not retreated empty-handed. It was all too clear that the empire was playing for time. She had hoped to throw the Vanir encampment into confusion while her forces regrouped with those of the imperial chancellor. The Triumvirate's losses might have been slight, but the damage to morale was far greater and much less easily healed. The sixth princess had won the time she sought.

Straea, however, had an arrow to her own bow, which by now ought to have reached the imperial army's heart—an arrow named the Free Folk.

"Only one path remains for you now."

*

A solitary rider galloped across the midnight plain. The cold wind of the western territories cut to the bone, but it did not slow her pace. Her crimson hair streamed out behind her, its luster untarnished by the dark. Sixth Princess Celia Estrella rode to meet her troops.

At last, she sensed movement on the road ahead. A host of people were gathered in the gloom. They were keeping their voices low, trying to disguise their presence, but the occasional whinny gave them away. She rode up to them without fear.

"What are our losses?"

A burly man stepped forward from the throng. He gave a respectful bow, then fell to one knee and lowered his head. "I am glad to see you safe, Your Highness. We have not yet finished tallying our dead, but I would estimate around two hundred."

Splitting up in the middle of the melee had been a spontaneous decision, and some stragglers were likely to yet arrive. More to the point, it was not easy to take an accurate head count without light to see by.

"We'll let the soldiers catch their breath, then set out." Liz slid down from her steed, and a soldier stepped forward to take the reins. She looked up at the sky and breathed deep. Their actions here had finally bought the empire a brief respite.

She turned back to the aide. "I regret to report that the Holy Emperor got away."

The primary goal of the raid had been to spread confusion throughout the Triumvirate encampment. In that sense, it had been a success. She had hoped, however, to secure the Holy Emperor in the chaos. The possibility of killing her had been proposed but ultimately rejected for fear of the possible repercussions. The people of the Triumvirate regarded the Holy Emperor as nigh divine, and while slaying her might drive back her armies, it would also sow the seeds of resentment and vengeance. With her advisors fearing a future of endless warfare, Liz had instead opted to capture her and use her to haul the Triumvirate to the negotiating table. Since that had not borne out, they would need to think of something else.

"That is no great matter, Your Highness," the aide said. "Capturing him would likely not have stopped the Triumvirate in any case. They could have easily claimed we took the wrong person."

Liz nodded. "Agreed."

Her confrontation with Nameless had left her with a whole new dilemma. The Holy Emperor of the Vanir Triumvirate and the archpriestess of Baum had turned out to be one and the same. Spirit worship was extremely widespread in the empire, while the Triumvirate was the cradle of faerie worship. Revealing the Holy Emperor's identity would send shock waves across Soleil whether "he" was alive or dead. As the soldier pointed out, the Triumvirate would likely deny that the woman was the real emperor, and the announcement would go down little better with the empire, where the citizenry would be outraged to learn the royal family had imprisoned the archpriestess. Capturing the Holy Emperor had turned out to be no better than killing her outright.

"We need another approach," Liz murmured.

She could not kill Nameless, nor could she take her captive. That left only one way forward, and the time was drawing nigh. Sooner or

later, she would have to settle this for good. Any doubts that haunted her needed to be shorn away now. When she confronted the woman next, she would not have the luxury of choice.

"This won't be easy, will it?"

She heaved a sigh and looked up at the sky again. The stars were gone, hidden by the dark, and the clouds only seemed to be growing thicker.

Chapter 2: March of the Zlosta

Fort Hundert, near the third imperial city, was one of a string of forts along the Draali border. It was presently occupied by Rosa and her First Legion, as well as the private forces of a coalition of western nobles and the eastern forces brought by High General Vias. They had gathered to intercept the forces of the Vanir Triumvirate pushing through Draal.

The Free Folk's raid the previous night had burned down the gate and inflicted its fair share of casualties, but the imperial forces had successfully eradicated the invaders. The Free Folk corpses had been piled up in an out-of-the-way corner to be burned. The imperial bodies had been treated with more respect; their comrades were carrying them from the fort with care.

"A grim sight," Vias sighed as she paced around the wall. While the raid itself had claimed relatively few lives, the fires had spread quickly. A third of the encampment had been consumed. The reorganization would have to wait until the burned-out tents were cleared away and the corpses were recovered from the ashes.

"For better or worse, we're still on imperial soil," Rosa said. "We can hire the local commonfolk to help clear the camp. That will win us back some time."

"It might not be enough with what's happening in the north."

"I share your concerns, I assure you. But we have to contend with the enemy before us first." Rosa glanced around and lowered her voice. "Besides, most have not yet heard that Friedhof has fallen."

Word to that effect had arrived from Aura after the raid, but her report had left out casualties and key details, suggesting a limited understanding of the situation. With only a fragmented picture to go by, Rosa had kept the news to a small circle of trusted aides. She was presently waiting for them to gather more information.

“We can’t afford for the troops to be distracted for the battle to come,” she continued. “We have to keep quiet about it for now. At least until the Triumvirate has been dealt with.”

“And what if the Triumvirate tries to use the situation to their own benefit?”

Rosa sighed, but not because she thought Vias was worrying unduly. If anything, she was glad to have an advisor who could offer clear-eyed insight with the enemy bearing down on them.

“I don’t think it matters if they do.”

“Meaning?”

“Our forces aren’t from the north.”

“Ah.” Vias nodded in understanding. “I see.”

Rosa made a good point. The empire was divided into five territories—northern, southern, eastern, western, and central.

“In a broad sense, setting aside matters of populations and governance, the territories are large enough to be nations of their own. They each have their own customs and national identities.” Rosa paused, shooting Vias a sidelong glance. “A soldier from the east will not truly feel at home in the west. By the same token, as far as the other territories are concerned, the north is almost a foreign nation. It may technically be part of the empire, but it will not truly feel like their own land.”

“So it won’t bother them as long as their own families aren’t threatened?”

“The same goes for fighting the Triumvirate. For troops from the east, this is simply another battle, but those from the west are burdened with the knowledge that they are defending their families and their homes. Do not forget that. They may stand as firm as the rest, but they will be more brittle.”

Vias nodded. “And we’ll have to watch the eastern troops’ morale as well, I assume.”

Fort Hundert was a long way from the eastern territories. If the battle dragged on, the eastern troops would start to get homesick.

“I’m speaking in general, of course, but the size of the empire does come with its downsides.” Rosa stared up at the sky as if lamenting the previous emperors’ territorial ambitions. She began to

walk. “My point is that timing will be crucial. The same goes for announcing the fall of Friedhof. The troops have just suffered a night raid. Breaking the news now will only shake them further. But once the battle begins, that will demand their focus, and the impact will not be nearly so great. As I say, most will dismiss it as nothing to do with them.”

As Vias fell in behind Rosa, she noticed a scroll in the woman’s hand. Rosa saw her staring and smiled ruefully, lifting it up to eye height.

“This is my most pressing concern.”

“Worrying news?”

Rosa nodded. “About the Free Folk. We were told they were engaged in battle with Steissen, but it seems that was false.”

Had the report only come a little sooner, they might have been better prepared for the raid. Perhaps they could even have repelled it without casualties. Rosa sighed. Lives might have been saved.

“Well, not entirely false,” she continued. “There have been minor clashes in Steissen, that’s true enough, but we now know they were a ruse. They’re coming here.”

“No doubt,” Vias said. “Why the raid, if Steissen was their primary front?”

They had received false information—been *given* false information—deliberately. Someone had knowingly lied about the situation in Steissen, and they both knew who: the same man who had preached so loudly about the threat posed by the Triumvirate, distracting them from the importance of the Free Folk.

“So,” Vias said, “how likely is it that Beto is in league with the Triumvirate?”

“All but certain. There have always been rumors that he maintains connections with the álfar and their allies. I was communicating in secret with a trusted informant, but it seems she has gone silent.”

“Lady von Muzuk, I assume? She reached out to me in Sunspear.”

Rosa hesitated for a moment but eventually nodded. “Indeed. I am privy to some of the skeletons in House Muzuk’s closet.”

“I daresay that’s unpleasant business.”

"Hardly anything special. Every family has its ugly secrets. Still, no one can afford for theirs to be known."

"And you threatened as much?"

"Enough to recruit Selvia to our camp, although I admit I had very different intentions for her at the time."

Rosa had initially hoped to install her as the head of House Muzuk after deposing Beto, leveraging her to exert control over the south, but the Vanir Triumvirate's invasion had forced her to change course. Instead, she had instructed Selvia that if Beto turned out to be a traitor, she was to apprehend him and buy time. She had given Selvia support in laying the groundwork among the southern nobles; if Beto had openly turned against the empire, he would have found himself with few allies.

"That might have meant a crisis for the south," she concluded, "but it would have been better than letting Beto run amok."

"I have left General von Grax in Sunspear," Vias said, "along with a contingent of soldiers. If worse comes to worst, he will defend our rear."

"I'm not worried about that. Between von Grax and Selvia, the south is in good hands. My concern is how much the Free Folk will have swollen the Triumvirate's numbers."

Vias nodded. "We have perhaps seventy thousand after my troops are counted."

"And the Triumvirate has over a hundred thousand."

The Triumvirate had split into multiple groups to march through Draal, making them difficult to count. As a result, the empire only had a rough idea of their number.

"Judging by old reports," Rosa continued, "the Free Folk have around twenty thousand soldiers."

"A hundred twenty thousand, at the least. Fifty thousand more than us." Vias scowled. "An inauspicious difference."

"Would that we had some scheme to turn the tables..."

Rosa trailed off, narrowing her eyes. Far in the distance, a lone rider was cresting the horizon.

*

The twenty-ninth day of the eleventh month of Imperial Year 1026

The central territories of the empire boasted fewer military installations than other regions. The reason was simple: For generations, the region had been defended on all sides by a sturdy bulwark of imperial lands. Monsters and bandits remained ever-present threats, but with no foreign invaders on its doorstep, it was relatively peaceful. Still, the problem of upkeep soon loomed large. The cost of supplying, feeding, and paying a garrison was immense, not to mention the additional expenses incurred by regular maintenance. When peace seemed like it would last forever, it was perhaps inevitable that the central nobles began to talk of abandoning their forts. Some proposed leaving them intact for use in times of need, but given the risks of occupation by bandits or monsters, it was deemed safer to tear them down entirely. The result was a region with few defenses. What forts remained were far from sturdy, small in scale with low walls and fragile gates.

After the Demiurgos disappeared from the field, Hiro rounded up his forces and made for the nearby Fort Caputo with the wounded Second Prince Selene. He had intended to host a strategy meeting immediately. Instead, Selene had requested that they speak alone first.

The second prince's chambers were bare, with little more than a flagstone floor, unfurnished walls, and an aged desk and chairs. As they stepped inside, Selene turned to him.

"I daresay I owe you an explanation," the prince said with a rueful smile. "You must be curious about...this."

He—or rather, she—laid a hand on her distinctly swollen chest. She had always been androgynous in appearance, so her new femininity in other aspects was less jarring, but anyone who had known her as a prince would have reacted with wide-eyed astonishment to see her body now.

"It's my swords, you see." She laid a hand on one of the twin blades at her hips, ready to explain.

Hiro cut her off. "I know what they are."

She looked at him with surprise. "You do?"

Hiro could only smile wryly. From the moment he first met Selene, he had recognized her paired swords as one of the Noble Blades, but they were not one he was familiar with, so that was where his knowledge ended.

"I had a feeling. The Noble Blades have a distinct presence about them."



“Of course. Perhaps I should have known.” She nodded, fiddling bashfully with her hair, and laid her other hand on the other hilt. “These are Móralltach and Beagalltach,” she said, glancing between them. “Together, an Archfiend’s Fellblade.”

“A Fellblade?” A hint of surprise entered Hiro’s voice. That, he had not expected. The Fellblades were exceptionally poorly suited to use by humans. “I thought the Fellblades cursed anyone who tried to wield them unless they were a zlosta.”

“They do. Hence my...disguise as a man. Or more precisely, as my elder brother. I had one once, you know. A sickly man from birth, but one of the brightest minds I’ve ever known.”

Selene began to tell her story. At the time of her birth, House Krone had been using its backing of First Prince Stovell to expand the scope of its power. Meanwhile, her brother’s sickly constitution had left House Scharm even poorer in status than House Münster and Third Prince Brutahl. Only with the assistance of Chancellor Graeci, her uncle, and Emperor Greiheit, who had plotted to disinherit Stovell, had they managed to stand on an even footing with the other great houses.

As the years went by, her brother began to come into his own, revealing a magnetism the other princes lacked. He was sharp of mind and fair of feature, slow to anger and trusted by the nobles below him. Meanwhile, Stovell grew ever more prideful and audacious. His failings only became more apparent by the day. In time, common understanding became that the first prince was mighty, the second was wise, and the third was mediocre—and then Selene’s brother abruptly passed away.

“He coughed up blood and collapsed before my eyes,” Selene said. “I was young back then, and innocent enough to think he must have died of illness, but now I understand that he was poisoned.”

She had screamed as she saw him fall, bringing Chancellor Graeci, her mother, and several guards running. They had sent for a physician, but he had passed before treatment arrived. Her mother had collapsed in a fit of hysteria and been carried away. In the end, she had been left alone with Chancellor Graeci and her brother’s cooling corpse.

“The northern nobles could not afford to lose their second prince, especially with House Krone on the rise. So my uncle commanded me to take his place. We had always looked alike.”

The young Selene could not defy her uncle’s insistence, and as soon as she’d agreed, Graeci had sprung to action. He had disposed of all who knew of her brother’s passing. The physician and the guards had done nothing wrong, but that did not save them from the blades of his assassins. Her brother’s death was mourned as hers, and his body was burned, ostensibly for fear of disease, so his grave could not be disturbed.

“It was surprisingly simple, all told. My brother always did have a weak constitution. No one doubted that he had been taken ill mourning his sister’s passing. And meanwhile, my uncle schooled me to take his place.”

“Did your mother not say anything?”

“She was beside herself. Her memories were muddled. Once she came to, it was easy enough to convince her that I had died instead. That didn’t heal her grief, of course. Eventually, my father decided she would fare better away from home and sent her to the inner palace.”

Tragedy had struck soon after. In a fit of madness, the first empress consort had perpetrated the massacre of the inner palace, killing both Selene’s and Liz’s mothers. Hiro found himself at a loss for what to say.

Selene shrugged and continued. “Nonetheless, as I grew, my body developed in ways that became difficult to hide. I did not know what to do, but as I approached my wits’ end...my swords came to me.”

One day, out of the blue, Móralltach and Beagalltach had appeared before her. She had been surprised but not afraid. The majesty of their craftsmanship fascinated her. It was almost as if her brother had reached out from beyond death in her hour of need. She had not hesitated to take them in hand.

“I had always believed the Noble Blades were a myth, you see. At first, I thought they were a gift from someone. My uncle, perhaps. Mjölnir had not yet chosen Stovell, and my father was never one to

flaunt Gandiva."

A strange sensation had come over her when she picked up the swords, but she had not recognized it as a Fellblade's curse. Only later, once her understanding of the weapons had deepened, had she become aware of their true nature. Under other circumstances, she might not even have noticed, but it was difficult to ignore that her body had changed from a woman's to a man's.

"I have never regretted it for a second. To me, it was a blessing. Truth be told, I have looked into the matter since, but it doesn't match any recorded curse I could find. A part of me wonders if they are truly a Fellblade at all."

"I've certainly never heard of anything like that," Hiro mused.

He cupped his chin, thinking. Changing sexes would certainly alter a person's life dramatically, but it was a small price to pay for the power of a Noble Blade. If that were the only toll the Fellblades exacted, the people of Soleil would stumble over themselves to claim them. The price was usually much steeper. Some would-be wielders simply died outright, some grew old overnight, some were robbed of their wits and others of their bodies, and some ceased to be human entirely. More often than not, a Fellblade's curse proved fatal. He had never heard of someone escaping so lightly.

"It strikes me as orchestrated," he said.

Selene nodded in agreement. The Demiurgos, the "Father" of the zlosta, had forged the Archfiend's Fellblades from zlosta remains, but unlike the Spiritblade Sovereigns, they had not been given wills of their own. Yet if Selene concentrated, she could sense a flicker of *something* from Móralltach and Beagalltach. Perhaps the intervening thousand years had endowed them with consciousness, or perhaps someone had altered them somehow in the interim. Either way, they clearly differed in some sense from the other Fellblades. Was that why their curse did not threaten Selene's life? Hiro had no end of questions. The most important one, though, was whether she could still fight.

"How are you holding up?" he asked. "If you're back in your old form, your curse must be gone...and I'm guessing that means you've lost your powers."

There were only three ways to escape a Fellblade's curse: to lose its favor, to destroy it, or to die. Evidently, Selene was no longer affected. She still had the weapons at her hips, so they had not abandoned her, and he could sense himself that they had not been destroyed. Did that mean she had died? The idea seemed absurd on its face, but then again, her battle with the Demiurgos had brought her to the brink of death. Had that caused some kind of anomaly? Contracts with Noble Blades often cost the wielder's life, but that was not always true. More ambiguous relationships were proportionately perilous, but they left more scope for the weapon and wielder's interests to align.

At that moment, a thought struck him. Was that not exactly what becoming a man had meant for Selene? He had no way to know precisely what she had sought from the Fellblade, but it had lent her its strength so far, and if it was still by her side, it was presumably content with her as a wielder.

"Honestly?" Selene asked. "I'm barely staying on my feet. I won't be much help, even with Móralltach and Beagalltach. Still, beggars can't be choosers. If you want me to fight, I'll fight. I'm not so bad off that I'll be a burden."

She drew up a chair and sank down into it. Her shoulders sagged as she let out a sigh, but she looked back up and smiled, closing her one good eye in a reassuring wink.

"Binding my chest should be enough to fool the soldiers. Fortunately, I'm not as well-endowed as Liz, and my face looks about the same either way. Only my aides should notice the difference."

"Then I'd appreciate it if you could take command. When we're this short of men, we'll need all hands on deck."

"I'm at your disposal."

"If that's all, I'll call Garda and the rest and get this strategy meeting started." Hiro's voice turned grave. "If the reports are right, the monsters are starting to gather."

Selene heaved a sigh. "War and bloodshed wherever we go. Even victory will cost us dearly."

"But if we don't win, we'll lose everything."

Victory here would earn them time to plan, but defeat would be the end. The Grantzian Empire would quite literally vanish from the map. That could not be allowed to happen, no matter what.

"And to that end," Hiro continued, "I need your help with something."

He laid a pile of scrolls on the table. Selene peered at them and cocked her head. They were all blank.

"I'm willing. What do you intend?"

"To excise the rot from the empire once and for all."

With a smile, Hiro summoned Garda in from the hall.

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The thirtieth day of the eleventh month of Imperial Year 1026
Brommel, in the northern territories

The north of the empire was a land of great cold, and much traveler's ink had been spilled over its snow-dusted vistas. Although it was the largest region of the empire, the lion's share of its area comprised inhospitable snowfields. Like the infertile south, it was often considered a hinterland. Yet it was not without virtue. While the far north was uninhabitable, the south of the region was comparatively temperate, boasting a swathe of fertile land known as black soil. That land sustained its people and provided the crops it exported to other territories and nations. Calling it the beating heart of the north would be no exaggeration—and it was that very heart which the Royal Army of Lebering now swept south to gouge out.

The zlosta forces had struck like lightning, carving their way to Brommel in a string of victories. By all rights, they should never have gotten so far, but with the empire in unprecedented crisis and the head of House Brommel absent in his bid to steal power from House Scharm, the only forces left to stand against them were nobles who had not yet decided where their allegiance stood. By and large, such opportunists did not have the courage to oppose a zlosta invasion. Most retreated behind their walls and waited for the storm to pass. Nonetheless, a small handful had banded together in a bid to drive back the scourge threatening their lands.

Every fallen body painted a new streak of red across the snow. Indifferent boots advanced over the corpses, grinding them into the earth until they were unrecognizable mulch. The wounded writhed in the dirt, while the roars of those still standing rang across the field.

"Still they resist."

A beautiful woman stood on the back line, watching red snow fall over the battlefield. Her long lashes fluttered in the wind, her glistening eyes sparkled in the sunlight, and her pale lips expelled misty sighs. Anyone who saw her dainty figure on the battlefield would at first be surprised, then lovestruck, and finally beguiled. Even the hardiest generals were as children before her. She was the unquestioned queen of Lebering—Claudia van Lebering, the Vernesse.

"Humans are always so stubborn. Do they not see the battle is lost?"

There was disdain in her voice, but admiration too. These precious few had challenged impossible odds while the rest of the northern nobles cowered in their keeps, and that was worthy of praise. She refrained from voicing it only because they had knowingly ridden to their deaths. They had faced an army many times their number with no plan and no hope of reinforcements—a story that had the makings of a legend if they achieved a miraculous victory, but would otherwise render them an ignoble footnote. As it was, she could only lament their fate.

She raised an arm toward them. "Rest assured, you have my respect. It is not your fault that your countrymen left you to die. Would that you had been blessed with better allies."

Perhaps she would grant them a place in her own tale. This battle would become a day of infamy for the empire, but it would play a much more glorious role in Lebering's history. They would live on forever, immortalized as the valiant foes who dared to stand before its hero-queen.

"Your noble sacrifice shall fill my zlosta with zeal," she murmured, "and lift me to greater glory."

As she stared out over the battlefield with amusement, an aide approached. "Your Majesty, there is urgent news."

She turned to face him. “Speak.”

He bowed, then produced a report and offered it to her reverently. “It appears that Friedhof has fallen, Your Majesty.”

“Dear me.” Claudia’s eyes widened momentarily, but it was not long before a smile blossomed on her lips. She giggled. “Well, that does change things.”

“The empire’s downfall is surely set in stone now, Your Majesty. Its neighbors will not let this opportunity pass them by.”

The man was correct that the other nations of Soleil were waiting for the empire to falter, but Claudia knew they had not been eager to seize the moment. After a thousand years of rule as the lion of Soleil, it was difficult to imagine the empire’s reign could ever end. Now that their chance was finally upon them, they were second-guessing themselves.

“They have hardly been quick off the mark,” she murmured to herself. “Although I suppose one can scarcely blame them.”

The empire had simply been unassailable for too long. A thousand years was a dizzying span of time for anyone, but the empire had spent them in might and prosperity, while its neighbors had spent them in fear. The years weighed twice as heavy. Now, that weight slowed their feet and mired them in paranoia.

“It is not only the empire that has stagnated over the years. We have grown just as complacent.”

She looked back at the aide. There was an apprehension in his face that he could not quite disguise. He wanted to believe in the opportunity he saw, but Lebering’s long history of humiliation at imperial hands was leading him to question his judgment. Uncertainty, fear, and distress played across his face, and sweat was beginning to bead on his brow.

“Is something concerning you?” she asked.

“No, Your Majesty. The fall of Friedhof will surely be to our advantage.”

The north of the empire was currently embroiled in the conflict between House Scharm and House Brommel, while the remaining territories were variously preoccupied with fending off Draal, Lichtein, and the Vanir Triumvirate. Claudia and her forces had

pounced upon that very opening. Now that Friedhof had fallen, the empire would be even less equipped to respond—or at least, so went the general line of thinking.

Claudia knew very well what was troubling her aide, but she chose to let him work his own way through his thoughts. Telling him the answer would deprive him of the opportunity to think for himself. He would never grow that way. Only if he found his own solution could she question him to determine whether he was talented or inept—and more to the point, she herself would stagnate if her subordinates did not have the spine to voice their opinions.

"You may speak without fear," she said. "A queen cannot rule without advisors. The more perspectives I have to inform me, the more Lebering will flourish."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the man stammered. "I only thought...might the fall of the Spirit Wall not persuade House Scharm and House Brommel to set aside their differences in the face of a greater enemy? And if the northern nobles were united again, would we not be the first threat they dealt with before turning to the monsters? I fear that our position may grow weaker, not stronger."

Claudia nodded, satisfied. "An understandable concern, although I do wish you had raised it before we crossed the border." She turned back toward the battle. "Our unannounced attack will have won us the hatred of the nobility. Every soldier we have slain will become a bereaved family who blame the zlosta. We ourselves have buried too many dead to simply turn around and go home. This is no children's squabble. What we have set in motion can no longer be stopped."

"As you say, Your Majesty. Forgive me for wasting your time."

Claudia had taken all of her advisors' opinions into account before making her decision. This aide had supported the invasion too, yet now his reservations had led him to voice second thoughts. Perhaps he had hoped to find she might share his concerns, but as soon as she rebuffed him, he had retracted his opinion, fearing her disapproval. Frankly, he disappointed her. He ought to have recognized that the decision had not truly been a communal one. While others had volunteered their perspectives, Claudia had made

the final verdict. Responsibility for what happened next lay fully on her shoulders.

"Not at all," she said. "Thank you for sharing your thoughts. In fact, I daresay your honesty deserves a reward."

"A...reward, Your Majesty?"

She didn't need to turn and look to sense the man's confusion. "Precisely. Look out at the field. Do you see? It seems more imperial nobles were men of character than we expected."

"I do, Your Highness. There are perhaps a thousand of them, and yet they willingly charge toward thirty thousand soldiers. Foolhardy, certainly, but I cannot deny their courage."

Their resistance would accomplish nothing. The Royal Army of Lebering would crush them like ants beneath a boot. Yet still they forged ahead, believing they could prevail. It was a beautiful sight, Claudia thought. They fought for their country, for their friends, for their families. In the face of hopeless odds, they willingly risked their lives to defend those they held dear.

"It would be a waste to kill them, don't you think? I could use such soldiers in my own employ."

It was a commander's role to send their troops into battle, but soldiers would not risk their lives for someone they did not trust. Yet these imperial troops were riding toward certain death without a flicker of hesitation, showing complete faith in their orders. She could tell from where she stood that they were willing to die for the man they served. There was nothing so valuable as a commander who could inspire faith, and courageous warriors were worth their weight in gold.

"You would take human soldiers, Your Majesty?"

"Why not, if they are capable enough? I daresay a talented human is far more appealing than an inept zlosta."

"Ought we not have issued surrender demands, in that case? They are riding to their deaths."

"I doubt they would accept. If they were inclined to bend the knee, they would not be here. They have ridden to this battlefield knowing it will be their grave. Then again, if they are so prepared to die, I suppose taking them captive will not persuade them to change

allegiances...”

“Then would it not be best to simply kill them and be done with it? It does not seem wise to let them go, and if their commander is as exceptional as you say, the imperial forces will be weaker for his absence.”

Claudia nodded. “True enough.”

She stepped forward. The aide furrowed his brow. She took another step, then raised an elegant hand to her soldiers.

“Summon my queensguard and bring me my steed. I ride to battle.”

The aide looked dumbfounded. “Your Majesty, is the battle not in our favor? Surely there is no need for you to fight in person.”

She giggled. “And what if I want this commander for my own?”

“Forgive me, Your Majesty, but did you not abandon that idea?”

“Of course not. I have decided to capture him.”

“But...didn’t you say that would not persuade him to change allegiances?”

“Oh, I’m sure he is terribly loyal, proud, and honorable. But such men have their weaknesses.” She mounted her steed and drew her sword—the prized blade of Lebering once wielded by her forefather, Lox. “It will be far more profitable to leave him alive. And does the same not hold true of the road we walk? Survival means opportunity. Survival leads to the future.”

With that, she drove her heels into her horse’s flank and surged toward the battle.

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Near Tutelary Citadel, in the western territories

A monstrous bird descended from on high, silhouetted against the setting sun. Its alighting wingbeats launched flowers and blades of grass into the air. Several smaller birds wheeled above, scattering the petals. The larger bird—the parent, perhaps—scanned its surroundings before leaning down to tear at the earth with its sharp beak. Yet only moments later, it looked back up in alarm. It glanced around before taking wing once more, vanishing with its fledglings

into the eastern clouds.

The undergrowth rustled as the ground began to shudder. Somewhere in the distance, hoofbeats thundered across the earth.

Erected to keep a watchful eye on the Grand Republic of Draal, Tutelary Citadel was a keystone of the empire's western border. Its concentric walls were said to be impregnable. Formerly administered by High General Vakish von Hass until his death in the Six Kingdoms invasion two years prior, it now lay under the command of noble officials from the eastern territories. There had been hopes that it would prove useful in the coming battle with the Vanir Triumvirate, but unsurprisingly, the enemy had not obliged to march up to its gates. The expected battlefield was some way south.

Passing close to the citadel was the Schein High Road, one of the main thoroughfares between the imperial territories. It had been named in honor of its builder, House Schein, one of the original great houses of the empire. So-called stations positioned along its length dispatched stagecoaches on a regular schedule. It was not stagecoaches that traversed the High Road now, however, but a great heaving shadow winding all the way to the horizon. A colossal dust cloud trailed in its wake. Countless hooves filled the air with a steady drumming, punctuated by clattering metal and snatches of voices. The din was almost unbearable.

The shadow's true form became clearer on closer inspection. It was a giant host of soldiers, their appearance fearsome enough to send anyone running. Some carried flags, some carried spears, and some marched with swords at their belts. All were clad in sturdy armor. They were no vagabonds—vagabonds did not carry such fine gear or march with such uniformity. They could only have been imperial troops.

Liz stood at the back of the train, watching them go. Aura, her chief strategist, stood beside her.

"That's everyone who was ready to march," Aura said. "We'll send the rest once their preparations are in order."

Liz nodded, pleased. "Good. Shall we head back?"

She turned back to the command tent—a primitive structure consisting of canvas slung between a set of poles. Keen-eyed guards

stood around it, keeping watch for intruders.

They walked in silence for a while, until eventually, Liz spoke again. “How are things in the north?”

“The monsters are heading due south,” Aura said. “Straight for the capital.”

“The beating heart of the empire,” Liz agreed. “But you don’t look worried. I’m guessing that means you have a plan?”

“Not as such. But the Crow Legion has been sighted in the region.”

“Right. Hiro’s attending to it, then...”

“The Crow Legion were strangely quick to pull out of Six Kingdoms.”

“Do you think they heard about Friedhof before we did?”

“Maybe. Or they made a very good guess.”

“Surely not.” Liz laughed. “Then again, this is Hiro we’re talking about...”

Aura was probably right, she mused. Hiro had known Friedhof would fall and predicted where the monsters would go afterward. That was what was so frustrating about him. He saw so far ahead that just keeping pace with him was an impossible task, let alone imagining what he was trying to achieve.

“I always had my suspicions,” Aura said. “I wonder how long ago he...” She sighed and shook her head. “No. Enough. I’m being ridiculous.”

“Aura...” Liz almost told her everything right there and then, but she swallowed the words at the last moment and settled for something less committal. “Once we find him, we’ll squeeze the truth out of him. You can count on that.”

Aura seemed at least dimly aware of Hiro’s true identity. Indeed, she had probably suspected the truth from the moment they’d met. Such an avid admirer of Mars and devotee of the Black Chronicle would have seen through him in an instant. Nonetheless, Liz was reluctant to share what she had learned. It did not seem like her secret to reveal.

Aura nodded, clenching a determined fist. “We’ll tie him up and make him read the Black Chronicle for three days straight.”

Liz smiled helplessly. “I almost feel sorry for him.”

She turned toward the imperial capital, far beyond the horizon. Somewhere in the distance, she could feel him. She hardly even needed her new eyes. He seemed...wilder, perhaps, than when they had fought in Six Kingdoms. She could have sensed him across any distance.

Aura saw her staring into the distance. “I’ll take care of that,” she said, trying to encourage her. Her eyes filled with conviction. “You focus on the Triumvirate.”

Liz had to smile. It had not escaped her that Aura had been receiving messengers from across the continent, whom she had sent back out with secret missives. She was clearly planning something of her own—trying to solve the current crisis in her own way, no doubt. Liz knew there was no point pressing her on it. Aura would only repeat her request to concentrate on the Triumvirate.

“I can’t leave *everything* up to you,” Liz said, playfully offended. “You aren’t the only one who’s grown these past few years.”

Aura cocked her head. “I’m just trying ideas for now. Once I’m more confident, I’ll tell you everything.”

Her short stature forced her to look up through her lashes, inevitably stirring Liz’s protective instincts. Nonetheless, it didn’t escape Liz’s notice that her faintly cold eyes wore heavy bags. She had been missing sleep. With the empire in crisis, it was hard to blame her, but she had a tendency to suffer in silence, and it seemed like she was taking on a heavy burden so that Liz could concentrate on the battle at hand.

“All right,” Liz said. “Just promise me you’ll try to take care of yourself. I only have one of you.”

Part of her marveled at the audacity of the request. If she were only more dependable, Aura wouldn’t have needed to pick up her slack. Nonetheless, there was likely only one person in Soleil who could match the Warmaiden’s insight, and that was Hiro. Or no, she mentally corrected herself—the raw talent was surely out there, somewhere in the vast breadth of the empire, but she had no time to cultivate it. She could only hope it would make itself apparent over the course of the coming war. Until then, the best she could do

was place capable advisors at Aura's side to lighten the load. Scáthach had taken on that role already. Still, minds that could anticipate the Warmaiden's ideas and requests were hard to come by.

"All right," Aura said. "I'll rest for the other deployments."

They reached the tent, and Liz pushed open the flap. The strategy meeting had concluded, and the tables had been shunted aside. In their place sat a beastwoman swathed head to toe in bandages, stuffing her face with food—High Consul Skadi of Steissen.

"Finally back, eh? I've never seen two paler faces. You two look like you could use something in your bellies." She held out a hunk of meat on the bone. It was a mystery where she had even pulled it from. "Oh, right, and I should mention I'll be heading back to Steissen for a while."

Liz's brows pulled together. Beside her, Aura looked at Skadi with similar bemusement.

Skadi gestured to herself. "Not exactly fighting fit, am I? Besides, the war with Six Kingdoms is done. I've paid my debt. Time for me to go home." She tore off another mouthful of meat and looked at Liz, silently requesting her approval.

"All right," Liz said slowly. It was hard not to have questions. She had never known Skadi to shirk a good fight. The beastwoman was borderline battle-crazed. The worse the odds, the harder she laughed as she spilled the enemy's blood. It was hard to believe her injuries would be enough to deter her from the field.

"Sorry," Skadi said sheepishly. "I'd join you if I could, but not with the Free Folk on my doorstep."

She had raised the matter of the Free Folk in the strategy meeting, but Liz had been under the impression her concerns had been assuaged. Word had come from Rosa that the reported attack on Steissen had been false information, at which Skadi had been overjoyed. Indeed, the beastwoman had already sent a batch of wounded soldiers back to Steissen. If she'd had no intention of continuing the fight, surely she would have gone with them. What could have changed her mind in so short a time?

Liz's eyes told her nothing. Skadi's heart was as steadfast as iron, and she didn't seem to be hiding anything. With time, it might have been possible to tease out the truth, but that would risk damaging the trust between them. At the end of the day, there was nothing to do but smile and wish her well.

"Not at all," Liz said. "I know you've had some clashes along the border. I understand that you want to go and take charge in person. Your people will be glad of your presence."

"Glad you see it that way. Anyway, don't worry. With any luck, I'll be back before you know it." Skadi thumped her knees and stood up. "Better get the tent cleared away. We'll be heading out sooner rather than later."

"Of course," Liz said. "Thank you again—"

Skadi cut her off with a wave as she strode past. "I ain't here for your thanks. Just followed my nose, is all."

She glowed with self-assurance and battle fervor as she flashed a dauntless smile and strode from the tent. In that moment, Liz finally glimpsed the color of her heart.

"I wonder what happened..." she murmured.

Aura appeared by her side, head cocked and chin in hand. "I thought she would want to stay, seeing as Steissen is secure. But she's a leader, and she's looking to the future. She wants to do what's best for her people."

"What do you mean?"

"This war isn't over yet. It's the perfect chance to pick off rivals while they're weak. The beastfolk can sniff out vulnerability the best out of all the five peoples. And with such fine spoils to be had..." Aura bent over and picked up a bone stripped of meat. "Anyone would work up an appetite."

"Are you saying they're going to turn on the empire?"

"I'm not sure. But we should be ready if they do. The beastfolk follow their instincts, for better or worse, and she's no exception."

Liz's face fell. "I suppose not."

As nice as it would have been for everyone to coexist in harmony, the world was not so kind. Every day, people turned on their comrades, forsook their siblings, sacrificed their own to advance

their station. There was no better example than the present state of the northern territories, where imperial steel spilled imperial blood.

"And that goes double for rulers. The moment they show weakness, someone will use it against them."

Statesmanship was not a philanthropic venture. The empire's neighbors were anxious for it to fall. What was more, Steissen was a republic, ruled by the consensus of its senators. If a majority voted for war with the empire, Skadi would be powerless to defy them.

"Anyway," Liz continued, "the north. Not that I'm worried about Selene, but have you heard anything?"

Aura shook her head. "Nothing. I think the fall of Friedhof is impeding communications."

"Well, keep trying to get through to them. How about Six Kingdoms?"

"Queen Lucia is marching south."

Liz nodded. "To secure the rest of the kingdoms, I'm sure."

Now that Lucia had broken free of her shackles, she seemed intent on settling the score with the álfar. The Vanir Triumvirate's focus on the west left her free to act without restraint. It was a golden opportunity to drive the álfar from Six Kingdoms entirely, and one she was too shrewd not to take.

"I sensed her love for Six Kingdoms when we signed our truce," Liz said. "She's incredibly loyal. Fanatical, even. I don't know why, but she'd defend it to the death."

She had always thought Lucia was as self-interested and cunning as the serpent she styled herself after, but at her core, the woman seemed deeply loyal to her nation. Yet that was concerning in its own way. When devotion grew strong enough to overpower reason, it could all too easily lead to wanton cruelty.

"I just hope she'll keep herself in check..."

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To the southeast of the empire lay the Duchy of Lichtein. Often reviled as a nation of slavers, it was the only place in Soleil where the practice still survived. The reason was simple: Lichtein was a

barren desert. It did not have the vast breadth of the empire or the fertile soil of Steissen or the divine protection of Baum or the stable trade routes of Draal. Its only real natural resource was its spirit stones, which crystallized at its oases under very specific conditions. One such requirement was the presence of perfectly pure water, which was a vital commodity in the desert. Most potential locations had been settled by humans, causing the spirits to flee and harming Lichtein's spirit stone production. Thus, its slave trade remained a vital source of income, even as the practice faded out across the rest of Soleil. That was how things had always been, and for a long time, most had believed it was how they would always be.

Now, however, a chance for expansion had presented itself. The Grantzian Empire was teetering on the brink of collapse. If Lichtein played its cards right, it could leave its arid soil behind for fertile grasslands. Its nobles visited the duke's palace on a nigh daily basis, trying to persuade him to seize the moment.

"Now is the time to strike!" one urged. "We cannot let past defeats discourage us from future glories!"

"My lord," another pressed, "those lands are ours by right! We must reclaim them!"

Their pleas fell on the ears of Karl Oruk Lichtein, the young duke of Lichtein. On account of his sickly constitution, he had been his father's least favored heir, but after a slave rebellion had claimed his father's life and his brothers had fallen in battle with the empire, he had been the only one left to take up the mantle.

"I hear your concerns," he said, "but I must ask for calm. We must assess our options carefully before we decide how to proceed. Lichtein will not survive the empire's wrath a second time."

He looked at the man by his side, one Marquis Rankeel Caligula Gilbrist. Now thirty-seven years of age, Rankeel had once driven back thirty thousand soldiers of Steissen with only two thousand troops, a feat that had earned him the title of the Rising Hawk. Yet his disregard for authority had won him no favor with the nobility, and one impertinent remark too many had seen him relegated to command of a border fort, where for a long time he had languished in functional exile. After the death of the old duke and two of his

sons, he had swept back to the Golden Hall to throw his support behind Karl, hoping to bring about reform and excise the rot in the capital. While defeat in battle with the empire had tarnished his legend, he continued to serve as Karl's right hand.

"Silence, if you would," Rankeel commanded. "Duke Lichtein is right. These decisions cannot be made hastily."

"But, my lord," a noble protested, "you must see better than anyone that now is the time!"

"It is an opportunity, to be certain, but I share the duke's unease. It would be unwise to proceed until our doubts are assuaged."

"This is cowardice!"

"When we face the empire, it is wisdom. Have you forgotten how many times they have humiliated us on the field?"

"All the more reason not to let this chance pass us by!"

"We thought the same five years ago, and it cost us the north. As Duke Lichtein says, a repeat of that incident would mean the end of Lichtein."

"Only if we fail!" The noble sounded increasingly agitated. "We cannot accept defeat before we even try!"

Rankeel brought a hand to his forehead as if suppressing a headache. "The imperial military still maintains a presence in the south, and the former high general Robert von Grax is in Sunspear. At best, we could muster twenty thousand soldiers. That would be far from enough."

"What if you were to lead our forces? Then we would have nothing to fear. You could outwit any high general, let alone one who lost his post years ago."

"Perhaps." Rankeel snorted and shook his head. "But we would not have the strength to keep the lands we took. What to us would be a historical conquest, the empire could undo with a shrug of its shoulders."

"And what if the empire were no more?"

"We would have to hope it wasn't. Otherwise, we would be tying our own nooses."

For all the nobles seemed to think the empire's days were numbered, defeat at the Triumvirate's hands would not instantly

wipe it from the map. Its dignity might be tarnished, but its people would still be hale, and plenty of nobles would still have troops they could summon. It could very well rally its forces and try again. Besides, it would take time for the effects of the Triumvirate's victory to ripple outward. Whether Lichtein could hold out until then was another question.

"We must also consider Steissen's response," Rankeel continued. "Talking about seizing the moment is all well and good, but too much haste will rob our victory of its savor. War is not a game."

The noble fell silent, although he did not seem convinced.

Rankeel turned back to Karl. "The fate of Lichtein hangs on this decision, my lord. It is not one to make lightly."

Karl nodded. "I know. Still, we should prepare as best we can. It wouldn't do for another country to seize our spoils while we argue."

"Very wise, my lord."

The nobles would have to be content with that for now. Lichtein's internal affairs had still not fully stabilized. Invading the empire without a full understanding of the risks would be folly. Besides, Rankeel had a concern of his own—one that had lingered in his mind for the past three years like a splinter under his fingernail.

"I shudder to think what the empire plans. Or no, not the empire as such, but one man..."

Many times, he had studied the great map on the floor as some messenger apprised him of events in the empire, squinting to see the path that would best serve Lichtein. Yet one day, he had glimpsed the truth, and thereafter, thought had seemed pointless. The coming battle lay beyond human understanding. It was a contest in which no mortal had a right to interfere, on pain of unimaginable suffering. Just the thought of the possible consequences sent a shiver through him.

"When exactly did this all begin? No mortal man could have done this. A god, perhaps..."

He sighed as he cast his gaze over the bickering nobles. It was all he could do to smile wryly.

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The snowfall was light enough that it didn't impede visibility. It melted away as it touched the ground. White flakes rode high on the wind, striking the faces of soldiers and sapping the warmth from their bodies.

Not far from Riesenriller, sixty thousand soldiers in service to House Brommel faced forty thousand soldiers of House Scharm. A few skirmishes had left the land between them strewn with bodies, but the field had changed little since battle was first joined. Each side waited for the other to make the first move. It was, in short, a stalemate.

There was a reason both sides were so reticent: Both of their commanders were missing in action. It was hard to take the initiative in their absence. No one wanted to risk a reprimand, and a botched offensive would endanger their house's standing. Honor and self-preservation conspired to drag the battle on with no end in sight. What was more, only the troops directly in service to House Scharm and House Brommel were actually fighting; the other nobles' forces were holding back and watching how the battle played out. The threat of treachery was another reason House Brommel's forces had adopted a passive position.

As the impasse dragged on, a messenger arrived at House Scharm's encampment.

"So we still do not know what has happened to my father?" asked Herma von Heimdall. The heir to House Heimdall and one of Second Prince Selene's most trusted retainers, he had been left to command House Scharm's forces in the prince's absence.

"No, my lord. The survivors report that he evacuated the wall, but there is no word of what became of him after."

"I see." Herma nodded. "And how fare the commonfolk?"

The messenger looked a little surprised. "Forgive me, my lord, but do you not want us to search for High General Hermes?"

"His Highness the Second Prince has entrusted me with his forces. I would not send them to their deaths searching for a man who could be anywhere by now."

Herma held himself firmly in check, refusing to let his emotions sway his judgment. There was no time to worry about his father.

Even if the man was dead, there would be no time to mourn. He carried too many responsibilities on his shoulders. His people and his country took precedence over everything, family included. Safeguarding House Scharm was House Heimdall's sacred duty. Yet as much as he might try to ignore his feelings, he was not yet old enough to harden his heart completely, and his fingers tightened on the arms of his chair as he regarded the messenger.

"So?" he repeated. "How fare the commonfolk?"

"Mostly unharmed, my lord. High General Hermes's evacuation orders saved many lives."

"Good. So long as they are safe... Where are they headed?"

"As far from danger as they can, my lord. Forgive me, but I cannot say more. The monsters are impeding our scouting efforts."

Herma set a hand to his forehead and lowered his eyes. "And here we are, still squabbling with House Brommel..."

"Then we should offer to negotiate," his sister Phroditus supplied. "They can't afford to ignore the fall of Friedhof any more than we can. Their lands will suffer like anyone else's."

"If they were willing to listen to us, we wouldn't be in this mess in the first place. And we've already crossed blades, even if not in earnest." Herma smiled ruefully and shrugged. "They won't be so kind as to lay down their swords just because the yaldabaoth are breathing down their necks. They have dead to avenge, and their commanders' pride is on the line."

"They would choose pride at a time like this?"

"Nobles are prideful creatures." Herma's voice grew firm. "But we cannot broker a peace in His Highness's absence. And even if he was here, it would not become the leader of the north to bow and beg cooperation from a house he is supposed to lead."

"Are you certain?" Phroditus looked puzzled. "His Highness has always valued his nation over his honor."

"Perhaps, but I will not make that decision for him. A leader must act with conviction. If he shows weakness in this, other houses will think they can defy him too."

Her brother's stubbornness stirred Phroditus's anger. "So you would stand by and let monsters spill our people's blood?"

“Do not misunderstand me, sister. His Highness would never allow the commonfolk to come to harm. If we abandon them on his behalf, he may well die of shame.”

“Then do what he would do!” Phroditus advanced on her brother. “Forget about this ridiculous idea of noble pride, make peace with House Brommel, and face these monsters with the full might of the north!”

Herma was unmoved. “I will not be the one to yield.”

“Then your stubbornness will be the end of us all!”

“You misunderstand, sister. *I* will not be the one to yield.”

Phroditus cocked her head. “What do you mean?”

“I intend to make House Brommel bow to us.”

Phroditus’s eyes gleamed. “And you have a plan?”

“It is said that Emperor Artheus once forgave the same house twice.”

Phroditus’s brow wrinkled, but she said nothing. Her position did not allow her to interrupt her brother. His word was law, no matter how unreasonable it might be. Only the emperor or Selene had the authority to refute him.

“That house’s name lives on to the present day,” Herma continued, “albeit in disgrace.”

“House Krone,” Phroditus said.

“Precisely. House Krone once ruled a kingdom of their own. They became part of the empire after being conquered by Mars, but they reneged on their allegiance for fear of the zlosta.”

“So they have always been faithless.” Phroditus scowled. “It must run in the family.”

Herma smiled wryly. “And the War God laid waste to them a second time. But they were not executed, because a greater threat was looming.”

The historical record was vague on the details, stating only that House Krone had been pardoned before moving on to Mars’s defeat of the primozlosta. In any case...

“The second time came at the birth of the empire, after Mars’s disappearance. They attempted to foment a rebellion, but Emperor Artheus saw through their designs and defeated them in battle.

Because of their power, he was obliged to forgive them, but he confiscated their lands and swore he would not be so lenient the third time."

"And the third betrayal came a thousand years later," Phroditus said.

Stovell's rebellion had been almost unprecedented. Not since the reign of the third emperor had a member of the royal family tried to overthrow the reigning emperor. Phroditus herself had doubted her ears. Yet House Krone's attempt to supplant the house of Grantz had been thwarted by Fourth Prince Hiro, who had crushed their ambitions for the final time.

Her brow furrowed. "Come to think of it, was Hiro not...?"

Herma grinned. "Poetic, isn't it? It was the War God's descendant who finally put an end to them. As Emperor Artheus promised, there was no third pardon."

Now House Kelheit of the east ruled the central territories, and what remained of House Krone and its vassals endured in disgrace. All the wealth, power, and status they had accumulated over the past thousand years was dust in the wind. The sixth princess had decided to let them live, a choice Phroditus found perplexing, but they had nonetheless served as a fine example.

"We should do the same. It is important for the royal family to show clemency. The first emperor forgave House Krone twice, and the sixth princess spared them again. If we are to act in Lord Selene's name, it would only be right that we show House Brommel the same forgiveness."

"Because this is their first transgression?"

"Precisely. We will take fair compensation, of course, but that can wait. Matters at Friedhof demand our attention first."

"Then what do you propose?"

"I have already sown the seeds." Herma stood up and turned to the messenger. "My apologies. I don't doubt that you're exhausted, but I have another assignment for you."

"Of course, my lord," the man said.

"Good. Then let us serve Lord Selene as best we can."

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The night was chill, and the wind cut to the bone. Yet a light burned in the darkness. The monsters had made camp on a sweeping plain, gathering all the wood they could find into a sea of bonfires. They looked almost human as they huddled around the light, but that was where the similarity ended. There was nothing human about their conversation. Most spoke only in bestial growls, and a few squabbled with one another over scraps of corpse-flesh. The Demiurgos looked on as they heaped more timber onto the fires, feeding the light with the wreckage of human homes.

"Ah, my beloved children. So hideous, and yet so endearing." No smile touched his lips, though he spoke of affection. He looked up, eyes half closed in reminiscence. "The sky hangs low tonight. Why, it's so close, I could swear I felt my own father near."

He stretched up and reached out his arm, but though his fist seemed to encircle the heavens, it closed on empty air. With a disdainful snort, he touched the mark on his arm.

"There is no hiding from Surtr now. Flee to the farthest ends of Aletia, conceal myself in the most populous city, or bury myself far beneath the earth... It would make no difference."

Surtr had sent the primozlosta Ladon back to the Demiurgos alive but imbued with a powerful curse crafted to seek him out. The mark was both a declaration of war and a promise of pursuit. The Demiurgos cared little. He no longer needed to hide. If Surtr wanted to seek him out, all the better—and seek him out Surtr would, just like when he'd come to Selene's rescue.

"Saving her was not your intention, was it? It was me you came for."

Surtr had not approached the wounded Selene after arriving on the field, nor had he spared her so much as a glance. His eyes had been for the Demiurgos alone, burning with a hostility even the Lord shuddered to recall.

"But you cannot slay me, Surtr. Just as you could not one thousand years ago. You lack the means."

His throat rattled with laughter. How long ago it was now when a

young boy had reached for power, only to let go of happiness instead. When in pursuit of the ideal, he had blinded himself to reality. And when at last, trapped in his delusions, he had met a wretched end.

"A Lord must see the world for what it is," the Demiurgos murmured to the empty air. "Only then may we preach what we would make it."

The wind snatched his voice away, unheard and unacknowledged.

Grass rustled behind him. He turned, unsurprised to see two figures approach. There stood Khimaira and Ceryneia, two of the twelve primozlosta who had sworn loyalty to him so long ago. Each of them had reigned as kings when the zlosta ruled Soleil, before Mars laid their kingdoms low. Now, one thousand years later, twelve were but three, and their strength was greatly diminished—another thing the War God had taken from them.

Ceryneia dipped his head respectfully, then raised a sleeve to his mouth as if in lament. "Oh Lord, our Lord. Why did you not take the War God prisoner? With our strength combined, it would have been a simple matter. We may never see another such chance."

The Demiurgos frowned at the primozlosta's theatrical tone, waving him away as one might a dog. "The time was not right. We must lure the Spirit King out of hiding."

"Surely such a trivial matter can wait until after we capture our greatest foe?"

"It would not be enough to capture him. We must dispose of him if we are to seize the Spirit King. She has plans of her own, and she would resist fiercely if we pursued her." He scowled, growing tired of justifying himself. "And besides, you overestimate yourselves. You would not be equal to the task."

Khimaira and Ceryneia flinched in shame, both bowing their heads.

"Had I done as you suggest," the Demiurgos continued, "neither of you would be standing here now. Nor would I have escaped unscathed either. This vessel cannot bear the rigors of battle."

They bit their lips but kept their silence, knowing he was right. He turned to them with impassive eyes. The twelve primozlosta had

been a gathering of eccentrics, but these two were comparatively obedient—certainly more so than the third survivor, Verona, who hardly even listened to a word he said. That was endearing in its own way, of course...but in any case, Khimaira and Ceryneia tended to be so accepting of the harshest demands that he sometimes forgot himself.

"This body confounds me."

"In what way, my Lord?"

"It is the body of the man who drove the zlosta to the brink of extinction, of the man who ousted a Lord and elected himself a god instead...and yet it is unaccountably frail. Ever since I took it on, I have wondered if it is even truly his at all."

Its skin swelled up at the touch, as if inflamed. It bled profusely at the slightest cut. Even its bones were brittle. It caused a being such as the Demiurgos no pain, but it lacked the dexterity for combat.

"But my Lord," Ceryneia ventured, "we retrieved it from the first emperor's tomb. The imperial burial grounds are sanctified by the spirits. They are not easily discovered. No one could possibly—"

The Demiurgos cut him off with a wave of his hand. "No one but a descendant of the first emperor—or a fellow Lord. I know, Ceryneia. I was there." As he raised a hand to his neck, a thought seemed to strike him. "But Surtr did not seem surprised to see me thus..."

"Might he have tampered with Artheus's body somehow, my Lord?"

"No. He would not do such a thing."

"But if you are experiencing the symptoms you describe, it would explain much."

"He would not desecrate his blood-brother's corpse. His sins are great, and his guilt weighs heavy. He would lay no snares here—he could not. Of that I am certain."

"Perhaps he simply never imagined that the body might be taken?"

"That, too, is hard to credit." The Demiurgos shrugged. "Then again, if he did foresee it, I fail to understand why he took no

measures to stop it."

He fell silent for a while, pondering Hiro's actions, but he did not seem frustrated. If anything, he seemed to be enjoying himself.

"Circles within circles," he said at last. "And there is nothing to be gained by trying to decipher them. All will become clear in time."

He turned away from Ceryneia and Khimaira and gazed out into the night. His presence seemed to magnify. They tensed, feeling his power wash over them. Several figures approached through the gloom, cast into half light by the bonfires, too large to possibly be human.

"Well met," the Demiurgos said. "You have come far."

One of them, a tall male, stepped forward into the light, revealing himself to the world. He was bare-chested, with only a cloth wrapped around his waist, and so gaunt that his rib cage showed. The markings swathing his body identified him as a yaldabaoth, and his skin was a deeper purple than even the zlosta.

He turned a piercing gaze on the Demiurgos. "Father," he said through cracked lips. "How long it has been."

"Eins." The Demiurgos did not seem especially excited by the reunion. "You have grown since I last saw you."

Eins looked around, unruffled by his master's coldness. "Where is Sieben? I do not see him here."

"Sieben is dead. When I first saw him, I thought he had matured, but it seemed his brains did not match his brawn."

Eins did not seem offended. If anything, his face fell. "I am saddened to hear he failed you, Father." He turned to Ceryneia and Khimaira. "But why do your servants still live? Surely they cannot have been more useful than Sieben."

Khimaira stepped forward. "Watch your words, Eins."

Eins stared back, unintimidated. "Do I not speak the truth? You have served our Father for a thousand years, and what does he have to show for it?"

"We have been his hands and eyes while you and your ilk scrabbled against Friedhof. I will not let some ill-made mongrel tell me I have served no purpose."

They glared at one another, neither willing to back down. The air

grew tense with the promise of bloodshed.

"Do not squabble in my presence," the Demiurgos said.

The pair stiffened. The animosity emanating from him would have chilled a human to the bone, but to bestial creatures like the yaldabaoth, it was nigh toxic. The lesser monsters around them began to back away as it seized their hearts in a vise grip, filling them with an instinctual fear.

"The yaldabaoth assemble. The archons hunger. Yet we cannot wage war in earnest until our forces are gathered. If petty squabbles will keep you amused, then by all means. But know that monsters will feast on both your corpses come the morrow."

He made no attempt to hide his displeasure. His anger shuddered through the air, gouged furrows in the earth, and split the clouds above. The pair fell to one knee, realizing they had overstepped the mark.

"My deepest apologies, my Lord."

"I beg your forgiveness, Father."

At last, the Demiurgos's wrath subsided. "This night will be a fine chance to speak with your fellows. Teach them. Learn from them. Share how you will torment, slay, and devour the humans in our path. For now, I will rest."

As he began to walk away, Ceryneia broke his silence. "And what of the troublemaker? What of Verona?"

"As I said, leave her to her own devices. Worry not for her, or for Bebensleif. Both will return to me in time." With that, the Demiurgos vanished into the night.

Ceryneia bowed his head, although his master was already gone. "As you desire."

Despite his show of obedience, there was a tremor of displeasure in his voice.

Chapter 3: The Serpent Queen

The first day of the twelfth month of Imperial Year 1026

The rising sun glimmered on the sea. A salty breeze skimmed the waves. In another season, it might have been a fine day for an outing, but there was no such thing in the depths of winter, and doubly so on the coast. The wind would sap the warmth from a sightseer's flesh, the scent of the tide would swamp their nostrils, and any metal they might have thoughtlessly worn would quickly fall prey to rust.

Scorpius's coastline was no exception. It was home to a scattering of fishing hamlets, and despite the early hour, most of the boats had already put to sea. The docks were all but empty. White sails dotted the ocean beyond. Human shapes scurried about beneath them, hauling on ropes and tending to nets. Meanwhile, on the coast, the forces of Anguis made their way south in the name of the High King. Under Queen Lucia's leadership, they had set out to exact retribution upon the álfen oppressors.

A long and thorny road had led Lucia to this. She first sought to undermine the álfen presence within Six Kingdoms itself. To that end, she had lured King Surtr of Baum, the sixth princess of the empire, and their allies into an invasion, gambling the country's very existence. Her wager had been a roaring success, and she had turned the imperials and the álfar against each other with no losses to her own troops. The High King's death had become the wind at her back, allowing her to execute a great many álfar as dissidents. Her momentum had only built in the days and weeks that followed, and she was now sweeping south through Scorpius in a bid to unite Six Kingdoms under her rule.

As was perhaps to be expected, álfen resistance had been slight. Lucia had disposed of most of their rulers in battle with the empire, and some strategically disseminated rumors of her southward march

had done wonders to convince the rest to flee across the border. Leaderless nations were quick to surrender. As she closed on Tigris, the last kingdom to defy her grasp, she had encountered very little opposition.

"We will soon reach the border, Your Majesty," Seleucus said, gazing out of the carriage window.

In the opposite seat, Lucia folded her arms and closed her eyes. Seleucus smiled despite himself. All her plotting must have taken its toll on her sleep.

Her eyes cracked open again. "Do not mistake me, Seleucus. I am very much awake."

"Of course, Your Majesty. Forgive me. Between the drooling and the snoring, I must have misunderstood."

"Always with the barbs. Do you know that's why you send all the maidens running?"

"Your tongue is as sharp as ever, Your Majesty. I am pleased slumber has not dulled your wits."

Lucia snorted. "Waking to your foppish face would shock anyone to their senses."

Seleucus started to realize their exchange wasn't going to end. Lucia would never back down, and the longer the argument dragged on, the more he risked his head. With a sigh, he admitted defeat.

"You must have been preoccupied, then," he said. "May I ask with what?"

Lucia scowled, but she did not seem truly offended. "My thoughts, nothing more. Merely reflecting that the end is in sight."

He nodded. "It's been a long, hard road that's brought us here."

She had been working toward this day ever since they first met, and he had served her for a long time now. As for what she truly desired, however...that was something only she could say.

"Frankly, Your Majesty," he continued, "I struggle to understand your plans."

He had never been able to truly tell what she was thinking. She was hard to read, well practiced at covering her heart with a lacquer of lies. Slippery as the serpent of her house, the nobles had called her. As she rose in the ranks under álfar rule, some had even

accused her of betraying her own. Yet she had endured their insults without complaint as she schemed in silence—refining her venom, waiting for her prey to weaken, squeezing tighter bit by bit. Hers was a plan long and subtle in the making, and it had finally come to fruition.

"With a mind such as yours, surely you could have made a comfortable living in some other land?"

The álfar takeover of Six Kingdoms had begun before Lucia was even born. By the time she'd taken the throne, it had already been fully under their thumb, obliging her to watch her every step and word. She had persevered, and that path had brought her here, but a woman of her talents could very easily have chosen otherwise. Why had she stayed? Not because she enjoyed her status, surely. The royal families had been reduced to pawns of the álfar. Seleucus had always wondered—why had she chosen this path of thorns?

"Tell me, Seleucus," she said, "do you know how Six Kingdoms came to be?"

"It was the result of the third emperor's racial purges, if I remember correctly. His brother rebelled, but he was defeated and fled west."

"Indeed. And together with the descendants of Mars's Black Hand, he founded Six Kingdoms. Here, they would gather their strength until the time was right to lay the empire low."

"And after a thousand years, we tried...and lost."

Six Kingdoms had marched east in the name of liberating Faerzen, but not only had they failed, they had very nearly lost Esel to the empire's retaliation. Lucia had negotiated an armistice with the empire and leveraged the situation to decapitate the álfen command, but that did not erase Six Kingdoms' military losses. Between that and the damage caused by the imperial invasion, they had been as good as defeated.

"No matter." Lucia waved a hand. "Let us suffer every defeat under the sun. Let us endure all the shame we must. So long as Six Kingdoms yet stands, we remain victorious."

"I...don't follow, Your Majesty."

"Have you ever wondered why the emperor's brother founded *six*

kingdoms?”

Seleucus frowned. “One each for him and all five of the Black Hand, surely. Am I wrong?”

“You are. The descendants of the Black Hand rule three kingdoms, not five. Scant evidence for your theory, no?”

“Then why?”

“Look upon our banners, Seleucus. Ours and Greif’s. And if you would be so kind, recall the other four.”

Each kingdom’s flag carried a device of the animal said to embody its national identity: a gryphon for Grief, a snake for Anguis, a mule for Esel, a fox for Vulpes, a tiger for Tigris, and a goat for Scorpius. Seleucus counted them off on his fingers and turned back to Lucia quizzically. She leaned forward, looking exasperated and just a little triumphant.

“The gryphon symbolizes pride. The serpent, envy. Now do you see?”

“And the mule is sloth, and the fox is greed...” Seleucus’s face lit up with comprehension. “The seven sins.”

“Good.”

“Very well, but what of it?” His eyes took on a hint of resentment. “Besides, there are only six kingdoms, not seven.”

Lucia laid a frustrated hand on her forehead. “Oh, but there is a seventh. Far to the east.” She pointed. “One even a child would know.”

“The imperial lion? Is Greif not already pride?”

“Farther east, Seleucus. Where the Spirit King rules.”

“Baum? Ah, the black dragon... Wrath, I presume.” Seleucus’s eyes widened as a new thought struck him. “But Baum’s flag carries a set of scales. What is the significance of that?”

“When the final judgment comes, the empire’s crimes shall be weighed against the seven sins that they may rise to heaven or fall to hell.”

Seleucus swallowed audibly. “And who will do the weighing?”

Lucia raised her hands. “I cannot say.”

He looked incredulous. “All that just to say you don’t know?”

She snorted. “In any case, Six Kingdoms was founded to stand

testament to the empire's wrongs and to level due punishment should it ever forget them. That is why it must endure: to carry their memory into the coming era. And should the empire fall, we shall join it. Our fates are as one."

"A grudge we've been nursing for a thousand years... We almost sound like a curse."

"'Tis what we are, Seleucus. And with so many centuries to steep, it has grown potent indeed, as was our founder's intent when he laid the first stones. As long as the empire existed, we would be its shadow. How deeply he must have despised his brother..."

"Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised after the purges he ordered. But cursing the entire imperial line strikes me as unjust." Seleucus sighed and leaned back against the carriage wall. "So you have devoted your life to this...dubious myth? As I say, someone of your talents could have become anything she wanted."

"You might say it was written in my blood. The house of Anguis is as jealous as the serpents we bear. Am I to watch meekly as a woman of younger years takes the imperial throne? Am I to let my children, or my children's children, have the honor of dealing the empire the final stroke? No, no. I shall not have the history books call me impotent."

"And that is why you would be High Queen?"

"Precisely. I shall suffer none other to topple the Grantzian Empire." Lucia flicked open her fan and raised it over her mouth. "It shall be me who laughs last."

Her shoulders shook with laughter, but she snapped her fan shut, composing herself. When she turned to the window, it was with her usual regal dignity.

"Time will not wait, Seleucus. While the empire busies itself with the Triumvirate, Friedhof, and this rebellion in the north, I shall surpass them all—and ascend to the highest heights."

She leveled her fan eastward and smiled.

*

Fort Caputo, in the central territories

It was a pleasant morning, circumstances notwithstanding. Hiro rested his arms on the balcony and breathed in the crisp winter air.

The ground had been thick with mist when he woke, but it had cleared as the sun rose higher, letting him see all the way to the horizon. The sight awaiting him was not a heartening one. The skyline was black. Bestial cries drifted on the wind. A distant uproar tugged at his attention, and he turned to see a dust cloud smeared across the faraway sky. Fires smoldered as far as the eye could see, the smoke looming over the fort like the shadows of mountains.

Eventually, the sight below drew his attention. The gates of Fort Caputo stood wide open and people were pouring in. It was clear from their armor that they were no ordinary civilians. Some held sharp-tipped spears. Others carried greatswords on their backs. The honed edges of their weapons glimmered in the sun. Designs on their cuirasses and breastplates displayed a variety of affiliations, a disparity echoed among the standard-bearers. They were the private troops of the central nobles who had neglected to answer Liz's call.

The central nobles' standing had weakened tremendously since the fall of House Krone, and while the latter's botched rebellion was to blame, the nobles still resented their lot. Yet House Krone was no longer worth seeking revenge upon—it had almost been sanctioned out of existence—and Fourth Prince Hiro had perished in battle. With no one else upon whom to vent their anger, they had decided to spite the ones levying their punishments—the sixth princess and House Kelheit—by refusing the call to arms. While it was unimpressive that they had prioritized childish pettiness over a national crisis, it had proved an unexpected boon. The Crow Legion numbered fewer than five thousand, and Selene had perhaps fifteen hundred soldiers left. Trying to stop a horde of monsters with what they had would have been like trying to dam a river with a twig.

"I didn't expect so many," Hiro mused.

He and Selene had written to as many nobles as they could, calling them to action, and more had replied than anticipated. Still, he knew only a handful had contributed because they wanted to do their duty for the empire. Most were likely just terrified of the horde of monsters running amok, although the chance to put the king of

Baum and the second prince in their debt surely didn't hurt.

He turned away from the balcony and headed back inside. Fifteen central nobles were seated around a long table, accompanied by Selene, Garda, Huginn, and Muninn. Last but not least was Luka, his ever-present shadow. She sat in a corner, hugging her knees, muttering to herself as she stared at the ceiling—business as usual, in other words.

Hiro cast his gaze over the central nobles, flashing a smile to put them at ease as he spread his arms in welcome. Luka scowled.

"Firstly, let me thank you all for coming."

He took his seat at the head of the table. With the nobles studying his every move intently, he produced a stack of parchment and laid it on the table.

"I have here fourteen pledges of loyalty." He tapped the desk with a finger. "One for each of you."

He looked at each of their faces in turn. Every last one flinched beneath his gaze. He almost could have laughed. One of the nobles visibly steeled himself, then requested permission to speak. Hiro acknowledged him with a nod.

"Thank you," the man said, rising to his feet. "Let me introduce myself. I am Tanilum von Dabode, the head of House Dabode."

He did not once look Hiro in the eye. As confident as he tried to sound, the sweat pouring from his forehead showed how he really felt.

"If I may, Lord Surtr, does our presence not already prove our devotion? With respect, you are not our king. I see no reason we must pledge ourselves to you. Unless, of course—and I shudder merely to suggest it—you are using this crisis to take advantage of us?"

He spoke quickly and fluidly, trying to seize control of the meeting. His words prompted whispering among the other nobles. They seemed to share his concerns.

Hiro rapped the table with his knuckle, calling them to silence. He paused for a deliberate moment, then turned to von Dabode with lightless eyes. "You appear to be laboring under a misapprehension, Lord von Dabode. You are not being asked to sign anything."

He raised a hand. Huginn nodded and trotted over. She took the fourteen pledges and laid one in front of every noble except for von Dabode, who was left with nothing.

Von Dabode turned to Hiro in confusion. "You...left me out?"

Hiro shook his head but otherwise said nothing.

The man rounded on him, reaching out to grasp him by the shoulder. "What is the meaning of— Agh!"

With a spray of blood, his hand fell to the floor. An iron tang filled the air.

"Ah... Ah—"

A cry rose up his throat, but it never passed his lips. His head exploded, splattering the wall with brain matter. His decapitated corpse fell to its knees and thudded to the floor. Crimson rivulets trickled across the unblemished metal of his ornate breastplate.

The other nobles were too dumbfounded to scream. As an uncomfortable silence fell over the chamber, Luka set her bloodstained greathammer on the ground and sat down atop von Dabode's corpse. Hiro looked down at her reproachfully.

"Please," she said without a hint of remorse. "Any fool could see you weren't going to let him live. I thought I would save us both some time."

He sighed. "You have to take these things step-by-step. Now look. You've scared them stiff."

The nobles stared at her in wide-eyed terror, but nothing more. No one stepped forward to confront her. No one raised their voice in trembling fury. Perhaps that was to be expected. If they complained, they might very well meet the same fate.

"Well," Hiro said, turning to them, "I meant for that to be a longer demonstration, but I think my point is clear enough."

He clapped his hands briskly, returning the nobles to their senses. They flinched and looked down at the parchment. None dared look him in the eye.

"Von Dabode wasn't the only conspirator, was he? With all eyes on the north, south, and west, you thought you could hatch a scheme of your own. Consider this your final chance to redeem yourselves."

He stood up and walked toward the banner behind his chair. It was emblazoned with a lion—the symbol of the Grantzian Empire. Artheus had grinned like a child when he first saw the finalized design. Indeed, he had been so overjoyed that he'd donned it like a cape, tied it to his horse, and ridden out through the town. He had tied it poorly, though, so it had fallen off and gotten muddy, earning him a scolding from Rey.

The other peoples of Soleil had scoffed to see the supposedly inferior humans adopt the banner of the lion. Even many of Artheus's peers had opposed it. But with every victory that he won, that perception changed, until there could be no more doubt that humankind possessed a lion's heart. In that flag, his pride, his hopes, and his courage lived on. It was a gathering beacon for all who resisted the zlosta, for all who took pride in their humanity, for all who sought freedom. Hiro had no pity for those who would stain it.

"Lord von Dabode's son—the head of the house, now—gave me permission to execute his father. It was not a choice he made easily, but in the end, he signed his pledge. He decided the safety of his house was dearer to him." Hiro turned. His lips smiled, but his voice was cold. "Now tell me, what do you hold dear?"

He held out his hands, both balled into fists.

"This is your final judgment. Will you choose loyalty to the empire, or will you choose death?"

He glanced at Huginn. She laid a quill and ink in front of each of the nobles. They each hastened to sign their name.

"Once you have finished," Hiro said, "you may hand your pledges to me."

A noble rose from his seat and approached, holding out his signed parchment. "I was told there would be a strategy meeting, my lord."

"Later." Hiro took the parchment, checked the signature, then looked back up. "This little gathering was for von Dabode and the rest of you who were scheming to defect to the Triumvirate. I stepped in before you could ever meet face-to-face, but this is as good a chance as any. Get to know each other."

"Thank you, my lord."

The noble hurried away, shamed into silence. The rest finished signing their names and filed out of the room. At last, the only ones left were Hiro, his retainers, and Selene...as well as von Dabode's headless corpse.

Garda signaled for Huginn and Muninn to dispose of the body. "Do you truly mean to grant them clemency?"

"Of course not. Their pledges aren't worth the parchment they're written on. They've tried to betray their country once already; they won't hesitate to do it again. They'll listen to me for now, but once they think I've forgotten about them, all bets are off."

"Then what should we do with them?"

"Let me worry about that. You have better things to worry about. Namely, that horde of monsters on the horizon."

"I thought we were waiting to discuss strategy."

"I don't care what these nobles have to say. They're here because Surtr and the second prince asked them to come. I doubt they have a single idea between them." Hiro shrugged and sighed. "And let's not forget that most of them tried to sell their country out."

As former supporters of House Krone, they had perhaps the finest political instincts in the entire empire, but that same sensitivity made them dangerous. If not for the invasion of the monsters, they would likely already have defected to the Triumvirate. They would be nothing but a burden in a strategy meeting. Lackeys and yes-men, they were the heart of the rot in the upper echelons of the empire.

"They're yours as far as I'm concerned," Selene said. "Any graves they might end up in, they dug themselves, and they'd only make trouble for Liz if left to their own devices." She paused. "But yes, the monsters. We should be careful not to underestimate them. We're used to thinking of them as beasts, but these are organized. Frankly, they scare me more than the Triumvirate."

A monster's prodigious strength could easily make short work of a human. Engaging them thoughtlessly would incur heavy losses. What was more, even with the central nobles joining the war effort, the invaders vastly outnumbered the human defenders.

"Historically, we've used tactics to even the odds," Selene

continued. “Monsters are strong but not clever. Easy to trap and kill. But with the Demiurgos in command, they’ve started working together. We’ve lost our greatest advantage while they’ve shed their greatest weakness. And seeing as they outnumber us too, I think a frontal charge would be suicidal.”

Hiro had been waiting for Selene to finish, but Garda beat him to the punch. The zlosta raised a hand from where he leaned against the wall.

“I wouldn’t be so certain. Beasts in a pack are beasts nonetheless. A leader will not make them less dim-witted. They mimic our ways, nothing more. They may have the strength of arm, but once the melee begins, a methodical approach will compensate for their numbers.”

“Not without a good plan, it won’t.” Selene stared back, frowning. “Don’t forget, they came through Friedhof to get here. They won’t just stand there politely while we push and pull. If we aren’t careful, they’ll overwhelm us with brute force.”

“We’ll need to be vigilant, sure enough, but beasts fight with their hearts, not their heads. If they try to pin us down, we stay moving. Easy enough. Besides, they have a sixth sense for danger—try to outthink them like a human and they’ll only sniff you out. I wouldn’t place too much stock in clever strategy, if we could even manage such a thing with this ragtag bunch. The simpler our plan, the better our troops will follow it and the easier we’ll catch the enemy by surprise. Send some troops around their rear and catch them in a pincer, and we’ll see their ranks crumble.”

“Too eager by half, my burly friend.” Selene sighed. “Charging recklessly into the fray is a risk we can’t afford to take. Without some sort of card up our sleeve, we’ll get ourselves killed. Do you think a simple pincer will defeat them? They’ll break out in seconds and smash us to pulp.”

Garda fell silent. Selene cocked her head, puzzled that he had not replied.

“‘Garda’ will do,” he said finally. “‘My burly friend’ makes me itch.”

“Ah. Of course. My apologies.” Selene nodded meekly, knocked off-balance. “You... You may call me Selene, I suppose.”

"If you like." Garda continued, unfazed by the awkwardness in the air. "In any case, I was at Friedhof myself. I saw how the monsters fight. They're organized, it's true, but their numbers do much to compensate for a lack of discipline. If the defenders had sallied forth instead of holing up behind the battlements, the wall might well have held. Fear of the yaldabaoth made them hesitate. *That's* why Friedhof fell. The monsters can be beaten—it's just a matter of approach."

"If your point is that we shouldn't hide behind our walls, I agree. But we won't win any laurels charging in like fools, and we won't win at all without a plan. Turn this into a contest of who can hit harder and they'll beat us every time."

"Better than tying ourselves up in our own schemes," Garda grunted. "It would be foolish to make this battle more complex than it needs to be."

Selene proposed caution, watching and waiting while she worked to lure the monsters into a trap. Garda advocated for boldness, striking fast and hard to take them by surprise. Neither seemed willing to back down. Eventually, Hiro had heard enough. He clapped his hands to draw their attention.

"Then we'll do both. We'll be firm where we can and flexible where we need to be. A combined approach will get the best out of our troops."

He turned to the window. The dust cloud on the horizon had gotten bigger since he had last looked. It roiled and raged like a sandstorm, striving to paint the blue sky a dirty brown. It was visible proof of how many monsters were flocking to the Demiurgos, and if it set even him ill at ease, he could only imagine the trepidation the soldiers outside must have been feeling.

"We can't afford lengthy preparations," he said. "They won't give us that kind of time."

"Then what do you suggest?" Selene said. "Other than making do with what we have, of course."

"I do have a plan, but we'll have to get to work right away." Hiro stood up from his chair. "And I'll need your help, Garda."

"With what?"

"Get me the things on this list, if you'd be so kind." He handed the zlosta a sheet of parchment, then pulled out an envelope and gave it to Selene. "Have you heard anything from your retainers about what's happening in the north?"

Selene eyed the letter dubiously. "Nothing, I fear. Not that I'm not concerned. They can take care of themselves. Who is this for?"

"For them, if you don't mind."

"If you insist, but it might not make much difference. I've already written myself."

She was sharp, he thought. No doubt they had both reached the same conclusion. He could guess what her letter contained: an order to seek peace with House Brommel. This was no time for the nobles of the empire to be squabbling among themselves. No doubt she had included more detailed instructions too. He had to admit, he was impressed—or rather, he was relieved she had not let him down. In truth, he was not especially surprised. This had been well within his estimation of her abilities. Indeed, if she hadn't sent the letter, he would have been privately disappointed at having another job to do.

"I thought you might have done," he said, "so I put something else. Don't worry, it's nothing extravagant."

"Something different, hm?" Selene looked back at the letter with renewed interest. "Well, I suppose I'd better send it, then." She held it up to the light, trying to see through the envelope, but the paper revealed nothing.

Hiro smiled wryly, then turned to Huginn and Muninn. "I have a job for you too," he said. "I want to take care of these monsters in one fell swoop."

No one could see the future. Even the formidable power of the Far Sight could not peer beyond the present. But he did know one thing: Everything was proceeding as he had hoped. If the answers were out of reach, he would work his way toward them. If the future was unknowable, he would shape it step-by-step by the path he walked...and when he reached his destination, he would find it spreading out before him just as he desired.

I'm close now. So close...

He half closed his eyes as the sunlight fell upon his face.

When all is said and done, will you be able to forgive me?

*

The third day of the twelfth month of Imperial Year 1026
Fort Zerseldt, in the western territories

Following the Free Folk's attack, High General Vias left Fort Hundert for Fort Zerseldt two sel south. A key emplacement on the Draali border, the fort was large and steadfast, and it commanded a good enough view of the surrounding landscape to spot any approach. It was also close to the expected site of the final battle with the Triumvirate, making it an ideal staging point for the imperial offensive.

On the third day of the twelfth month, Liz arrived at the fort with twenty thousand soldiers. That was only a fraction of the number with which she had marched into Faerzen—an army in excess of a hundred thousand—but it was all she had been able to mobilize in short order. The rest of her forces were still in Faerzen, preparing to march. Whether they would arrive before battle was joined with the Triumvirate was presently uncertain.

Liz gazed up at the fort from atop her horse. "I hope Rosa is keeping well..."

She had not seen her elder sister since departing the imperial capital. They had kept in touch by letter, but since the reclamation of Faerzen, Rosa's messages had become more like military reports than private correspondence, providing little insight into her well-being. Some said the perceptive could discern such things through writing, but that was a skill Liz had yet to master. At best, she could tell the strength of Rosa's handwriting, and even then, the letters could easily have been dictated. The imperial military did keep trained analysts on hand to evaluate official communications, but it would have been inappropriate for Liz to use them for personal reasons. In short, the only way to be certain Rosa was in good health was to meet her in person.

"The soldiers look cheerful," said Aura beside her. "If something had happened, they wouldn't be so relaxed."

Liz was an open book to her chief strategist, it seemed. She nodded, a little conscious that her concerns might have been more visible than she intended. "I suppose so. I was worried when I heard about the raid, but things seem less bad than I feared."

"Their losses were low, and Rosa has put High General Vias in charge now. She seems to be doing a good job maintaining order. We'll have to see for ourselves to be sure, but morale looks good, and the encampment looks secure."

"Do you think so? I would have thought a camp this big would be bound to have some blind spots."

The fort could only accommodate so many soldiers, so the rest had made camp outside the walls. A variety of banners flew over the tents, most bearing the crests of western and eastern noble families.

"She's never led an army this big before, but she knows to group the nobles by territory for ease of coordination. And look. See how she's spaced them out? That won't just make it easier to repel an attack, it'll stop the fire spreading if the tents catch light."

"Your point being?"

"She's good. Very good."

"You're that impressed?"

"If that doesn't convince you, it's not all. Look at the fences around each block of tents. She's dug trenches around the inside, then piled up sacks of earth on either side to disguise them. That's an anti-cavalry tactic. The sacks reinforce the fence, the trenches trip the horses if they do break through, and then the troops hiding behind the inner ring attack the riders." Aura was growing more and more impassioned. "It's straight from the Black Chronicle. Artheus describes Mars building an unassailable camp using exactly the same approach. That might even be where she got the idea. Maybe she's copying him. If she is, I'm impressed. She knows her strategy. If she's doing it properly, she'll have laid two to three rings of—"

"Look, we're almost at the gate!" Liz hurriedly cut her off. "We'll give our regards to High General Vias once we're inside. I'm sure she'll be happy to answer all your questions."

Aura pouted a little. "That would be nice, I suppose."

She seemed unhappy to have been interrupted, but the gate was

indeed looming over them. She let the matter drop and turned her attention to the fort.

Liz let out a private cheer. Tragedy had been averted. There had been no mistaking the telltale glint in Aura's eye—Liz knew it well from Aura's passionate tirades about the Black Chronicle. Once she got started on the War God and his tactics, there was no stopping her. It took her hours, if not days, to cool off. Come nightfall, she would no doubt have crept into Liz's bedchamber to ramble on more about Mars. She would probably have demanded an essay as well. She always did.



Liz sighed in relief, then glanced at Aura again. The girl was staring fixedly at Scáthach. Liz's eyes softened in sympathy, and she whispered a silent apology. Her actions had robbed Scáthach of any chance of sleep tonight. All she could do, she decided as she turned back to the fort, was to ensure her friend's brave sacrifice wouldn't be in vain.

At that moment, the gates swung open with a dull rumble. The parting of the double doors whipped up dirt and dust. A gust of wind washed over the party, setting Liz's hair fluttering, and dissipated into the sky.

The doors opened fully, revealing a path lined on either side by nobles. Rosa stood in the center, ready to receive them. Liz straightened up in the saddle and urged her horse forward. As she passed through the gate, Aura and Scáthach fell in behind her, followed by her hundred-strong guard.

She advanced confidently until she came to a stop before her sister. Rosa lowered her head, and all of the nobles sank into retainer's bows. For a moment, someone caught Liz's attention among the sea of unfamiliar faces, but Rosa's voice quickly recaptured her attention.

"We are grateful for your presence, Your Highness."

It felt odd to hear Rosa address her so formally, but Liz let it pass without remark. They could not behave as sisters now. In front of the empire's nobles, their respective positions superseded family ties.

She nodded. "Thank you for your kind welcome. Be that as it may..."

Her eyes flicked to the beastwoman standing a short distance from Rosa—the woman whose face had seized her attention a moment prior. She had sleek silver hair and piercing eyes, although a generally sleepy demeanor lent her a little softness. More to the point, she looked familiar. No, more than familiar. No passage of time or change of shape could obscure the bond they shared. Liz's heart thumped in her ears as fond memories flooded her mind. Without a doubt, this was—

Vias preempted her. "Lady Celia Estrella. A pleasure. I am Vias,

the Shield of the East."

The beastwoman's voice was brusque and haughty, and she did not lower her head. The nobles stared at her reproachfully, silently chiding her for her poor manners.

Liz was taken aback. It had been a long time since anyone had spoken to her so. Some years past, many nobles had treated her with similar disdain, but that was before she became the presumptive heir to the throne. By all rights, the situation called for a reprimand. She could not let such impertinence go unchallenged in front of her nobles. Yet she hesitated. Something felt wrong. When had she started believing others owed her deference? Had she always cared so much about the rules and codes of high society? Or was her newfound status perhaps distracting her from what truly mattered? Once upon a time, she had cared nothing for the opinions of others, only for the road ahead. What would that girl think to see her now, flattered by the empty praise of sycophantic courtiers? She would think she had grown up to become what she hated. No one could hope to claim the highest station in the empire by guarding the one they had.

She took a deep breath. She felt so embarrassed she could scream, but she held it in. Her own shortcomings had caused this shame. It was only right that she suffer it.

"A pleasure to meet you, High General." She held out her hand with a smile. "I am honored to fight by your side."

Murmurs of astonishment issued from the nobles at her show of leniency. Vias looked no less surprised. Her eyes widened momentarily, and her voice quavered as she fell into a bow.

"Your Highness, I..."

Just then, a western noble dashed forward. "Allow me to introduce myself, Your Highness! I am Lord—"

Vias seemed to vanish. A dull *thud* echoed across the courtyard. Before Liz knew what was happening, the noble was lying sprawled on the ground with his eyes rolled up into his skull. The beastwoman stood over him, one fist extended.

"We are speaking," she growled. "It is rude not to wait your turn."

The nobles looked on, dumbstruck by her ferocity. Her fist

trembled with almost visible fury.

"I ought to take your head, but I would not dirty Her Highness with your blood. Be grateful that you will have the chance to apologize."

"Um..." Liz squeaked. Vias was so haughty and quick to anger, it was hard to believe. Did she have no self-awareness at all?

"Is she the one who set those tents? It can't be..."

Aura put a hand to her forehead and sighed. Behind her, Scáthach was grinning. Yet when Liz turned to Rosa, the person who could least afford to let their authority be undermined, she seemed to be taking the beastwoman's impertinence in stride, with only a rueful smile to show otherwise.

It was then that Liz remembered she had heard about Vias before—specifically, that she'd supposedly had Greiheit's favor. It was said that the late emperor had forgiven her for any slight. Liz had always doubted those stories. Her father had never been the kind of man to show clemency. Yet now that she saw Vias in the flesh, she knew they must have been true. If Vias had addressed Greiheit similarly—and there was little doubt she had—then he must have made an exception for her, or she would be dead. That explained why Rosa was used to her impertinence. As the leader of the eastern nobles, she had probably seen it countless times.

It would take a reckless disregard for one's own life to speak to Greiheit that way, of course. Still, Liz covered up her incredulity with a smile. "That will do, High General."

"As you command, Your Highness." Realizing she had left Liz's hand hanging in the air, Vias hurriedly took it and sank to one knee.

As Liz looked down, she saw a sleek-furred tail wagging back and forth behind the beastwoman's back. It looked familiar. Liz's suspicions inched even closer toward certainty, but she could not possibly ask about them in front of so many people. As she searched for words, Vias drew away and Rosa stepped forward, forcing her to stow the problem away for later.

"We may speak at greater length inside," Rosa said. "And Lady Aura may be interested to know that her father is here, although he is not present at the moment."

Aura's face crinkled into an uncharacteristic scowl. "Tell him I'm not here."

"May I ask why? He was delighted when he heard you were coming."

"I don't like being around him."

"You don't like your own father's company?"

"Did you like yours?"

Rosa's brows pulled together. "Now that you mention it, I see your point..."

Just then, Liz realized Vias had wandered off. She looked around to see the beastwoman speaking to Scáthach.

"Call me Vias," the woman said. "It's an honor, Lady Scáthach."

"Likewise," Scáthach replied. "But if I may...must you stand quite so close?"

Vias had leaned in uncomfortably close to take in Scáthach's scent, causing the latter some consternation. Liz frowned to see her act so familiar. All the rumors painted High General Vias as a prickly woman who kept others at arm's length, but that seemed hard to believe after how she had acted today. She stepped forward to join the conversation, but the western nobles started clamoring for her attention, leaving her unable to investigate further.

"Dinner is ready, Your Highness," Rosa said. "Shall we head inside? We have much to discuss."

At the suggestion of dinner, Vias sprang away from Scáthach and vanished into the fort, tail wagging.

"Anyone less than a high general would have been punished for that," one of the western nobles remarked.

"Preceding a princess to the dinner table..." Another shook his head. "The beastfolk's impertinence never ceases to amaze. Someone ought to remind her of her station."

"Would that she could conduct herself appropriately," a third sighed. "She struck that man without a second thought. If we weren't on the brink of a war, that would have been the end of her career."

Rosa drew closer to Liz. "Never mind her. That's just her way. Wild and willful, as all good high generals are."

Ultimately, the nobles were correct—Vias's actions deserved at least a dressing-down, if not the stripping of her title or confinement to house arrest. Admittedly, that wouldn't be wise under the circumstances, but Liz got the feeling that wasn't the only reason Rosa was turning a blind eye.

Rosa turned to her with a rueful smile, sensing the unspoken question. "You'll find that she grows on you. I see why the nobility dislike her, but the soldiers would trust her with their lives. Have you seen the camp?"

Liz nodded. "Aura was impressed."

"You wouldn't believe how quickly she got it done. She even pitched in herself. It's hard to laze around when a high general is getting her hands dirty, don't you agree? We have her to thank for our high morale. She knows a thing or two about winning hearts and minds."

"So you think she lives up to her station?"

Rosa nodded. "She's free-spirited, certainly, but she's no slouch. If you had any concerns about her competence, consider them allayed."

"Don't worry. I didn't."

Liz's thoughts had been elsewhere. Vias's blunt streak had reminded her of Skadi. The impulsiveness the two shared seemed to come naturally to the beastfolk. Still, if they shared the same shortcomings, they also likely shared the same strengths. Humans, with their obsessions with rules and propriety, struggled to understand that forthrightness could be a virtue, especially western nobles, who had likely never seen beastfolk before. The southern territories bordered Steissen and were more used to their ways, but people from other parts of the empire often complained that the beastfolk were lacking in manners.

"She has a good heart," Rosa insisted. "Speak with her yourself and you'll see."

She seemed concerned Vias might be punished, but there was no need. Liz was of no such mind. There could no longer be any doubt. Vias was someone she had known for a long time—someone with whom she had grown up side by side after their meeting in the

farthest reaches of the east, sharing their joys, their anger, and their hardships. How was she supposed to punish her? Tris would glare down at her from Valhalla. He had loved her more than anyone, after all, and he would allow no one to speak ill of Liz's oldest and most loyal servant.

"Yes," Liz murmured. "I'm sure I will."

Indeed, no one in the world knew her better.

*

The sixth princess's night raid had struck the Vanir Triumvirate's forces just as they reconvened before the empire's western border, and it had left them reeling. A wide swath of tents had been reduced to ashes. Although the Holy Emperor had taken swift action to contain the blaze, the fire had refused to be extinguished, and they had ultimately been forced to abandon the site.

Camp had been reestablished at Fort Lahern in the Corsche region of Draal, barely a stone's throw from Fort Zerseldt. The soldiers who could not fit within the fort had set up tents outside the walls. The mood was more subdued than in the imperial camp, likely due in part to the memory of the night raid, although that did not necessarily indicate low morale. Álfar were by nature quieter than humans. All throughout the camp, soldiers ate in silence or trained or attended to their weapons. Any other nation's army would have marveled at their discipline, but the álfar considered this their natural state, the standard they had been raised to uphold since birth. Drinking before a battle, as the humans or beastfolk did, seemed like an absurd custom.

While the rank and file readied for combat, the officers gathered in the war room of Fort Lahern. The atmosphere was uneasy. Word had just arrived that the empire and Six Kingdoms had signed a peace treaty.

"Their battle ended," one álf muttered, "and us on the empire's border."

Six Kingdoms was supposed to keep the bulk of the empire's forces trapped in the west while the Triumvirate moved into imperial

lands. Now, that plan had gone awry, throwing the meeting into confusion.

"That's not all," another said. "Our scouts say the sixth princess has rejoined the defenders."

"But with her forces...will we not be outnumbered?"

"Surely she cannot have brought them all. No one could move a hundred thousand soldiers in so short a time."

"Six Kingdoms might have failed us," a third officer added, "but they did their part keeping our foes occupied. The empire's forces will be too exhausted to travel."

"But are the odds still in our favor? That night raid filled our sickbeds. Will we have the numbers to push through to the capital?"

"We will not have to. We will take the western territories for ourselves and withdraw." The speaker turned to the Holy Emperor, who was presiding over the meeting. "If you do not object, Your Holiness."

Straea nodded as all eyes converged on her. "I do not. But I would like to wait a little longer before deciding to retreat."

She wore her hood low to conceal her burn scars, leaving only her mouth visible. That aroused no suspicion, however. Only the Faerie King was permitted to look upon the Holy Emperor. The face of a Lord's chosen was not for the unclean eyes of the masses. She could have concealed her mouth as well and no one would have objected. Indeed, showing any more skin would cause her troops great distress. Go so far as to reveal her face, and the álfar would either pluck out their eyes or end their lives, so zealous was their faith. Anyone who wanted proof of her identity would have to submit a petition to the cardinals, but they were all back in the safety of Vanaheim, awaiting news of the empire's fall. Besides, for a Holy Emperor to join a campaign in person was an unprecedented blessing. Morale would suffer if she took offense and returned home. Her presence on the field inspired the troops to give their lives for the cause. No one in the room was in any position to question her.

"Word came not so long ago from the north of the empire," she said. "It seems that Friedhof has fallen."

A murmur went up from the officers at that.

“Grave tidings indeed,” one man said.

“More so than the empire, perhaps,” added another. “How are we to sleep soundly knowing the wild races stalk the lands?”

Straea raised a hand to silence them. “The yaldabaoth and their horde are making directly for the imperial capital. I cannot promise that we will not cross paths, but we are not on course to do so. At worst, we may encounter a wayward foot soldier or two.”

She had hoped to allay their fears, but they did not look convinced—and after she had gone to the trouble of leveraging her authority too. She was so exasperated, she was of half a mind to fall silent and leave them to it. It was only fear of compromising her plans that convinced her to continue.

“If the west does come under threat,” she said irritably, “then I do not see why we should fight for a land of heretics. We will plunder their assets and return home with our spoils, and be richer for the trouble.”

She played on their hopes, soothed their anxieties, and appealed to their greed. The Holy Emperor’s authority as the Faerie King’s chosen worked on soldiers just as well as faerie worshippers. Her lips turned war crimes to divine mandates.

“The imperial capital is nigh impregnable, but if any army might breach its walls, it is the monsters who conquered Friedhof. Whichever side proves victorious, both shall bleed.”

First, she would tell them how they stood to gain, rousing their spirits enough that fleeing seemed impossible. If she could only bring them to the field, the rest would take care of itself. There was no room for doubt in the heat of battle.

“And the victor shall be exhausted by their battle,” she continued. “If we can rout the army before us and finish off whoever wins the capital, it will be simplicity itself to cast down the city’s battered walls. The battlefield is ever-changing. We have plenty of time to decide that retreat is the wiser course. Let us consider flexibility an ally, not an enemy.”

The álfar were by nature a composed people. If she outlined her position calmly and clearly, they would listen, and if she sprinkled her explanation with reasons to trust in victory, their greed would

outweigh their misgivings. They were much like humans in that sense. The only point to be cautious of was their pride. They considered themselves not only the oldest of the races of Aletia, but the best, and they were reluctant to measure themselves against others. The moment victory seemed out of reach, they would quickly retreat, insisting they did not want to squander precious lives. The rest of the world believed they were rational, but they were really just stubborn. Anyone commanding them had to bear that in mind.

As Straea expelled a private sigh, one of the officers stepped forward. "Indeed, Your Holiness. Even if the monsters are victorious, they will be greatly weakened. The rest of Soleil will thank us for vanquishing them. Perhaps even the people of the empire will see the light of our faith."

Seeing his eagerness, Straea smiled and nodded. "So long as the Faerie King watches over us, we have nothing to fear. Let us forge ahead with courage." She rose from her seat and spread her arms wide. "In the guidance of his divine revelation."

The officer swallowed. "For the glory of the Faerie King!"

The rest of the attendants gazed at her in wonder before bowing their heads as one and beginning to pray. Straea smiled in satisfaction. She had succeeded in setting their hearts aflame. The soldiers' morale was high. All that remained was to rout the imperial army and lay the capital to waste.

"We will proceed as we planned," she said. "May the blessings of the Faerie King be upon you all."

"Please feel free to retire, Your Holiness. Rest assured, we are more than capable of handling matters here."

"My thanks."

With that, Straea turned and left the room, heading back to her chambers. The guards waiting outside the door fell in behind her as she passed through. Naturally, none said a word. For one thing, they were forbidden to speak in the Holy Emperor's presence, but even if they hadn't been, they revered her too highly to open their mouths. Simply being allowed to serve at her side was a terrifying honor.

Eventually, they arrived at her room. She swept inside without a word of thanks. There was a woman waiting inside, leaning against

the wall. She was no servant, nor a bodyguard positioned for fear of assassins. No one was supposed to enter the Holy Emperor's chambers. She had to be an intruder, and yet Straea regarded her without hostility, although she did not let down her guard.

"Verona."

The woman smiled. Her pale, álf-like complexion was the first thing most people saw, but anyone foolish enough to be taken in by her dainty appearance would soon regret it. She was an auf, a changeling child. Her kind were spurned by the zlosta and unaccepted by the álfar, yet she had nonetheless found a place among the twelve primozlosta who had driven Soleil to despair one thousand years ago.

"I do not recall summoning you," Straea said. "Has the Demiurgos ordered you to take my life?"

"Please." Verona inclined her head. "My Lord has no need for impure vessels."

Straea did not rise to the provocation. She narrowed her eyes for a long moment but finally relaxed and sighed. "I see. Another of your whims, I assume."

She lowered her hood, took a seat, and poured herself a goblet of water.

Verona giggled. "I have not seen my Lord Demiurgos for a long time. I can only assume he is in good health, but seeing as he has not sought me out, perhaps he has forsaken me." Despite her words, she sounded almost amused.

Straea snorted and drained her goblet. "Forsake a primozlosta who wields a Fellblade? It would not be out of character, I suppose, but he knows better than to leave someone like you to their own devices."

"Perceptive indeed. Yes, he lets me do as I please. He finds it charming that I am so disobedient, unlike the other eleven."

"You make it sound like he doesn't care for the rest. Aren't they his children too?"

"Not in his eyes. They let Mars best them, pluck out their eyes, and render them weak as babes. Our Lord does not love the weak. He keeps them in his service because he must and for no other

reason. They are all he has."

Verona seemed oddly evasive. Why was she here, exactly? If she had come simply to amuse herself, Straea had no intention of humoring her.

"Well," she said, waving the auf away with a hand, "if he loves you so much, why don't you rejoin him?"

"So hostile. And here I thought you might be interested in hearing what I have to say."

"I don't see how anything coming from you could be welcome news."

"No need for that. Rest assured, I have no ulterior motives." Verona's lips curled in amusement. "Are you familiar with Meteia, the captain of the first archpriestess's honor guard? I was hoping you might tell me more about her."

Meteia had lived so long ago that most records had been lost to time, but a small handful had remained in Frieden. Indeed, Straea had met her in person—an incident she was unlikely to forget. Still, she saw no reason to share any of that with Verona.

"I have heard the name," she said, "but little more. She was one of Mars's Black Hand, but she only joined him at the end of the war and died not long after, so few have heard of her. If you would like to know more, you will have to search through Frieden's records."

"Ah, now I recall," Verona said. "It was her death that invited the War God's wrath."

Meteia had fallen in battle with the Demiurgos during the latter days of the war. The zlosta had surrounded the human forces and begun to close in. As the invasion began, House Krone had betrayed their comrades, compromising the human defense. The War God had put down their rebellion before it caused harm, but the Demiurgos had taken advantage of his absence to strike at his lands with a great army, leaving Meteia as the only defender. As the battle grew bloody, the War God had hastened to her aid, but he had arrived too late to prevent her death at Hydra's hands. What had followed was well-known. Enraged, the War God had laid waste to the primozlosta, taking them prisoner and plucking out their eyes and manastones. The encirclement had broken, leading to the downfall

of the zlosta.

"So?" Straea raised an eyebrow. "Why are you so interested in her?"

"I met her, as difficult as it may seem to believe. During my attack on the imperial fort. I thought you may be interested to know that she has joined the fray."

"Meteia is fighting alongside the empire?"

Verona smiled. "Were you not aware? Dear me. Whatever has become of the Faerie King's gift?"

"I-I have no idea what you..."

Straea's eyes widened in surprise, but it was already too late. One look at Verona's face was enough to tell she had been exposed. She ought to have known the moment the auf began rambling on about the past. As one of the primozlosta, Verona would have known far more about Meteia. This conversation had been no idle whim after all. Every word had carried intent. From the moment she entered the room, she had been trying to determine whether Straea could still use her eyes.

"Could it be?" the auf asked, a hatefully knowing glimmer in her eyes. "Are you truly blind?"

For a moment, Straea thought to try bluffing her way out, but the game was up. Verona knew the truth already. She had asked a second time not to confirm, but because she hoped to catch her in a lie. As humiliating as it was to have slipped up, Straea would not give her that satisfaction.

"I am," she said with a shrug. "Although not completely."

A flicker of disappointment crossed Verona's face. "As my Lord tells it, they were never more than an imitation. The true Far Sight died with the first archpriestess. Is that not so?" Her voice took on a heated edge. "Mars defended her corpse to the hilt. Even the Faerie King could not have bested him in his prime. No Lord could."

Straea could only speculate about Verona's past, but to see how the auf talked about Mars, anyone could tell that the two had crossed paths. Yet she sensed there was more to the story. While the rest of the primozlosta regarded Mars as a hated foe, she did not see the same resentment in Verona.

“Imagine the Faerie King’s alarm, to have been struck blind,” Verona continued. “Although I am sure his imitation served well enough. Is that why they failed you, then? Did the reappearance of the true Far Sight rob the false of its power?”

Straea said nothing, which the auf seemed to take as an answer in itself.

“An imitation is only an imitation, after all.” Verona’s smile widened. “In the presence of the original, it will wilt away.”

Straea narrowed her eyes, bringing her hands together in mocking applause. “Well reasoned. Now, are you going to stay and crow, or will that be all? I might not look it, but I am very busy.”

“Please, do not take such offense. Have I not been your erstwhile ally?” Verona laid a hand on her chest. “Was it not I who took you in, that young girl smoldering with vengeance, and introduced you to Orcus and the Vanir Triumvirate?”

Straea’s brow wrinkled in annoyance. She downed the rest of her goblet. “And I am very grateful, but you are overstepping the mark. I thought we had an understanding not to interfere in each other’s affairs.”

“I think we have more important concerns, don’t you?”

Straea fell silent. Verona stepped closer, laid a hand on her shoulder, and leaned in next to her ear.

“Give me Meteia and you may have Lady Celia Estrella.”

“What are you plotting?”

“Give me your rage. The rage you never showed me.”

With a wicked smile, Verona stepped away. As Straea watched, she strode over to a corner of the room before finally looking back.

“I would be one with the dark.”

With that, she melted into the shadows and disappeared. The room was silent once more. The air finally relaxed. Straea heaved a sigh and leaned back in her chair, gazing up at the ceiling.

“And I...”

As she raised a hand to the burn scars on her face, her voice fell dead into the silence of the night.

I would see the world scorched by the sun.

*

Azbakal, the capital of Lichtein

The Golden Hall was the dwelling place of the dukes of Lichtein. Its architecture, and its liberal use of gold in particular, recalled Glitnir in Sunspear. That was no accident; the former had been modeled after the latter. Although Sunspear belonged to the empire, Lichtein had always felt a kinship with the city, built as it was on arid ground. Yet when Sunspear discovered gold under the mountains, it became a hub of trade overnight, building itself up and out as Lichtein watched jealously over the border. Without the resources to compete, that jealousy turned to anger, then to resentment, and finally to hatred. The duke of the time levied heavy taxes on his people to fund large purchases of gold with which to build a rival palace. The result was the Golden Hall, a home for the rich built on the shortsighted exploitation of the poor—a monument to envy and vanity.

The interior of the Golden Hall was just as lavish as the exterior, the better to receive foreign guests. Its corridors were paved with marble flagstones from the empire's eastern territories and furnished with plush red carpets from the Vanir Triumvirate, decorated with arms and armor crafted by the dwarves of Steissen and glimmering with gold imported from the imperial south. All its imported opulence converged on the duke's audience hall in the center, where the throne room would have been in an imperial castle. The chamber teemed with nobles whispering their dissatisfaction with the duke.

"What in the world is Lord Karl doing?"

"As I hear it, he has not left his chambers for days."

"Did he not promise he would make an announcement today?"

"Lord Rankeel! Have you spoken to him? Without you to counsel him, I suspect he will never come to a decision."

Rankeel shot the rowdy nobles an irritated look but kept his voice level. "He has not asked me for counsel. Indeed, all he has asked is that I give him time to think. I intend to respect his wishes, as well as whatever conclusion he comes to."

At that moment, the chamber doors opened to reveal the very

person they were discussing: Karl Oruk Lichtein.

"Forgive me for taking so long," he said.

He did not look in good health as he took his place on the throne. He had always been sickly, but even then, he seemed twice as pale as usual. Then again, several nights without sleep would do that to a man.

Rankeel took one look at him and sighed. He suppressed the urge to lend his aid. After three years as duke, Karl was finally starting to grow into his role. He needed to learn to stand on his own. There was a limit to how much advice Rankeel could offer, especially when the other nobles were growing bitter that he had Karl's ear. They had not acted on their resentment yet, but there was no telling when their patience might run out.

A trial by fire indeed. Perhaps I have asked too much of him...but if he cannot prove equal to this challenge, Lichtein has no future.

As Rankeel whispered a silent prayer, Karl cast an anxious look over the assembled nobles. Several times he made to speak, only for his nerves to get the better of him. At last, he summoned his courage, balled his fists, and addressed the room.

"Lichtein will not invade the empire. We will choose alliance and diplomacy."

A ripple of shock ran through the hall. Suddenly, there was uproar.

"My lord," shouted a red-faced noble, "you must reconsider! We will not have a better chance! Have you forgotten our humiliation three years ago?! Have you forgotten how the empire stole our lands and slaughtered your brothers?! And you would make peace with them?! I will not stand for it!"

"That is my decision," Karl countered. "This is the time for pragmatism, not vengeance. We must bide our time. If we go to war now, not only will we not see the conquests you are hoping for, we may lose what chance we have of reclaiming the north. I do not believe we can defeat the empire in battle."

The noble bridled. "This is weakness! It is cowardice! You dare call yourself our—"

"Silence!"

The noble stepped back, shocked to hear Karl raise his voice. Karl stood up from his throne, knees trembling as he advanced on the man.

"I am the duke of Lichtein, whether you approve or not! And if you disagree with my decision, you may round up your soldiers and drag me from my throne!"

A hush spread through the hall as the nobles fell silent. Rankeel gazed at Karl in admiration. Finally, he began to laugh uproariously.

"Ba ha ha ha ha ha! Took you long enough!"

The surrounding nobles glared at him reproachfully as he clutched his belly, although he paid them no mind. Even Karl looked at him with wide eyes.

"You too, Marquis?"

Karl sounded timid again, his confidence of a few seconds earlier thoroughly wilted. Even he could not risk making an enemy of Rankeel.

Rankeel snorted under his breath. "He could still use a little guidance, but we'll make a duke of him yet." He looked up and shook his head, grinning. "Not at all, my lord. You have my full support. And let the rest of you be warned, anyone who takes issue with Lord Karl's proposal will have me to reckon with."

Karl's face lit up. "So that's what you meant!"

Rankeel felt the tension drain from his body, replaced by relief. "Had you chosen war, I was prepared to go to war. The decision was truly yours, my lord."

He would follow Karl no matter what. As long as he had the strength to stand, he would wield his sword in his duke's name; if that led to the end of Lichtein, so be it. Still, Karl had exceeded his expectations. It was only right to give the man's decision his blessing.

"We ought to send a messenger to the empire as soon as possible," he continued. "Tell them our resources are at their disposal."

"Very good." Karl nodded. He turned to address the nobles. "We will start by gathering provisions—"

Rankeel cut him off with a wave of a hand. "That will not be

necessary. They will not accept."

"What do you mean?"

"The empire wants soldiers, not supplies, and they have their pride. Even if their resources are strained, I doubt they will take ours."

"Then why make the offer at all?"

"If we offer soldiers, they may well take them, and we will suffer for it. Better to offer something they have less use for and that we can better afford to spare."

"Hence material resources."

Rankeel nodded. "The most important thing is that we are seen to offer assistance. That alone will put us in good standing."

It was imperative to make Lichtein's position clear. Give the empire a reason not to trust them and they might find themselves under scrutiny once the Vanir Triumvirate was dealt with, if not on the receiving end of an invasion. On the other hand, offering material support—proclaiming loud and clear that they were an ally—would warm the empire's disposition toward them, even if the rest of Soleil reviled them as a nation of slavers. What resources they invested now would pay dividends once the war was over. They would do well to ingratiate themselves to the empire as much as they could.

"I see." Karl nodded. "Then if you would excuse me, I must attend to that letter."

Rankeel bowed low, pleased to see his duke take charge at last. "Very good, my lord."

*

Amber sunlight pierced the clouds to illuminate the earth below. Stalks of golden grain swayed in the breeze. In less than an hour's time, the sun would retreat below the horizon, and gold would darken to brass.

The fertile black soil in the south of the northern territories formed the economic backbone of the entire region, and the lands where it could be found were highly prized. To prevent them being

monopolized by a privileged few, the northern nobles had agreed to rule them collectively—at least on paper. In practice, they were controlled by House Scharm, and with House Scharm embroiled in battle with House Brommel, Lebering had seen its chance. Now, the nobles cowered behind their gates, quivering in fear as the zlosta seized the heart of the north.

"Magnificent," Claudia sighed. "The snowfields of the north are beautiful in their own way, but how can they compare to such abundance? Anyone would be jealous to see what the empire takes for granted."

She plucked a head of wheat and cupped it in her palm, staring at it lovingly.

"As you say, Your Majesty," her aide said. "But why is it not in the granaries? The harvest season is long since past."

"I would imagine most of the hands that were meant to hold the scythes took up swords instead. Then came word of our invasion, and finally of Friedhof's fall."

Those lucky enough to dwell in larger towns would have taken refuge behind their walls, while villagers would have fled en masse. With no one to take in the harvest, it remained in the fields, unclaimed.

"More proof of human inferiority." The aide scowled. "We would have defended this land with our lives."

"Oh, I cannot blame them," Claudia said. "It was the first time they had ever come face-to-face with death, no doubt, and they had the whole empire to flee to. Yet they may not find happiness in their new homes, alas. With time, they will come to realize what they have lost."

Regret—that was the word. It was the way of the world that people rarely appreciated what they had while they had it. Only once it was torn from them did they realize that they should have fought to keep it.

"Yet remorse sows no seeds," Claudia continued. "In time, they will forget they chose to run, and the pain of losing their homes will turn to anger with their rulers. And they will in part be justified. After all, it was the failures of the aristocracy that enabled this in the

first place.”

Rulers bore responsibility for their people’s happiness, or lack thereof. If the commonfolk ever had to flee their homes, the nobility had failed them.

Claudia sensed someone else drawing nearer as she gazed into the distance. Another of her aides was approaching. He stopped before her and laid a box of scrolls at her feet.

“Your Majesty,” he said, “the nobles of the surrounding provinces have offered their surrender.”

“You may tell them I accept.”

“Very good, Your Majesty.”

The man bowed his head and departed. In his place, a group of nobles from Lebering approached.

“A marvelous showing, Your Majesty,” one hailed her. “Lebering has claimed victory after victory.”

“Thanks in no small part to you.” Claudia inclined her head. “This conquest is as much yours as mine.”

“There is more land ripe for the taking to the west, Your Majesty. Do you truly mean to continue to the capital?”

“But of course. Aren’t you curious whether Surtr or the Demiurgos will emerge victorious?”

“Curious, certainly. Just not enough to risk my life.”

The noble and his fellows looked skeptical of the question, and with good reason. They might as well have been asked whether they would like to see two wild beasts fight from close range.

Claudia covered a giggle with her hand. “Your honesty is appreciated. But I expect their battle will be done by the time we arrive.”

“Then what would we have to gain by going?”

“Why, the security of our new lands, of course. If the Demiurgos wins, we will need a buffer zone between us and him, and if the empire prevails, we will want to begin negotiations as quickly as possible. The prisoners we have taken ought to win us some favorable concessions.”

Claudia had taken everyone who opposed her prisoner. Initially, she had hoped to recruit the best of them to her own cause, but as

it turned out, people stubborn enough to oppose the zlosta invasion did not change their allegiance easily. A change of approach was in order. If the empire won the coming war, it would need human talent to fuel its own reconstruction, in which case her hostages would become valuable indeed. That was a big "if," of course, but it could potentially pay off handsomely.

"Indeed." The noble nodded. "You truly have thought of everything."

"I do have other reasons," Claudia said, "but those are the most important."

"Then we shall prepare to march."

"If you would be so kind."

As the nobles departed, Claudia turned back to the wheat field.

"To have made such beauty mine and yet hunger for more... The ambition in my zlosta blood, perhaps."

She set off. Her queensguard followed in silence behind her, keeping a respectful distance. Eventually, she came to the shack where the imperial nobles were being held. The sentries opened the door to reveal a host of men bound with ropes—the officers and commanders who had risked their lives to defy her. They glared at her resentfully as she approached.

"What do you want, queen of the zlosta? Have you come to mock us?"

The man who addressed her was among the first she had taken prisoner—one of the brave few who had led the first doomed charge against her.

Claudia turned to him. "Von Dartolf, was it?"

"What of it?"

"Will you not consider serving Lebering? I could use more retainers as loyal as you."

"Never."

Claudia nodded, taking von Dartolf's refusal in stride. "May I ask why not?"

"My loyalty lies with the Grantzian Empire. I would sooner die than betray my homeland."

"And what is your loyalty worth when the empire is beset by

enemies on all sides? If your country falls, you will have nothing."

"Then I will die and be done with it."

"Tell me, then," she said. "Why would such a loyal man side with House Brommel?"

"Because I owe them a debt."

Claudia giggled. "How admirable. Is there anything more irksome than an honest man?" She raised a hand. "Very well. You will make as good an example as any. Take him outside."

Her queensguard sprang to action, hauling the struggling von Dartolf to his feet and frog-marching him through the door. Claudia followed them out, turning a deaf ear to the other prisoners' wails of protest.

"Set him down among the wheat," she demanded. "He could hope for no better place to die."

The soldiers complied, throwing von Dartolf down among the golden grain.

"My thanks for that, at least," he grunted. "To die upon the soil of home will speed my way to Valhalla."

"Have you made your peace with death?" Claudia asked.

Even as her blade pressed against his neck, he stared back up at her, unafraid. "Do what you mean to do. The moment you took me prisoner, I knew I was a dead man."

"Good."

Claudia raised the blade and let it fall. With a soft *snick*, von Dartolf's bindings fell away. He stared dumbly at the scraps of rope on the ground. Finally, he looked up at Claudia with suspicion.

"What is the meaning of this?"

In lieu of an answer, Claudia held out a letter. "Deliver this for me, if you would be so kind."

"Excuse me?"

"Find King Surtr of Baum and give him this letter." She crouched down and pressed the envelope into his chest. With the wheat to shield them, her queensguard would not see the exchange. "Do take a hint, won't you? Now go before you're seen."

"I don't understand. Why would you have me deliver anything to Surtr?"

Claudia smiled. “Because the zlosta are born from the Demiurgos.”

She glanced around, then leaned in to elaborate. Von Dartolf’s eyes grew a little wider with every word she spoke.

*

As upheaval swirled over Aletia, change had also come to the north. The rebel army of House Brommel and the righteous forces of House Scharm had sat down to negotiate. A rudimentary tent had been erected between the two opposing forces, but even the most ignorant observer would have been able to sense the awkwardness within. The reason was simple: The heads of both houses were absent. House Scharm was represented by Herma von Heimdall, with his sister Phroditus at his side. Opposite them sat a sour-faced man named Seicht, a distant relation of House Brommel.

“Typhos von Brommel is absent, I take it?” Herma asked.

Seicht mopped his dripping forehead. “I can only apologize. None can say where he has gone. But if I am not mistaken, can the same not be said of His Highness the Second Prince?”

“Indeed. His Highness has left in pursuit of our true foe.”

“Your...true foe?” Seicht looked faintly incredulous.

Herma could hardly fault the man for his bewilderment, but he had no time to explain. He laid a letter on the table. “This arrived this morning from His Highness. What do you suppose he said?”

A flicker of annoyance entered Seicht’s voice. “I could not possibly guess.”

Herma smiled wickedly. “He claims that Typhos von Brommel is an imposter.”

“That cannot be. Who sold him that preposterous idea?” Swelling with anger, Seicht snatched the letter and read it through.

Herma gritted his teeth to see the second prince’s words treated so callously. While Seicht did not seem to notice, Herma’s anger abated as he saw him grow paler and paler as he read.

Eventually, Seicht flung the letter down and shook his head. “Surely you cannot believe this!” he cried, sending spittle across the

table. “This is absurd. I have broken bread with Lord von Brommel many times!”

Herma frowned. “His Highness describes somebody of very different appearance to Lord von Brommel. Did you simply not notice?”

“Of course I...” Seicht trailed off, frowning. Either he suspected Herma was trying to mislead him or he was beginning to doubt his own recollection. In either case, it was clear that neither he nor House Brommel had the will to fight any longer.

“Forgive me for interrupting while you’re thinking,” Herma said, “but I would ask House Brommel to withdraw. I trust you have no objections?”

“None. Given the circumstances, I appreciate the offer.” Seicht’s shoulders slumped. “We can hardly keep up the fight in Lord Typhos’s absence.”

Herma smiled triumphantly. “You do seem to have a shortage of allies, it’s true.”

As the battle had ground to a stalemate, Herma had spread word of Typhos von Brommel’s absence among the enemy lines, hoping to drive a wedge between House Brommel and its collaborators. The latter had been reluctant allies at best, and messengers had soon begun to arrive inquiring after Second Prince Selene. Phroditus, disguised as Selene, had accepted their apologies, prompting a wave of defections. It had not been long before Seicht had proposed peace talks.

“If I may,” Seicht ventured, “what does His Highness intend for House Brommel?”

“Your crimes will be forgiven. He judges it to be a failure on his part that the nobles of the north grew so discontent.”

Seicht breathed a sigh of relief. “That is...generous.”

“He will not be so lenient a second time.” Herma found himself having to hold his tongue. “If you ever turn against him again, there will be no negotiation, only the sword.”

“Consider me duly warned. But His Highness need not worry.” Seicht rested his head in his hands. “House Brommel is done for in any case.”

Even Herma felt a pang of sympathy at that. House Brommel had turned against their masters only to make a poor account of themselves on the field. Now, their allies had deserted them and their leader was missing in action. As readily as they had rebelled, they had failed to win hearts and minds. Their future was not a promising one.

Just then, he recalled the second letter he had received from Selene. He had not thought it was important enough to show, but a particular line plucked at his memory.

"Are you familiar with Caelus, Lord Seicht? Perhaps you know it as the Leonine Sight?"

Seicht's brow wrinkled at the sudden change of topic, but he nodded. "As well as any imperial citizen. Emperor Artheus's arcane eyes, if I recall correctly? But that's nothing more than a silly tale. If the Leonine Sight truly existed, the empire would have fallen long ago, or at the very least, the throne would no longer belong to the house of Grantz."

"His Highness says otherwise. He believes an imposter used Caelus to deceive you into believing they were Typhos von Brommel. An imposter who was likely the Demiurgos."

Seicht stared back, slack-jawed. "The Demiurgos? Of the Lords of Heaven?"

Herma shrugged. "That does not erase your treachery, but it does lessen your responsibility. If you must answer to anyone, it is the soldiers you led to their deaths. Both of us have allowed this needless conflict to claim too many lives."

After a long moment, Seicht nodded. "I will do all I can to support their families."

"I am glad to hear it. Let that be the last word in this pointless war."

"Indeed." Seicht bowed low. "I shall give my regards to His Highness as soon as I am able."

He straightened himself to see Herma proffering a hand. As he took it, Herma yanked him closer with incredible strength. Seicht stiffened as Herma's eyes bored into him.

"Our battle may be over," Herma growled, "but there is much

work to be done."

"Wh-What do you mean?"

"You must be aware of the fall of Friedhof. You know as well as I do that monsters are pouring into the north. All across the region, refugees cry for aid, and I cannot save them alone."

"Of course. I will aid you to the best of my—"

Seicht had not even finished before Herma turned away.

"Time is no longer our ally. Come, Phroditus. Our lord needs us."

*

Fort Zerseldt, in the western territories

The shroud of night had settled over the land. Wild dogs howled in the distance. In the undergrowth, insects buzzed and chirped.

The fires of the encampment around the foot of Fort Zerseldt formed a beacon in the dark. With the decisive battle close at hand, the soldiers had been permitted a small amount of drink, which they downed with relish as they made merry with their comrades. Not all felt as optimistic as they behaved. Some were too anxious to eat. Some prayed to the Spirit King that they would survive the battle. Few of them were truly prepared to die, insofar as anyone could ever be. Yet death was a constant presence in war, and so they drank and caroused, trying to distract themselves from its shadow and chase the fear from their minds.

The commanders had convened inside the fort for a banquet. Rosa had arranged the event, hoping it would help the eastern and western nobles get better acquainted. Sharing a drink or two would not turn them into friends overnight—trust was not so easily built—but a little familiarity could go a long way on the battlefield, and she would take any opportunity she could to better her army's odds. Considering the threat of a night raid, she had kept the banquet modest, but it was lively nonetheless. Liz was drawing particular attention. There were no end of nobles hoping to give their regards to the presumptive heir to the throne.

At last, a break came in the pleasantries. "I thought that would never end..." Liz sighed.

It felt like she would never get used to these dreary formalities. For a long time, she had resigned herself to having to endure them for the rest of her life. Rosa had corrected her: In fact, the nobles were trying so hard to make a good impression now because she would be much harder to approach once she became empress. Liz had not missed the flicker of sympathy in her sister's eyes as she said that. For better or for worse, the throne was a lonely place. Still, she would not give up on her childhood dream. She would keep going, even in a world where monsters prowled and fiends stalked.

That said, all this smiling was straining her face.

"I think I need some fresh air."

Massaging her cheeks, she stole toward the door, hoping for a reprieve. On the way, she saw Scáthach being accosted by Aura. Aura's father had also joined the fray, and she watched as he thrust a copy of the Black Chronicle into Scáthach's chest. Her friend's nightmare still continued, it seemed. With a silent apology to Scáthach, she ducked into the crowd so Aura wouldn't spot her.

"Like father, like daughter...in more ways than one."

Aura had received the Black Chronicle from her father as a child, Liz recalled. It was seemingly his fault that she had taken to proselytizing the church of Mars. Only a true devotee would have gifted his daughter a copy of the Black Chronicle at an age when most girls would be playing with dolls. Not that Liz was in any position to judge, of course. At much the same age, she would have wanted a sword.

"Hm?"

As she moved through the crowd, she caught sight of Vias. The beastwoman fended off nobles with half-hearted formalities as she helped herself to food. True to the stereotype, she was opting exclusively for meat, with nary a vegetable to be seen. Eventually, she saw her chance, picked up a small plate, piled it high with food, and escaped through the same door Liz was making for. Seeing a chance to speak in private, Liz followed. She had a lot of questions for Vias.

The sentries looked horrified as she passed through the door, but she put a finger to her lips, and they turned away as if they had

seen nothing. She ran into more guards on patrol farther down the hallway. Their eyes widened and they moved to salute, but she checked them with a look, and a jut of her chin ordered them to continue on their rounds. They stood bolt upright and walked off, limbs stiff with surprise.

She continued after Vias, making sure to maintain a healthy distance. The beastwoman went up a flight of stairs and turned into a dingy passageway. Liz followed. Soon, she found her path blocked by an old wooden door that opened onto the roof. She tried to ease it open, but it caught on something and audibly creaked. She grimaced. She had taken so much care to avoid detection, only to fall at the final hurdle.

"You're welcome to join me," said Vias's voice. "There's no one else here."

Liz drew herself up and walked out with her head held high. She took a deep breath. A crisp winter chill flooded her lungs.

"The air's so much clearer out here!" she exclaimed.

Vias was perched on the battlements, attending to her plate of food. "Lady Rosa won't be pleased you're here without guards. Not to mention the uproar if the nobles realize you're missing."

"But I have a high general right here. You'll protect me, won't you? She can't complain about that. And the nobles are all busy with their greetings and how-do-you-dos. They won't even notice I'm gone."

"Maybe you should be a little more conscious of your station."

"But I am. Why do you think I snuck out?"

If Liz had stayed, her presence would have made the nobles too tense to eat. That was one of the reasons she had made a quiet exit. It would not have helped anyone to strain their nerves on the eve of a critical battle.

"So that was your intention." Vias smiled under the moonlight. It made for a strikingly beautiful sight. Her pale hair glowed silver, making her look almost ethereal. The only things marring her perfection were the grease stains around her mouth, but Liz thought better of mentioning them. If anything, that suited her better.

She hauled herself up onto the battlements and asked, "So what

brings you all the way up here?”

“I thought I’d eat under the stars. You can see them well from here. I have a soft spot for tall buildings. The sky feels closer.”

“I never took you for a romantic.”

Vias peered back, puzzled. “What do you mean by that?”

Liz sat down beside her. The beastwoman subtly slid her plate away, and Liz couldn’t help but smile. “Don’t worry. I wouldn’t deprive you.”

There was a guilty silence. “I just wanted to be safe.”

“You always did have a big appetite.”

“Best to eat while you can. You never know when your next meal might be.”

“So that’s why you kept stealing Hiro’s dinner.”

“He was a slow eater. It wouldn’t have been right to let his food get cold.”

“Say, Cerberus?”

“Yes?”

There was a beat, and then Vias froze as she realized what she had said.

Liz grinned like a child who had just succeeded at some mischief. “I knew it. From the moment I first saw you, I knew it.”

“I-I have no idea what you mean! I am Vias, not Cerberus...whoever that is! I-I mean, that does sound like a wonderful name...but it would be wasted on me, of course!”

She laughed weakly. It was hard to tell whether she was denying the accusation or quietly pleased with it, but her panic was unmistakable. She turned back to her plate with a vengeance, stuffing her mouth with food to stop herself from misspeaking again, but it was too late. What had been said could not be unsaid.



Not that the deception could ever have lasted long, of course. Liz had seen through Vias's disguise the moment they met. They were as good as sisters; the bond they shared ran too deep for a few months apart or a change of form to hide, and it pained Liz a little to see Vias deny it. Even if the beastwoman had her reasons, there was surely some way Liz could help. No, she decided, she would not let Vias ignore this. She would make her spit out *some* kind of admission*,* no matter what it took.

She reached out and grasped Vias by the chin. "Look at me, Cerberus. Look me in the eye—"

Too late, Liz remembered that Vias had shoveled a plateful of food into her mouth. As her cheeks squished inward, physics took its course. In an instant, the most beautiful face in Soleil was covered in half-chewed meat and grease.

It crossed Liz's mind that she only had herself to blame, but she had not quite developed the mental fortitude to admit that with good grace. She picked the scraps of meat off her face. A vein throbbed in her grease-smeared temple as she rounded on Vias.

"Oh dear." Her smile was chilling. "What am I going to do with you?"

"That wasn't my fault! It was you who—"

By all accounts, Vias was in the right, but she saw Liz's eyes flash and her protests died. Her shoulders slumped, and she sighed in defeat.

"How long have you known?"

"I had my suspicions the moment I saw your hair."

"That was what gave me away?"

"Remind me, I've been brushing your coat for how many years?"

Liz reached out and ruffled the beastwoman's hair. It was soft to the touch, although it did seem to have lost some of its luster. The moon was bright enough that Liz was certain that was more than just her imagination.

"Look, it's all mussed up. You haven't been taking care of it, haven't you?"

"I combed it."

"Badly, by the looks of it." Liz smiled triumphantly. "Did you think

you could fool me with this?”

Vias thumped the stonework in frustration. “If I’d known something so stupid would give me away, I would have put in more effort.”

Liz shrugged helplessly and reached out to stroke her hair again. “Come on. We grew up together. Did you really think I wouldn’t recognize my little sister?”

They had grown up surrounded by enemies, with only each other to rely on. They had not been able to speak in words, but they understood one another deeply even so. Just like real blood sisters, they could read one another’s minds as easily as breathing.

“My lady...” Vias whispered. She turned bashfully back to her plate, trying to hide the tears of joy glistening in her eyes.

Liz watched fondly. At last, a thought struck her, and she cocked her head. “So tell me, why *are* you human now?”

“It’s a long story.”

“That’s all right. We can talk while we eat...although on second thought, maybe you’ve had enough.”

Vias looked unamused. Liz might have been her mistress, but that didn’t mean she could limit her diet. What right did an elder sister have to tell a younger one what to eat? She was about to protest...until Liz’s next words shut her up.

“You need to slim down. You’re putting on weight.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Vias nodded meekly. She knew Liz was right. She had told herself she only felt sluggish because she hadn’t gotten used to her new form, but hearing the truth to her face shocked her straight. She set her plate down and turned back to Liz.

“Before I tell you what happened, I’d like to tell you a...” Vias stopped, seeing Liz peering at her curiously. “Are you listening to me?”

Liz smiled bashfully. “Don’t mind me. I was just thinking it was strange to finally hear you speak.”

“My lady...” Vias began, then caught herself. “I suppose I can’t blame you, but I would like you to pay attention.”

Liz prodded her with a finger. “No titles. Don’t you dare. Not while

we're alone."

"But..."

"Just hush and listen." Liz laid a prideful hand on her chest, which Vias couldn't help but notice had grown again. "I'm your big sister, I make the rules."

Vias stared back. She didn't quite understand why Liz needed to pull rank like that. "Very well. If you say so, my la—I mean...Liz."

"That's better. You know, this is like a dream come true for me. I'd always wished you could speak." Liz's eyes sparkled like a young girl confessing she wanted to be a princess when she grew up.

Vias scratched her cheek awkwardly with a finger. "As I was saying..."

"Oh, of course. Don't mind me."

"Do you remember how we first met?"

"Of course I do. Father took me with him on a visit to Baum, and we found you washed up on the shore, horribly wounded. We didn't know if you were going to make it. It was a miracle you pulled through."

Vias nodded in agreement. "That's the first thing I remember. I couldn't tell you at the time, but I'd lost my memory. I had no idea what I was doing there or why I was so badly hurt."

Yet as time had passed for her at the crimson-haired girl's side, her memories had begun to return. She gradually recalled who she was and what had happened to her.

"Would you believe me if I told you I died a thousand years ago?"

Liz gave a hesitant nod. "If you said so. Although I might not be completely convinced."

She was fully aware the world was more complex than she knew. Who was she to say what was and wasn't impossible? So it had been with Hiro, and so it was with Vias. Still, understanding was one thing; acceptance was another. The idea did not seem quite real, and perhaps it never would.

"I won't begrudge you that." Vias smiled, appreciating Liz's attempt to understand, before taking advantage of the opening to sneak a scrap of meat and continuing as if nothing had happened. "I was Meteia, the leader of the archpriestess's knight-priestesses and

one of Mars's Black Hand. I fell in battle during the great war."

She sounded apprehensive, acutely conscious of the weight of her admission, but Liz only nodded blithely.

Vias cocked her head, perplexed. "Do you not believe me?"

"No, that's not it. It's just...I think you'll always be Cerberus to me. I can't really see you any other way."

"I see..." Vias nodded, looking a little bashful.

Liz brought her hands together and lowered her head in apology. "I'm sorry. Does that annoy you?"

"No, it's all right. Think of me as you like."

"Are you sure?"

Vias nodded. "If anything, it might be for the best." Her eyes took on a distant look, and for just a second she regarded Liz a little sadly, but then the moment passed and the look was gone. "Every day after I regained my memories was an exercise in frustration. My body would not do what I wanted. I had none of my former strength. I was unable to protect those I cared about. I watched you suffer, and I could do nothing to help."

"That's not true. You helped me every day. I couldn't have kept going without you."

"You're too kind." Vias smiled. "Eventually, I regained the ability to return to human form for a time, and I decided to finally make myself useful. I owed you my life, after all. Still, I couldn't maintain the transformation forever, so I used the time I had to reach out to your father."

"Is that how you became a high general?"

Vias nodded. "For reasons best known to himself, he believed my story, but he still wanted me to prove my strength in combat. I wasn't the warrior I was in my prime, but I was still good enough to best von Grax. Your father was as good as his word, and I hoped to use my new position to aid you from the shadows, but...things proved more complicated than I expected."

Liz's peril had been more dire than she'd ever imagined. A power clash had unfolded between the royal family and House Krone. For reasons Vias had only later understood, Greiheit had sought to disown Stovell, which House Krone had tried to foil by taking Liz's

life. Liz had not yet been chosen by Lævateinn, and she had no means of defending herself from their assassins' blades. Unwilling to leave her in danger, Vias had chosen to stay by her side and protect her, at least until such time as she could take care of herself.

"Transforming wasn't as easy for me back then," she continued. "I reasoned I could get used to my new limitations while I waited for you to mature."

Ultimately, that time had never arrived. Liz's fortunes had never improved, and Vias had ended up staying by her side. Looking back now, however, that had been for the best. Learning why House Krone was so determined to kill Liz had proved an unexpected boon and given her another reason to stay with her mistress.

"But why were you able to change shape in the first place?" Liz asked.

"I have a theory about that."

"What is it?"

Vias looked down, her brow furrowing. She seemed to be debating whether to continue. When she looked back up, her eyes were steeled. "It has to do with Hiro."

Liz swallowed hard, in part because of the intensity in Vias's gaze, but mostly because she sensed she would not want to hear whatever was coming.

Vias looked at her sadly but knew she could not stop. "Did you never think he was oddly short for his age?"

"I suppose, but..."

From the moment they had met, Hiro had always looked the same—short for a man, but with gentle features that complimented his stature well, the polar opposite of the burly, broad-shouldered imperials. He was unlike any other man she had ever met. Perhaps that was why she had been drawn to him. His black hair and black eyes had reminded her of her idol, Mars, and before she knew it, she had found herself seeking glances of him wherever he went. That impression had only grown stronger since their sudden parting. Even now, three years on, he had hardly aged a day. It seemed he never changed. His kind heart, his soft features, his slight build—they all seemed immune to the passage of time.

“Is it not strange that he hasn’t grown a jot in three years?”

“I...”

He was the War God. An exception to every rule. He couldn’t be measured by other people’s standards. Or so she had told herself. She had ignored common sense to accept his unchanging form at face value—and she would do it again, proudly. Hiro was Hiro, no more, no less. Someone unique. Someone unlike any one else in the world.

“Liz...you need to know who he really is.”

She wanted to cover her ears, to block out Vias’s voice, but her body refused to obey.

Chapter 4: Lord of the Skies

Long, long ago, the skies were ruled by a great black dragon. The dragon's roar leveled mountains. His footsteps razed cities. His wingbeats scattered clouds. He was terror incarnate, a monarch without equal, and to defy him was to know death.

The people of the land feared the dragon. In their terror, they took up arms and sought to destroy the beast. The dragon heard of their expeditions and met them with merciless fury, devouring soldiers, leveling cities, and torching nations in retaliation. Many times the people tried, and many times they failed. At last, they set down their swords and knelt in worship. The black dragon became known as the Lord of the Skies and ruled as their god with terrible might, spreading his tyranny across the land.

Time passed, the ages turned, and the Lord of the Skies became Surtr, the Black-Winged Lord. The people grew to leave him in peace, and he in turn grew bored of them. He made his lair underground, deep beneath a ruined kingdom, and rarely emerged thereafter.

One day, a human boy ventured into the dragon's den. That moment marked the advent of a new age and the first step on the boy's path to lordship.

"So this is Surtr's den," Hiro breathed. The place had an unexpected beauty.

His knees trembled with apprehension. His soft-featured face, so gentle none could believe he would hurt a fly, was pale with fear. None could fault him. Few would have dared come alone to the stronghold of the imperious and terrible Surtr. Nonetheless, he had come too far to turn back now.

"I won't leave. Not until I have what I came for."

He had come to claim the strength he had dreamed of, the strength to safeguard those dear to him. Years of desperate pursuit

had led him to one conclusion: He had to take the dragon's power for his own.

He advanced cautiously down a stone passageway until he emerged into a larger space. The ceiling above was shrouded in darkness. The only light came from the torch in his hand, and the gloom beyond was a yawning abyss hungry to swallow him whole. He had little time to marvel at his surroundings, however. A distinctive chill ran down his spine. Something else was there with him.

He held up the torch. A great rock face loomed before him.

"A rare guest. And a human, at that."

The voice was a woman's, and it sounded out of place in the underground cavern. Its distinctive tones lingered in Hiro's ears, strange and unforgettable. He lifted his torch to see where it was coming from. A man was sitting atop the rock, gazing down. Hiro backed away in surprise, but the man did not seem concerned. He raised a hand in an amiable greeting.

"Hail, friend." He paused. "Well, now. You don't look lost."

He spoke with a woman's voice—the same one Hiro had just heard. Hearing a female voice from male lips was disorienting to say the least. Then again, why should he have expected to find anyone normal in this place? Ordinary people did not come here. There could be no mistake. This had to be Surtr, the Black-Winged Lord.

"Surprised, boy? Hah! Can't say I blame ya! Perverse, the Spirit King called me, if you can believe it. No accounting for taste, eh?"

The man rolled around on top of the rock, clutching his belly with laughter. Hiro didn't see what was so funny, but more to the point, he was beginning to wonder if he had made a mistake after all. This was a far cry from the fearsome dragon he had expected to find.

"Are you Surtr?" he asked.

"None other! And what brings a snot-nosed brat like you to my lair?"

Hiro forced his quivering knees to stand firm. "I'm here to kill you."

The laughter stopped, and the man sat up, scratching the back of his neck. He sighed. "You? Kill me? Hate to rain on your parade, but

we Lords can’t—”

“Can’t die?” Hiro’s voice grew firmer. “I know.”

Surtr leaped down from the rock and leaned in for a closer look. “So that’s the way of it, eh? Interesting...”

At once, his demeanor changed. The air groaned beneath a sudden weight. Hiro fell to one knee under the pressure. Sweat flowed from his every pore, trickling down his forehead and falling to the ground. Surtr had not so much as lifted a finger, and yet the sheer immensity of his presence was almost enough to make Hiro pass out.

“It is you...” Hiro whispered. “The Black-Winged Lord...”

He had trawled through countless tomes and journeyed to every corner of the world in search of knowledge about Surtr. Every source he had consulted mentioned one thing, without fail: To meet Surtr was to know death.

“The Desperation...”

The álfar spoke of Cornix, the Midnight Crow of the faerie tales. The southwest nations of Soleil claimed Cornix was another name for Varachiel, the god of death and destruction who would lead the world to ruin. And the basis for them all was the Black-Winged Lord, the man before Hiro now.

“Is this who you were hoping to meet, perhaps?”

The weight pressing down on Hiro was too great for him to answer, but Surtr seemed to take his silence as a yes. He let out a sigh and scratched the back of his head, scowling irritably.

“Who tipped you off about that, I wonder? Well, no matter. This power isn’t for you. Hurry on home, you little toe rag. I wouldn’t usually have let you live this long, but you’ve been lucky enough to amuse me.”

Suddenly, Hiro could move again. The pressure was gone. Yet while Surtr seemed willing to let him go, he had no intention of accepting the offer. He braced a hand on his knee and rose, black eyes glinting with determination.

Surtr sighed. “Gonna make me kill you, eh? Well, have it your way.”

In an instant, he vanished, and then his fist was bearing down on

Hiro's face. The world spun so wildly that Hiro could not tell what was up and what was down. Before he knew it, he was sprawled on the ground.

"Ngh... Gah!"

His cheek seemed to be burning. White-hot agony lanced through his stomach. Nausea overtook him and he retched, splattering the ground with vomit, but it did nothing to lessen the pain. Blood poured from a fist-sized hole in his abdomen.

"A hundred of you couldn't kill me, brat. You've got guts, I'll grant you that, and what good did it do you? Now you're dying in a pool of your own blood."

Surtr sat down cross-legged, planted an elbow on his knee, rested his chin on his hand, and watched coldly as Hiro writhed in pain. Before him, Hiro was no better than an infant, a helpless creature he could kill as easily as pulling the wings off a fly.

"I'm tired...of being weak..." Hiro gasped. "I have...to be stronger..."

He gritted his teeth against the pain and crawled hand over hand toward Surtr. Tears of humiliation flowed down his cheeks as his lips pulled into an agonized smile.

"My knowledge...isn't enough. Not anymore... I need strength. Power. Or I won't be able to save anyone. I'll just...hold them back..."

He reached out with a blood-slicked hand and grasped Surtr's ankle, glaring up at the man like a vengeful spirit. Seeing the obsession in his eyes, Surtr raised a single shapely eyebrow.

"What in hell's name have you done to yourself?"

At last, he noticed what he had so far overlooked: Hiro's veins ran thick with a curse of impossible potency. His face clouded with anger. He grasped Hiro by the lapels and hauled him upright, lifting him clean off the ground.

"Where did you get something like that?" he growled, squeezing Hiro's collar tight enough to cut off his airflow. "Not by yourself, I'll bet. You listening? That curse is strong enough to twist your very being. It's a miracle you're still alive, let alone sane. Well, maybe not all that sane. You must have a few screws loose, or you wouldn't

have ended up like this in the first place."

Hiro thrashed in midair, clutching at Surtr's arm. His grip was inhumanly strong, and the wound in his side had already closed. Surtr's suspicions turned to certainty.

"A human ain't got no business with that kind of power. What exactly are you after, brat?"

"Power," Hiro choked out. "I want to be stronger. Strong enough...to protect the people I care about..."

"And being a fiend ain't good enough?"

"Not nearly good enough." Hiro gritted his teeth, his eyes bloodshot. "I need...more..."

Surtr could not begin to imagine what had driven this boy to such lengths, but he could sense one thing: his desperation. Hiro had utterly lost faith in the world.

"And if you get it? What then?"

"I want... I want..."

To kill the Lords.

"Do you now?"

Surtr's grip relaxed. Suddenly, Hiro was free. He crashed down on his back, sending the air rushing from his lungs. For a moment, he couldn't breathe. By the time he caught his breath and looked back up, Surtr had gone.

"You're dedicated, brat, I'll give you that. Come for my head again if you ever feel inclined."

Hiro looked around, coughing. It did not take him long to trace the voice back to its source. Surtr was sitting cross-legged atop the great rock, just as he had been at the start. He leveled a finger at Hiro and grinned.

"But next time, come with drink."

And so Hiro met Surtr, one of the Lords of Heaven—a figure of unassailable power, worshipped and feared in equal measure, but for all that, a friendly and agreeable man.

"Time for me to keep my end of the bargain."

Hiro opened his eyes. Fog blanketed the horizon. He was two sel from Fort Caputo. Before him sprawled an armed host sixty thousand strong: the combined forces of the Crow Legion, Selene's

northern army, and the central nobles he had convinced to join his cause.

The monsters' exact numbers were still vague, but the scouts estimated one hundred sixty thousand, although that figure would likely grow. More filtered down from the northern territories by the day, flocking to the Demiurgos's command. At the current rate, they would exceed two hundred thousand once all was said and done. They howled and roared in the distance, proclaiming for all to hear that victory would be theirs. It was fortunate that the fog hid them from sight, dulling their impact on the defenders.

"Do you hear me? At last, all will be one." He patted the chest of the Black Camellia and turned to the sky with a wistful look. "It's been a long, long road."

He had been walking on a tightrope for so long, scheming for all he was worth just to keep himself from falling. His designs had caused much suffering, and he had cut down many foes with his own hands. Not an inch of him was left unstained by blood. He had been scorned, despised, driven to his wits' end. More than once, he had thought to leave it all behind. Yet that was not an option. From the moment they first met, he had known his only choice was to fight.

"This battle will mark the end of the old world." He spread his arms wide. "And the birth of the new."

Horns blasted from all around. The army shuddered into motion, the rumble of their feet an earthquake that shook the ground. Wordless cries erupted from their midst, a ritual of sorts to help them set their humanity aside and awaken the beast within. That was good. It would add to their momentum.

He nodded in approval. "That will do."

Garda stepped up behind him. "Our spies put them at one hundred sixty thousand, One-Eyed Dragon. We have but sixty, and more of them trickle south as we speak." The zlosta looked uneasy. "Drag this out and we will lose."

Hiro nodded, unconcerned. "I can fix those odds. What would you say to halving their numbers?"

He drew Dáinsleif from his belt. The blade of the Abyssal

Sovereign gleamed darker than darkness. With the black blade in his hand and the Black Camellia on his shoulders, he looked like a piece of purest night.

"Shed your skins for sharper claws."

He leveled Dáinsleif at the Demiurgos beyond the fog. The battlefield fell silent, a sight at once eerie yet natural. Every soldier watched him intently. He was about to send them into mortal combat. What he said next might be the most important words they would ever hear, yet there was no fear in their eyes as they listened with bated breath.

"Though outnumbered, stand undaunted."

He did not raise his voice, but they heard him all the same. The air itself guided his words to their ears, a gentle breath that took them in thrall.

"For the king's legion are champions all."

A surge of elation overtook them. With his orders in their ears, their hearts were one.

"Bring me victory."

Morale soared, easily enough to overturn their numerical disadvantage. Horns blared. The troops advanced, beating their swords against their shields as they marched into the fog. The monsters were still nowhere to be seen, but Hiro already had his next move planned.

"Garda, send out the cavalry waiting at the back of the left flank."

"Very well."

Garda raised a hand. A standard went up, and a drum began to beat. Motion rippled through the left flank as the cavalry raced forward. Around the same time, the vanguard halted its advance and roared battle cries, trying to goad the monsters.

The cavalry disappeared into the fog. There soon came shouting and sounds of battle. Before long, the riders reemerged in retreat.

"They've been bloodied. Must have run into an ambush." Garda stroked his chin. "To be expected, perhaps, charging in blind."

The deaths were regrettable, but they would not be in vain. As planned, a swarm of monsters came charging out of the fog in pursuit of the cavalry. Hiro faced the fore and raised his arm.

“Ready arrows.”

Farther back, a bank of archers trained their aim on the charging monsters. Fire wavered on the tips of their arrows. They drew their bows back to the limit, muscles bulging as they awaited the signal to shoot, but Hiro did not give the order just yet. He needed to draw the enemy closer still.

The archers watched in horror as the backmost riders were dragged from their horses and slain, but they could not start the attack without their commander’s permission. One hasty arrow could lose the battle. They would have been just as helpless if it had been their own family slaughtered before their eyes. All they could do was pray—pray, and hope the order would come soon.

Finally, banners went up on both of the first cohort’s flanks. Hiro swung his arm down.

“Fire!”

A deluge of burning arrows took flight, piercing the fog. The monsters were too focused on their prey to see the cloud bearing down on them. It fanned out and thundered down. The arrows looked no bigger than sparks from afar, tiny motes of light descending through the mist—and then one struck the ground, then another and another, and pillars of flame erupted where they landed. The wind swept the fire out, turning it into a wall high enough to scrape the sky.

“That should take care of about twenty thousand.”

The wall of flame cut the monsters’ forces in two, isolating those nearest. Shrieks of alarm rose from their ranks, but it bought them no mercy from Hiro. He commanded the first cohort to deliver the charge that would serve as the killing blow.

“Now our numbers are even. Maybe even in our favor. And I’ll make the most of it.”

Under Huginn and Muninn’s command, the first cohort set about cutting down the monsters as they fled the flames. Any semblance of order in their ranks had vanished. The human troops’ coordination more than made up for their individual weakness, overwhelming the monsters with ease.

“Reinforcements will come once the fire dies down. We have to

finish them before that happens. Garda, if you would?”

The zlosta gave the order, and five thousand cavalry charged forth from the flanks. With heavily armed soldiers pressing in from the front and an inferno raging behind them, the monsters had begun to spill out laterally, but the riders crashed into them from both sides, boxing them in.

“Leave the first cohort in place. All the rest, fall back.”

Hiro dispatched orders quickly and precisely, and his troops obeyed without question. The wall of fire was dying down now, and the monsters behind were starting to break through.

“Do you think they’re mourning their comrades?” he wondered aloud.

“Not likely,” Garda grunted. “I doubt they know the meaning of the word.”

Despite the zlosta’s words, the monsters did seem agitated by the sight of their allies’ corpses, but it only made them better targets. They grew even more furious as the archers unleashed a volley of arrows, but the ensuing confusion only worsened their losses.

“That’s enough. Bring the first cohort back. Slowly.”

At Hiro’s order, the first cohort slowly retreated. With the encirclement broken, the monsters regained their momentum and launched themselves at the withdrawing imperial troops, but they were uncoordinated. The front and rear of their forces began to separate. The wall of fire had all but died down now, but it had served its purpose well enough, leaving a large gap between the monsters’ vanguard and the larger force behind.

“Good. Now we’ll push back a little.”

The first cohort halted. The heavies dug their shields into the ground, bracing for the incoming charge. The monsters plowed headlong into the imperial line—and in the instant before contact, spears sprouted from between the shields to run them through. Yet rather than take the chance to go on the offensive, the first cohort resumed their withdrawal. The monsters’ fury grew to see them back away from the fight.

“Now for a less dignified retreat.”

Hiro signaled again. A drum beat several times. This time, the

soldiers cast down their shields and broke formation, fleeing as fast as their legs would carry them. It looked no different from a rout. Anyone, human or monster, would have given chase. The monsters pursued, caring nothing for the rain of arrows. Sensing victory in their grasp, they pounced on the first cohort's straggling rearguard, desperate to be the first to feed.

A second explosion shook the earth. Again, the battlefield erupted with flame. A nightmare unfolded, plunging the monsters into terror. All the while, arrows rained down as the sea of fire swallowed them whole. The stench of burning flesh filled the air.

Hiro wrinkled his nose as he watched the battle unfold. "Tell the second cohort to advance and slaughter any survivors," he said to an aide. "And order the first cohort to reform. Send the messengers at once." He turned to Garda. "That wouldn't have worked on a human army. Luckily for us, monsters are less intelligent and easier to provoke."

The monsters' vanguard had been all but annihilated, and the second cohort would make short work of what stragglers remained. The survivors would put up little resistance. The second fire trap had destroyed any hope of reinforcements. All that awaited them was death.

"I see no yaldabaoth." Garda peered at the front lines, frowning in suspicion. "Nor archons, come to that."

Hiro paused in the middle of his next set of commands. "They aren't committing their best troops yet. They're still testing us."

Just as he was testing them. This was only the prelude. It wasn't yet time to play his hand. He had placed Huginn and Muninn on the vanguard to inspire the troops, but he was keeping Garda, Selene, and the bulk of his strength in reserve. The one exception was Luka, who had insisted on accompanying Huginn to the fray to shield her from danger, but she would never have listened to him anyway. For the most part, he could not afford to risk losing all his most valuable resources at once. This battle was a long way from over. He would need to carefully observe how it evolved.

"This will be a long fight," Garda remarked.

Hiro shrugged and looked up at the sky. "The fate of the empire

is hanging in the balance."

He looked back down at the field, plumbing his memories of campaigns past for useful ideas.

*

"Remarkable."

The Demiurgos watched as his front line burned, snared in the enemy's trap. The imperial cavalry had come charging out of the fog, using the limited visibility to conceal their approach. His forces had driven them back, but they had grown a little too bloodthirsty for their own good, and many had perished in the first firestorm. As the flames died down, the monsters trapped behind had ventured forward to rescue the vanguard, only to be overcome by outrage when they found their comrades slaughtered, prompting them to charge at the imperial lines. The second fire trap had caught them unawares, wiping out the rest of the Demiurgos's first cohort.

That second blaze was still burning. On the other side, the human forces were butchering the stragglers. The Demiurgos could not see through the flames, but the shrieks that split the clouds painted a vivid enough picture of what was happening.

Khimaira knelt with his forehead pressed to the ground. "Forgive me, my Lord. I did not see Mars's scheme. My foolishness has cost your army dearly."

The Demiurgos looked down indifferently from his chair. "I am not angry with you, Khimaira. Reinforcements will come. The loss of twenty or thirty thousand will not harm our cause. I must marvel, however, that in one thousand years, you have not learned how to win a battle."

"Give me one more chance to prove myself, I beg you. I swear I will bring you the War God's head."

"I don't care for empty promises. Tell me, why do you think you fell for this trap?"

Khimaira bit his lip bitterly. "I was found lacking, my Lord."

"You were, but there was more to it than that."

The Demiurgos settled back in his seat as the screams of burning

monsters washed over him. The chair was a uniquely macabre artifact, made out of human skin and bone. He rapped one of the skulls that served as armrests with his fist.

"The War God knows us almost as well as we know ourselves. He loves his childish tricks, but he is accomplished at deception, and he is at his boldest when he plots against his allies as well as his enemies. He knows when to be firm and when to be flexible, bending as the battle demands. With the wind at his back, there is no stopping him."

Khimaira looked puzzled. "When he plots against his allies, my Lord?"

"The second fire trap, Khimaira. Did you not notice? Our troops were not the only ones caught in the blaze." A rare smile flickered across the Demiurgos's face. "The first eruption was a trifling thing compared to the second. I felt its fury from where I sit now. No doubt there were some among the retreaters whom he hoped would die in the blast."

"And what of his allies? Will they not lose faith in him to see him kill their own?"

"He took care to place himself above scrutiny."

Two things had happened in the imperial lines between the two explosions. First, the initial fire trap had been weak enough to achieve its purpose with no imperial casualties, encouraging the War God's intended targets to let down their guard. Secondly, the first cohort had been ordered to cast aside their arms and break formation during their final flight, leaving them more vulnerable to the second explosion. No doubt the War God had ensured his enemies were buried among many dead. Perhaps their comrades would assume they had been too slow to flee, or perhaps Surtr planned to spread the rumor that they had fallen in combat. It would have been more difficult to evade blame if his strategy had failed, but now that he had secured an early victory, no one would question his methods.

"Now," the Demiurgos mused, "who was it who said people show their true worth in death?"

There was nothing so terrifying as an enemy commander willing

to sacrifice their own. Every living creature was born with a capacity for empathy that ought to give them pause, but Surtr, it seemed, was an exception. He did not hesitate to let others die if it suited him.

"And he will turn his silver tongue on the grieving families, no doubt. He will offer them comfort, blunt their anger, and turn them into his loyal pawns in turn." The Demiurgos sighed. "A foe as ruthless as he will not be bested with half measures. Try to match his schemes and we will find ourselves caught in them."

"But we must defeat him somehow," Khimaira insisted. "I beg you, let me direct the offense."

"You are too eager, Khimaira. Remember, you must overcome more than just his schemes."

The War God's strategies were formidable enough, but there was another reason he had driven the zlosta to ruin one thousand years ago. When combined with his tactical acumen, it made him nigh impossible to defeat in battle.

"You speak of Uranos," Khimaira said. "The power to perceive the flow of all things."

The Demiurgos nodded. "Recall how troublesome it proved one thousand years ago." He gestured to the primozlosta's hollow eye sockets. "A bitter memory, no doubt, given how cruelly you were robbed."

No scheme or stratagem could fool Uranos. The Empyreal Sight pierced through any scheme with ease. It was truly an eye worthy of the Black-Winged Lord, the greatest of all living beings.

"Uranos is made to read the field. Its talents are wasted on single combat. Only here, in the grand theater of war, does it truly shine."

Ceryneia had been content to remain silent, but now he stepped forward to join the exchange. "What would you have us do? If we ride forth now, we may yet salvage this engagement."

The Demiurgos raised an exasperated hand. "There was a reason I did not commit the archons and the yaldabaoth to the fray. I expected this from Surtr. Common monsters are dull-witted things, blindly following the strongest of their kind, fleeing when their lives are threatened. He saw their shortcomings and exploited them." He

surveyed the battlefield, snorting as his gaze halted on the smoldering corpses. “Tell me, what may humans do to monsters but not to one another?”

Khimaira lowered his head sheepishly. “I do not know, my Lord.”

The Demiurgos did not reprimand him but continued indifferently. “They may kill without remorse. No one mourns the deaths of monsters. No hearts break to see their bodies burn. Monsters are a threat to human livelihoods, and so their lives have less value than household pets—and the less human they appear, the truer that holds.”

“And so you kept the more humanoid monsters in reserve until the time was right.”

“No. I would not shirk from using any tool to my advantage. I am much like Surtr in that respect. You disappoint me, Khimaira. A thousand years, and still you know so little of me.” He waved the primozlosta away as if shooing off a dog. “Enough. Return to your post. You have command of the archons and the yaldabaoth. Use them as you see fit.”

“Are you certain, my Lord?”

“You promised me Surtr’s head, did you not? Prove your words are more than empty bluster...but know that if you fail, Ceryneia will take your place.”

“I will reward your faith, my Lord. Victory shall be yours!”

As Khimaira stood, delighted, Ceryneia stepped closer.

“So what is your plan? We cannot afford to fail a second time.”

“You will not be needed. This battle has only just begun. I will win it for us yet.” Khimaira flashed a confident grin. “The humans believe they have the upper hand. I will turn their own momentum against them.”

He signaled to the standard-bearer. A banner went up, dyed deep red with human blood. The third cohort—composed chiefly of the more humanoid yaldabaoth and archons—ground into motion. The first cohort had been routed by Surtr’s fire trap and the second was still in chaos, but the third marched over their bodies toward the imperial lines.

“Our Lord’s words have shown me the path to victory. Surtr may

be fearsome in single combat, but this battle is a clash of armies. If his forces see they face creatures much like themselves, their resolve will falter and they will hesitate."

Even as Khimaira spoke, the third cohort crashed into the imperial line. Several hundred lives vanished in an instant, almost all of them human. Archons and yaldabaoth were far stronger than ordinary men, even if they had not succeeded in becoming fiends. Yet as the melee progressed, Khimaira began to pale.

Ceryneia cast his fellow primozlosta a sympathetic glance. "The tide is turning, it seems."

"But why? I do not understand..."

"You were too hasty, Khimaira. Our forces stand on poor ground." The Demiurgos sighed in disappointment. "You sent them to fight atop oil and corpses."

"But must our foes not do the same?"

"They have positioned themselves precisely upon firm footing. All before them is mire. As our forces approach, they slow and separate. By the time those behind reach the battle, those in front have already perished."

Although Khimaira's failure had placed the battle in further jeopardy, the Demiurgos did not seem concerned. Not only had his voice grown more animated, his face sported the rarest expression of all—a smile.

"A simple trick," he said, raising a hand to the battlefield, "but ingenious nonetheless."

"Child's play for the War God," Ceryneia remarked.

The Demiurgos nodded. "And inconceivable for Khimaira."

"My Lord...!"

Khimaira reflexively protested, only to cut himself off and fling himself down upon the ground. After disgracing himself a second time, he had forfeited all right to object. He pressed his head to the ground as if offering his neck for a blade.

"My life is yours to take, my Lord."

The Demiurgos's voice was soft. "Keep it."

Khimaira raised his head in astonishment, overjoyed at the reprieve, but the blood drained from his face as he realized the

Demiurgos was not even looking at him. The Lord's eyes were fixed on the battlefield. He did not understand. He had dedicated a thousand years of his life to serving the Demiurgos, easily long enough to tell what he was thinking, and yet the Lord hardly even appeared to realize he was there. He truly did not seem to care whether Khimaira lived or died.

The primozlosta paled as despair overcame him. "M-My Lord, I..."

Ceryneia moved to comfort Khimaira but was forced to content himself with a sympathetic hand on his shoulder as the Demiurgos cut him short.

"Command is yours, Ceryneia. You know what must be done, I trust."

"I will make use of our greatest strength, my Lord. Why bandy strategies with our foes when we could crush them beneath our superior numbers? The War God's tricks will mean nothing in the face of overwhelming might."

"And what is your answer for Uranos?"

"It is said that Mars has never known defeat. But one might also say that Uranos has only guided him to battles he could win."

The Demiurgos snorted. "Indeed. A promising start. Lead my forces as you see fit."

"As you wish, my Lord."

The Demiurgos did not reply. He kept staring at the battlefield, reaching out to close a fist around where he imagined Hiro lay.

"Come, War God. Entertain me."

It was then that Ceryneia noticed Khimaira was gone. The Demiurgos did not even note the primozlosta's absence. As for the past thousand years, his eyes were for one person and one alone.

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Black shadows appeared in the sky as the sun climbed higher. A flock of crows descended on the plain, drawn by the stench of blood. They found a veritable paradise. Scraps of flesh littered the grass, and for every corpse they picked clean, two more fell to the earth. The only caveat was that they could not eat in peace. The ground

began to shudder. Sensing danger, they took flight, and not a moment too soon, as their former perches vanished beneath countless feet. Yet before long, the soldiers who had disturbed their feast fell with tongues forever stilled, more carrion for the birds.

The clash between Hiro's forces and the Demiurgos's horde of monsters was growing ever fiercer. There were so many corpses on the front line that there was hardly anywhere left to stand. Soldiers trampled their fallen comrades underfoot as they charged toward the foe, swallowing their grief as they cried for vengeance. Those who still lived did not have the luxury of respecting the dead. It was all they could do not to join them. They turned their fear into battle cries, letting their thoughts fill with home as they brought everything they had to bear against their enemies—and since time immemorial, commanders had watched from afar as they sent such warriors to their deaths.

Alarm ran through the imperial core as the front line began to falter. The monsters' numbers were starting to tell. Their vigor was bottomless, and it gradually pushed the human forces back. The imperial army had kept the bulk of its troops in reserve, but only because they would be needed later. Its commanders were reluctant to commit them when the battle had just begun, but if nothing was done, the front line would collapse.

"That fire trap evened the odds for a time," Garda remarked, "but their strength is starting to show."

Hiro nodded. There was no point pretending otherwise. Anyone could see their forces were being beaten back.

"I agree. Letting this go on any longer will hurt morale."

He whistled for his swiftdrake. The reptilian beast quickly answered the call, skidding to a stop in front of him. Garda and the rest fetched their mounts and readied for battle.

"We need to repair the front line," Hiro said as he swung his leg over his swiftdrake's back. "Call the second cohort back and send the first to replace them. They should have reformed by now."

Garda brought his horse closer. "If you like, but what of the third cohort? They've yet to draw steel. Seems to me they'd do a better job."

"It's not time yet. If we tire them out now, we'll regret it later."

"If we lose the battle here, there won't be a later."

Hiro grinned. "That's why we're going to help."

He patted his swiftdrake's neck, and she took off with incredible speed, leaving Garda and the Crow Legion scrambling to follow in his wake.

The party moved through the ranks toward the battle. As they overtook the freshly reformed first cohort, Hiro spied Huginn and Muninn issuing commands to their troops. He thought he caught a glimpse of Luka too, but his mount was moving too fast to tell.

At last, they reached the embattled second cohort. The back lines were littered with casualties carried from the battlefront. They sped past the groaning wounded toward the melee. The imperial soldiers were putting up a valiant fight, but their ranks were in disarray and their formation had all but dissolved. The front line was moments from collapsing. Still, Hiro and his allies had made it in time. The battle could be salvaged before their morale broke.

Hiro let go of his swiftdrake's reins, drew Dáinsleif from his belt, and leaped into the fray. Before him, an ogul was engaging the imperial forces. The black blade sheared its head from its body with a single stroke. Blood sprayed skyward as the monster thudded to the ground.

"Now that takes me back," Hiro said. "You remind me of that first journey over Mount Himmel."

Several more oguls turned toward him, alerted by the fall of their comrade. Their mouths glistened with the blood of half-eaten corpses.

Oguls were pack monsters by nature, recognizable by broad, ugly faces, necks thicker than Hiro's waist, and distended bellies. Their bulbous, bloodshot eyes struck fear into their foes. Yellowed teeth protruded from the human viscera that filled their gaping mouths. Once human, they had been chased from their villages after angering the spirits and being transformed into hideous creatures, and they assuaged their resentment by feasting on human flesh, or so the records held. They were rarely found in imperial lands, typically forming colonies far from civilization...and they were often

led by larger monsters.

Hiro looked up as a shadow fell over him. An ogre stood before him, tall enough to cast the oguls in its shade. Spontaneously appearing among oguls, ogres were more intelligent than their brethren—a talent they usually applied to catch humans and eat them alive.

"Get out of my way or prepare to die."

Hiro thrust his empty hand out to the side. A rent appeared in the air, and a gleaming hilt emerged. Silver light spilled forth, coloring the world with a fantastical scene. Flakes of snow—no, motes of light—glittering particles spiraled down from the sky. They did not set like snow but burst as they touched the ground, and their remnants converged on Hiro as he drew a shining blade from the rift.

He braced his foot against the ground and vanished from sight.

The ogre looked around dumbly. Yet while it could no longer see Hiro, he was not gone. Oguls toppled where he had passed, slain before they hit the ground. Bewildered by the situation but outraged by their deaths, the ogre swung its fists about with wild abandon. It had no chance of hitting its target, but the imperial soldiers backed away, struck with fear by its brute strength.

As the monster beat the ground apart in its search, Hiro reappeared with a mocking smile. "I'm right here."

He stood nonchalantly atop a fallen ogul, prodding its swollen belly with his foot.

"Look, nice and soft. It would make a good springboard, don't you think?"

With a howl, the ogre charged toward him, but it did not get far. A bolt of lightning caught it square in the chest. With a thunderous boom, it exploded, quite literally blown apart. Nothing remained but a smoking crater and scraps of smoldering flesh.

The soldiers turned to Hiro, astonishment written on their faces. Standing alone, surrounded by corpses, he was a breathtaking sight. At last, the silence gave way to cheers. His presence alone dominated the field, given weight by his unassailable strength, and while he spoke little, his deeds were inspiring enough. This victory

alone would not decide the battle, but its effects would ripple out. Cheers spread through the ranks. Seeing him cut the oguls down so effortlessly had shaken the troops out of their stupor and restored their will to fight. Nothing inspired a soldier like their commander coming to their rescue.

"But there's still more to do."

The front line needed to be repaired. It had twisted and buckled in the fighting, and there was no telling when it might break. Slaying the ogre had relieved the pressure on this portion, but other parts were still in jeopardy. Only once these cheers resounded across the full breadth of the battlefield would the danger pass.

Hiro took off once more, a streak of dark and light sprinting to the next engagement. He cut down every monster in his way, reaping their lives with unerring, decisive strikes. It was not long before his foes took notice of the carnage he was wreaking. Monsters began to converge around him.

"Take care, One-Eyed Dragon," Garda called. "You've drawn their attention."

The zlosta had finally caught up. He drew his sword and hopped down to earth, chest heaving.

"That's the plan," Hiro said. "If they send their best at me, everyone else can breathe a little easier."

Monsters sprang at him, but he cut them down with nonchalant slashes. Blood washed over him as he strode across the field. As soon as he slew one foe, he moved on to the next. Eventually, the enemy reacted accordingly. The common monsters fell back, and more humanoid creatures stepped forth. He recognized them at once as yaldabaoth—the most human of all monsters, distinguished only by the strange markings that covered their bodies. A pack of corpse-eating archons followed in their wake.

A tall man stepped forward from the throng. "You must be the renowned Surtr. You may call me Eins."

Unlike his peers, his markings were carved into his flesh. He stood naked from the waist up, with only a tattered loincloth to protect his modesty, and he carried a blunt weapon carved from human bones.

“You’re as barbaric as I heard you would be,” Hiro replied.

Asking whether the yaldabaoth was cold seemed pointless. Eins radiated stifling heat. Sweat and encrusted blood evaporated from the gaunt man’s skin, filling the air with a pungent stench.

“Still, you can speak. You’re smarter than the rest.”

Just as only a handful of humans could truly be called exceptional, the same was true of yaldabaoth. In their society, the strongest ruled, but there were many on the lower rungs who were less intelligent and incapable of speech. Nonetheless, even the weakest yaldabaoth was far more powerful than an ordinary human—and more than their match in combat.

“Our speech marks us as intelligent beings,” Eins said. “Conquerors of our trial. Just as you are, brother.”

The yaldabaoth, too, had once been human. One thousand years ago, the people of Soleil had learned to crush and refine spirit stones into a medicine they called “spirit elixir.” Curses flowed in the veins of those who imbibed it, lending them great power, but at a terrible price. To fail the trial was death, and most of those who passed transformed into mindless monsters, strong of arm but dull of wits. The people of the past had called those malformed creatures “Fallen.”

Hiro had encountered two Fallen to date: Reihil, the eldest son of Duke Lichtein, and Stovell, the first prince of the empire. Reihil’s transformation had been the mindless sort, but Stovell had become something closer to a yaldabaoth.

“That trial never did anyone any good,” Hiro said. “Not even me.”

“Such modesty. Father thinks the world of you.” Eins’s gaze grew insistent. “His first and last success, he calls you. Far greater a fiend than we could ever be. The first to become the fell divinity Loki and approach Lordship.”

Hiro gave a disinterested shrug. “Should I be flattered?”

He suddenly vanished from sight. Eins barely had time to register surprise before blood sprayed from his neck. He clamped a hand to the wound, but it continued to pour through his fingers. Lightheadedness overcame him and he staggered, but he managed to keep his footing.

"A cowardly strike."

"We're at war. As long as you win, anything goes." Excalibur's light grew fiercer, and a deeper darkness poured forth from Dáinsleif. Hiro smiled at the yaldabaoth as the night engulfed them. "Now shut up and die."

Again, he disappeared. Eins's arm spun from his body, and he howled in rage, but Hiro did not answer the taunt. Slash after slash scored Eins's skin.

"You craven creature! You cannot be Father's perfect being!"

Eins's arm regrew in a matter of seconds. His regenerative powers were astounding. Yet even a Fallen's blessing could not outpace Hiro's assault. A storm of steel descended on him, severing his limbs, carving apart his back, laying open his belly. Overwhelming power sliced him to ribbons before he had time to cry out. Blood and flesh rained down on the surrounding terrain. Yet even then, the storm did not abate. Corpses piled high as it expanded to engulf the surrounding monsters. And as the terrible spectacle unfolded, someone whispered:

"The Desperation is upon us."

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The disc of the sun dipped below the horizon. Night was pressing in. The Demiurgos cast one final look at the tattered front line before turning to the loyal servant at his side.

"It would seem that numbers, too, were insufficient."

Ceryneia flinched. He had hoped to redeem Khimaira's failures by overrunning the imperial army with brute force, but despite a promising start, the enemy line still held. Even committing a squadron of yaldabaoth had not turned the tide. In short, he too had failed.

"As you say, my Lord. Our foes stand firm."

The Demiurgos did not look especially concerned. Another commander might have taken out his frustration on Ceryneia or else offered words of consolation, but he seemed utterly indifferent. His eyes were empty. It was as if he barely registered the battle at all.

Ceryneia continued nonetheless. “This is only the first day. The humans will tire. Only time will reveal the true course of this battle.”

“Then I shall hope for a better showing tomorrow.” The Demiurgos fell silent for a moment. “How many dead?”

“Approximately sixty thousand, my Lord.”

Most of the casualties had been the result of Surtr’s fire trap, but nonetheless, such losses would have crippled a human army. It was a stroke of luck that monsters did not have morale to maintain—they followed whoever filled their bellies. Left to their own devices, they would wander wherever their whims took them. They had no concept of a common cause, and it was only through strength that the Demiurgos had managed to unify them into something resembling an army.

“That would have spelled our doom during the great war,” the Demiurgos mused. “It is fortunate that we lead different soldiers now.”

Had their troops been zlosta instead, they would not have been able to continue the fight. Indeed, that was what had happened one thousand years ago: Their armies had been routed, the proud glory of the zlosta had fallen to ruin, and the twelve primozlosta had been hounded down, all at the hands of Mars. Ceryneia’s lip twisted at the thought that their hated foe stood in their way once again.

“Reports indicate that Surtr has been sighted on the front line, my Lord.”

“So I see. Their vanguard was on the point of breaking, but all at once, it rallied. Only he would have thought to respond so.”

“Forgive me, but it seems Eins has perished in the melee.”

Believing the precarious state of the imperial forces presented a chance to take Surtr’s head, Ceryneia had sent the yaldabaoth into the fray. His error had cost the Demiurgos’s forces a valuable asset, and he was well aware that it might be his last mistake.

“Has he indeed.”

The Demiurgos surveyed the field impassively. He did not look especially dismayed by the news. A ragged hole in the front line marked where Surtr was wreaking havoc. No one could stop him now, any more than they could stop a flood or an earthquake. His

very presence cast those around him into the abyss of death.

"To be expected, perhaps," the Demiurgos murmured. "My many failures cannot compare with my only success."

His praise for Surtr vanished into the wind, doomed never to reach the ears of the one it extolled. Ceryneia could only sigh. The Lord cared nothing for his servants' failures or his children's deaths, but he rejoiced at the achievements of the boy who was supposed to be his enemy. His thoughts were a mystery. For the first time in one thousand years of service, Ceryneia felt a flicker of doubt.

"I would suggest diverting the yaldabaoth to the flanks," he said. "They cannot hope to prevail against the storm."

"And abandon the center?"

"That will pose no problem, my Lord. The sun will soon set, and humans cannot see in the dark. They will fall back."

"Do you mean to attempt a night raid?" The Demiurgos's implication was plain: *Try to regain your honor and you will fail a second time.*

Ceryneia shook his head. "Our soldiers are not given to stealth, my Lord. We will keep the enemy awake throughout the night with battle cries, sapping their strength and morale."

"And so it ends," the Demiurgos murmured.

Ceryneia did not understand what he meant by that, but he could only bow his head and obey.

Chapter 5: The Warmaiden

The Vanir Triumvirate consisted of three countries: the Knightdom of Nala, the Monastic Order of Kwasir, and the Vanaheim Theocracy. It was founded after the álfar crossed from the western continent to the land that would become Vanaheim, joining hands with its indigenous people to build an independent nation. Other races who found common cause with them were given lands of their own, which became Nala and Kwasir.

As all three nations of the Triumvirate were devoted to the Faerie King, they had no such thing as a monarch. "No mortal may stand above the gods, and there is but one god in the heavens," as the speaker for the Faerie King said upon Vanaheim's founding. Instead, they selected a Holy Emperor, an earthly representative of the Faerie King, who ruled from Vanaheim's capital city of Vanr. The Faerie King was said to dwell within the central cathedral of Vana Vis, a magnificent structure built by the finest artists and artisans of its age.

On the coast to the northeast of Vanr lay the port city of Sissur. It was the largest port in the Triumvirate and the second largest in Soleil, second only to the capital of Greif. Its bristling jetties were invariably lined with ships bearing goods from all over Aletia. Most ports were lawless places, but here, the stately rule of the álfar maintained order. Even the rowdiest of sailors knew better than to defy Vanaheim, and so Sissur was known as an unusually peaceable place to dock. The álfar's influence extended over the town as well: The air was calm, the storefronts tranquil, and the people sedate. Sissur was where the álfar made contact with other cultures, and it made a point of emphasizing their elegance.

Now, however, the city was far from calm. Only a few hours prior, several dozen sailing ships had appeared beyond the harbor. They flew various flags—a cunning serpent, a proud gryphon, a fox, a

tiger, a goat—identifying them as belonging to Six Kingdoms, the nation across the strait. Ostensibly, Six Kingdoms and Vanaheim were allies, but when the governor of Sissur had sent out messengers, they had returned without heads. The governor had grown furious and dispatched the city's fleet. That fleet now lay at the bottom of the harbor.

As Six Kingdoms' troops made landfall, the governor had requested a meeting with Queen Lucia to beg for clemency. She had granted his request, only to clap him in irons and behead him in front of his people. The cries of outrage at her barbarism had soon turned to screams as her soldiers turned their swords and spears on the city garrison. The people panicked, and any who resisted were mercilessly cut down. In a matter of hours, the idyllic port city of Sissur descended into carnage.

Now, Lucia watched impassively as the chaos unfolded. Beside her, Seleucus cocked his head as fire consumed the buildings, set unnoticed during the fighting and now spreading unchecked.

"Was this necessary, Your Majesty?" he asked. "I seem to recall most of our nobles were opposed to war."

"Because they fear defeat, Seleucus. They know nothing but álfar rule, so they lack the confidence to stand on their own feet."

"I remember many insisting we ought to focus on internal affairs instead. Their point, it seemed, was that we have more than one way to fight."

"Let them say what they wish. Stop now and we shall win nothing."

"They make a reasonable case, Your Majesty. We have internal strife aplenty. More petitions arrive on your desk by the day. The soldiers and commonfolk are tired of war."

"Then tell them this." Lucia snapped her fan shut and brought the end to her mouth, smiling. "If they take issue with my course, they may strike out on their own."

"You would have me tell them all this, Your Majesty?"

"This world is built on conflict. Conflicts as large as wars between nations and as small as squabbles between people. It is a part of who we are. If they take issue with that, let them flee into the wilds

and live out their days as hermits."

Seleucus smiled ruefully, scratching his cheek. "Ever the harsh taskmistress."

Lucia narrowed her eyes. "Others are too lenient, Seleucus. Fiends aplenty stalk this world, and they prey first upon the naive. History attests that the virtuous die young."

She rose from her chair and flicked open her fan. The southwest of Soleil was already oppressively hot, but the heat from the burning buildings made the wind stifling. With an irritable scowl, she brushed a lock of sweat-slicked hair from her cheek.

"Rulers kill with warfare. Politicians kill with policy. Clergymen kill with words. Soldiers kill with arms. Commonfolk kill with numbers. That much is true wherever one may go. Wherever people live, people shall die at one another's hands."

"Not everybody is so ruthless, Your Majesty. Surely some sent petitions for virtuous reasons..." Seleucus trailed off doubtfully.

It was hard to blame him. Most of the nobles who had made requests of Lucia had simply been trying to preserve their own stations. If any were truly well-meaning, they had been drowned out by the rest and appeared no different from their selfish peers. If they truly wanted their proposals heard, the only way was to shout the loudest.

"I value my life, Seleucus. I shall not curtail my ambitions for the good of others. 'Tis why I still choose to fight. Let the record show that I lived the life I chose, at the expense of others if I had to. If that means I must stand atop a hill of corpses, so be it."

She watched as her forces descended into pillaging, narrowing her eyes at the sound of screams. How ugly humans were when given free rein to pursue their desires.

"I shall not have brigands marching beneath my banner. Make an example of those men. Let them feed the flames they have spread."

"At once, Your Majesty."

Suppressing reason in favor of animal instinct was a useful talent, but someone who cast aside their humanity entirely could never regain it.

"Nonetheless," Lucia mused, "I would not say no to fattening my

own coffers."

"Shall we levy tribute from the city nobles, Your Majesty?"

"Why trouble ourselves? Once I take their nation, all their treasures shall be mine." She snapped her fan shut and lifted an arm toward the distant shape of Vanr. "Let us leave this tawdry dock behind. We make for the holy ground of the álfar."

With those words, the invasion of Vanaheim began in earnest.

*

Liz opened her eyes. A field of flowers unfolded before her, a sea of colorful blossoms swaying on the breeze. A sense of peace took root in her heart as clear air filled her lungs.

This was a dream, she knew. She had been here once before. Besides, the real world lay in the grip of winter. This spring warmth had no place there.

She set off through the flowers. No matter how far she walked, she saw no end to them. Their beauty filled her vision in every direction, stretching as far as the eye could see.

At last, she came to a stop. Before her sat a woman, blonde-haired and blue-eyed, with skin like porcelain and features fine enough to bring a sigh to anyone's lips. Her beauty was truly unrivaled. The finest painters in Aletia could have worked their whole lives without capturing a sight as sublime as her amid the flowers.

The álfen woman's turquoise eyes turned as she registered Liz's presence, and a smile came to her lips. Liz felt a fist close around her heart. Even she was not immune to this woman's charms. She had surely bewitched a great many men in her time. No doubt her victims would have gladly laid down their lives if she only gave the order.

"It's been a while," Liz said.

The woman nodded, pleased to see her. "I've been waiting."

Liz had hoped they would meet again someday, but she had never found a way to return to this flower field. It seemed barred to her unless this woman called for her.

“Thank you for bringing me here,” she said. “I wanted to see this place again.”

“Do I not frighten you?”

“Not at all. Well, maybe a little at first, but after a while, I figured out who you must be.”

She had always thought the woman’s face looked familiar, and her visit to the statues of the Divines in the capital had removed all doubt, even if Straea’s interruption had kept her from taking a closer look. The statue had captured nothing of the woman’s beauty or kindness, but it had carried enough of her likeness to tell they were the same person. This was Rey, the first archpriestess—the Valditte of the imperial pantheon and a legendary figure who had fought alongside Mars and Artheus during the age of strife. And now, in the present age...

“Besides,” Liz said, “why would I be frightened of myself?”

Rey’s eyes widened, and Liz knew she had hit the mark. She smiled ruefully.



Ever since they first met, she had wondered why the Valditte lived within her. It was only after meeting Hiro again that she had hit upon the answer. He looked at her differently now that she was grown, with a mixture of fondness and sorrow. Her new eyes had made his pain clear to see. Cerberus, however, had been the one to clinch it. She had admitted to being Meteia, the captain of Rey's guard, and yet she treated Liz with the same deference that she owed her former mistress. She was easy to read, Liz thought. Perhaps a little easier than befitting a high general.

"So why did you call me here?" she asked.

"If you are aware of what connects us," Rey replied, "there is something else I must say first." It seemed she had never intended to reveal her true identity. She furrowed her brow, seemingly thinking how best to revise her approach.

Liz cocked her head. "It's all right. Start wherever you like."

"That would leave you doubting yourself needlessly. It would not be fair." Rey shook her head, then laid a hand on Liz's chest. "Even now, you wonder if these feelings are truly yours and not Rey's. Is that not so?"

Liz looked away awkwardly. The woman had her dead to rights.

Rey's lashes lowered sadly. "As I suspected. But I assure you, nothing could be further from the truth."

"What do you mean?"

"Your heart and mine are not the same. Frankly, I find the suggestion insulting."

"Insulting?"

Rey nodded, laying a proud hand on her chest. "I love him far more passionately."

Liz looked perplexed. She did not quite know what to say. Was Rey joking? Did she mean it? A moment passed, and Liz started to wonder if she was overthinking things, but then she saw the earnestness in Rey's eyes and knew she was not.

"You are you," Rey continued, "just as I am me. We may share a soul, but it is you who lends it color."

She radiated sincerity. Every word was true; Liz could sense it.

"Do not doubt yourself. These feelings are yours—birthed by you,

earned by you, shaped by you. Yours and yours alone."

At last, Liz saw Rey's true character. She had to wonder if she could have said the same thing in the álf's place. If she had seen her own reborn self fall in love with the same man, could she have maintained the same distance? The answer was no, she knew. It would have been too difficult to acknowledge her reborn self's independence, too painful to suppress her own emotions. She would have spoken those fatal words: *Your feelings are mine too.* She would have seized the chance to convey the feelings she had never been able to speak aloud, treating her reborn self as a tool in the process.

How strong Rey must have been to resist. How tragic it was that she had to. She had sacrificed her own desires for the greater good just as much as Hiro had. Surely it was all right to show her a little kindness.

"Then I'll tell him for the both of us." Liz squeezed Rey's hand and smiled. "Maybe my heart is mine and your heart is yours, but that doesn't mean I can just ignore you. You live on inside me. That means you're a part of me."

"But...that would mean..."

"Not another word. I've said I'll do it, and that's that."

Rey looked Liz dead in the eyes. A moment passed, and then she looked down, letting slip a quavering thank-you. Her voice was so soft that the wind snatched it away as soon as it left her mouth, but there was no mistaking its warmth.

Liz took the woman by the shoulders and pulled her close. A single tear trickled down her cheek. For a while, they stood in silence.

Suddenly, Rey jerked her head up to look at the sky. Liz followed her gaze. For the first time, she saw the colossal gateway looming large over their heads.

"What *is* that?"

She had seen it twice before—once when she had encountered the faceless man on the throne, and again when she had first met Rey here. She frowned up at it. What was it, and what did it mean?

Rey seized her shoulders, suddenly hurried. "Listen to me. There

is something very important I must tell you."

A note of urgency filled her voice. Liz realized the flower field was fading away. Grass swirled around them. Petals scattered on the wind. Above their heads, the sky fell in, and the great wooden gate came rushing toward them. Her body was as heavy as lead. Her senses felt oddly distant. Rey was right in front of her, shouting, but she could barely hear her voice.

"The Spirit King... You must not—"

Everything went white. Liz shot to her feet, and...

"What?"

She looked around to see walls of white canvas. A scattering of weapons stood in one corner. A clatter sounded behind her, and she turned to see her chair lying on its back. A desk stood before her, stacked high with reports. As her senses returned, she realized where she was.

Her head was pounding. She took a sip of water and started to pace, massaging her temple.

"Falling asleep at my desk. I really must be tired..."

The headache was dreadful, but at least it had come with a pleasant dream. At long last, she had gotten to see Rey again. Her only regret was that she hadn't been able to make out the álf's final words. They had seemed vitally important, but now that the dream had faded, there was no way to know what they might have been.

"I'll just have to ask her the next time I get the chance."

There was no telling when—or even if—they would meet again, but Liz deliberately filed that problem away for later. She had much bigger things to worry about now.

She ducked through the tent flap and emerged into dazzling morning sunshine. The sky was a clear, refreshing blue. The sun had chosen to rule alone today, banishing the clouds from its presence as it showered its bounties upon the people of Soleil.

"Did you sleep well?" a dainty voice asked.

Liz turned to see the petite figure of Aura. Around them, aides hurried to and fro. They were in the middle of the imperial camp. She looked back to see the tent she had just emerged from—a modest affair, decorated with banners bearing the imperial lion and

Liz's own lily crest.

Aura's stare was burning into her back. She turned back around with a rueful smile.

"I drifted off in the middle of the meeting, didn't I?"

"Do you know how hard it was to explain that away?"

"I'm sorry. Really."

She bowed her head, pressing her hands together in remorse. Falling asleep in a strategy meeting was unacceptable for anyone, especially with the threat of the Triumvirate so pressing. Still, with apologies to Aura, it was hard to feel bad about it. Liz didn't enjoy the prospect of her wrath, but it was an acceptable trade for meeting Rey again. The reunion had left her heart warm and at peace.

It was the fifth day of the twelfth month of Imperial Year 1026. The ninety thousand soldiers of her army had set up camp three sel from Fort Zerseldt. Across the field, the one hundred twenty thousand soldiers of the álfar stood in solemn ranks, waiting in silence for the battle to begin. Their uniform white armor made for an intimidating sight in comparison to the imperial forces.

"I hear they call themselves the Red Legions," Liz said.

It was said that the white armor grew red with the blood of their enemies. The more heretics they slew, the deeper the hue and the greater the Faerie King's favor, or so tradition held. Yet the Triumvirate maintained such firm control over the southwest of Soleil that their armies rarely went to war. Rumor had it that, with no other opportunities to dye their armor, the álfar resorted to brutalizing bandits to maintain standing in their honor-based society. Some theorized that the name "Red Legions" arose not from their beliefs, but from their wanton bloodshed.

"Their morale is high. They won't go down easily."

There was no more tenacious opponent in all of Soleil than an army of álfar led by the Holy Emperor. With the Faerie King's earthly representative at their head, their morale would never fall. Their command might even factor their willingness to fight to the death into their tactics. Divine inspiration could overturn the most disadvantageous of odds.

"Still, I'd like to think we're just as motivated and just as well trained." Liz turned to her diminutive strategist. "Will it all come down to numbers, do you think?"

Aura's leaden gray eyes shifted from the enemy lines to her. "That's the most important factor in battle, how many soldiers you can field."

"I see." Liz nodded. "Then we'll just have to fight hard enough to make up the difference."

Aura looked unimpressed. "Lots of factors make a victory. It's not just about trying hard."

"But if you don't try at all, you're done for. And victory smiles on the side that does their best, don't you think?"

"Just because you sound convincing..." Aura looked faintly impressed despite herself. "That'll be your job, then. Keeping morale up." She turned back to the plain where battle would be joined, her eyes taking on a distant look. "I'm not like you. I'm not a leader. I'm not talented enough to impress a Spiritblade. I don't think before I speak, and it makes people angry. I have flaws. A lot of them. A lot more than most people."

"Aura?" Liz looked at her friend, a little alarmed. She had never known that Aura harbored such doubts. What was more, they were unfounded. Not a leader? The Knights of the Royal Black had worshipped her like a saint. And while she did sometimes fail to think before she spoke, all the townsfolk of the capital and half of the nobles at court would have agreed that was a charming trait.

She moved to object, but Aura laid a finger on her lips before she could speak. The message was clear: *Let me finish.*

As Liz looked perplexed, Aura pulled a book out from inside her uniform. It was the same book that never left her side—the same one she took it everywhere she went, even laying it by her pillow as she slept. The Black Chronicle, the history of the War God's life.

"Before, I was nothing." Aura's voice took on an edge of pride. "But now, I have this." She smiled, a rare flicker of emotion on her typically stony face.

The idea that she was not a leader seemed more ridiculous than ever to Liz. Aura had the most compelling smile in all of Soleil. If

Hiro had been there, he would have said the same thing.

"And if I'm going to call myself the Warmaiden, I should live up to my name."

Aura had been named the Warmaiden for her lifelong inspiration, the War God himself. The name was her greatest pride, the crux of her very being. This was hardly fair, Liz thought. How could she object now, faced with such a warm smile and such an earnest heart? All she could think was that she needed to protect this girl—to defend her smile, her passion, her everything by any means she could.

"I believe in you." Liz smiled. "Who knows? Maybe you'll even surpass the War God."

"Never." Aura looked suddenly humorless. "Not in a thousand years."

Liz felt a little abashed. She had only wanted to offer encouragement, but Aura obviously hadn't appreciated the remark.

"Read the Black Chronicle. You'll see just how special he was. I could never—" Aura cut herself off and hugged the book to her chest, looking up at Liz through her lashes. "Never mind. I take it back. I will. Just watch me."

Thank goodness, Liz thought. They were of the same mind after all. And if Aura's determination burned that brightly, it was only right that hers did the same.

"We'll put on a show for the history books," she said.

Aura nodded.

Just then, a messenger approached Aura. "All units are in position, my lady," he reported.

Aura reverted to her usual stern expression, looking over the field with piercing eyes. "Good. Tell them to wait for my signal."

"At once, my lady."

With her resolve renewed, Liz returned her attention to the Triumvirate lines. "Is that the flowing formation?"

Aura nodded. "A constant assault on the enemy lines. Perfect for overwhelming an enemy with numbers."

The flowing formation was one of Schwartz's Eight Formations. The first three cohorts and the units that followed all deployed in a

diagonal line, thick and sturdy like a stack of parchment.

"It's easy to change into the dragon-wing formation too," Aura continued. "We'll have to be careful they don't surround us."

The dragon-wing formation, recognizable by its retracted core and extended flanks, was meant for encircling the enemy. Aura made switching between the two sound simple, but it was anything but. Pulling off such a maneuver in the heat of battle would take an exceptional commander.

"Whatever they choose, they're looking to use their numbers."

"And you're sure the half-moon formation is the answer?"

The half-moon formation was another of Schwartz's Eight Formations. It placed the core in the middle of the vanguard with the flanks falling back on either side, luring the enemy in. It was in the center, where Liz was, that the fiercest fighting would take place. That would expose her to danger, of course, but it also had its advantages. Her presence on the front line would inspire the troops, and the enemy would quail at the sight of a Spiritblade's chosen.

"They outnumber us. It would be stupid to fight on their terms. Our best chance is to surprise them. Besides, I want them to attack. There's something I need to test."

Aura had already deployed Scáthach to the left flank, Vias to the right, and Rosa to the rear. It was hard to imagine what else she could want to test, but Liz felt confident that they could overturn the difference in numbers.

"I hope we can finish this quickly," she said, turning away from the field to gaze at the horizon. "I need to get to the capital."

Aura saw where she was looking, laid a hand on her chest, and sighed. "Liz."

"Yes?"

"Trust me. I'll make sure you get to Hiro. I promise."

It wasn't like Aura to declare victory before the battle had begun. On top of that, the capital was a long way away—certainly more than a few days' travel, especially with an army in tow. Yet her confidence seemed unshakable. What could Liz do but trust in her strategist? Let events unfold as they may. She would do all she could and content herself with that.

She narrowed her eyes at the enemy lines, determination burning in her crimson irises. “All right. Let’s win this war.”

*

“And so the empire makes its move.”

Straea watched the enemy lines intently. The blasts of the imperial horns echoed across the field. She could see why other nations called their powerful notes “the royal voice.”

“All is ready, Your Holiness,” her aide said.

“Very good. Then let us meet them.”

“As you command.”

The aide gave the signal. Horns began to blare, clearer and more melodic than their imperial counterparts. While the imperial forces used drums to keep a marching rhythm, the Triumvirate’s troops advanced in solemn silence. Other nations supposedly considered them unsettling, marching soundlessly with helmets over their faces. That discomfort was not unfounded. The warriors of the álfar found honor in bathing in the blood of their enemies. There were few more tenacious opponents in all of Soleil.

“They’ve taken up the half-moon formation,” one of Straea’s aides observed. “A bold approach against a larger foe.”

Straea laid a hand on her chin and shrugged. “They cannot afford to have both fewer numbers and lower morale. I imagine they hope placing their commander on the front line will maintain the latter.”

The aide nodded. “A strategy hinging on the Crimson Princess and her Spiritblade.”

“But is there more to it, I wonder? I understand that the Warmaiden commands their forces.”

If the famed Aphrodite hoped to punch through the Triumvirate’s center with Lævateinn, she was more naive than Straea had given her credit for. The álfar had come prepared for just such a ploy. Yet given the numerical disparity, it was hard to imagine what else the empire could be planning. Their only chance was to split the Triumvirate down the middle, isolating the two halves from one another and picking them off one by one. All the same, Straea knew

she underestimated the Warmaiden at her peril.

"Ah, the Warmaiden," the aide said. "Trust an imperial to style herself after the Cornix."

The War God was reviled as an evil deity in the Vanir Triumvirate. Supposedly, he would bring about the end of the world. The aide could not resist scowling in contempt at the idea of taking such an unlucky creature's name.

Straea nodded. "Then today we shall shatter a myth. Command the first cohort to charge, beginning with the left flank."

"At once, Your Holiness. Let us show the empire the Faerie King's judgment."

The flowing formation was like a surging river, and its crashing waves would break through the strongest defenses as surely as a flood. Just as the enemy thought they had weathered one, the next would break over them, and the water level would steadily rise until their walls crumbled away. First contact, however, was key. It was vital that the initial charge found purchase on the enemy's right flank. To that end, Straea had entrusted the Triumvirate's left flank to Verona of the Free Folk. If she could open so much as a crack in the imperial line, the Triumvirate's victory would be certain. The rest of the battle would be a simple matter of waiting as the repeated blows of the flowing formation shook the imperial defenses apart.

"Behold, dear Elizabeth. The end of the empire is nigh." Straea turned to the horizon. Beyond, far in the distance, lay the capital. "No matter who prevails upon this field, it can no longer be saved."

She could only hope Liz realized the futility of her cause. With any luck, she would cease this meaningless resistance, bow down, and offer forth her head.

"The house of Grantz will be eradicated and its cursed bloodline finally put to rest."

Her smile widened as she stretched out a hand to the center of the imperial line, where her sister surely waited.

*

"Their left flank is charging, my lady!" Aura's aide cried.

Aura turned in the saddle just in time to see a mass of flesh and metal barrel into the empire's right flank, trailing a cloud of dust. A thunderous crash shook her eardrums. The pit of her stomach reverberated with roars and battle cries. She did not think she would ever get used to this feeling—to the heady mix of exhilaration and fear that was peculiar to the battlefield.

"They're coming in waves, my lady! First their left flank, then their center, then their right!"

"Understood."

This was far from Aura's first battle, but she had never faced the flowing formation. She had developed countermeasures in theory, but whether they would work in practice was another question, and one upon which the empire's victory hinged. For now, however, everything had gone as she'd predicted. The enemy were trying to leverage their superior numbers to smash a hole in the imperial line. Accordingly, Aura had assigned the right flank, the expected site of first contact, to High General Vias.

"How is the right flank doing?"

"High General Vias is holding back the charge!"

"Good. Send a messenger to Lady Celia Estrella in the center. Tell her she doesn't need to push back yet, just hold the line."

"At once, my lady!"

Aura glanced at the vanguard, but she was too far away to make out Liz in their midst. Still, she was not concerned for her safety. She had faith Liz could hold her own.

As the ripple of the impact on the right flank passed over her position, the Triumvirate's troops struck the center. She did not see them hit the left flank too, but she heard it in the clashing of steel echoing from all sides. Countless soldiers had already perished on this battlefield, and hundreds more would die for every new order she gave, but that was the price of the plan she had crafted. All she could do for the fallen was seize victory so their deaths would not be vain.

"Their second cohort is advancing!" another aide reported.

"Send messengers to all units. Tell them to hold the line."

The man bowed forcefully and sped away without another word.

Ordering a unit to hold the line in battle was tantamount to ordering them to die. It carried no encouragement or promise of reinforcements, only a command to fight until they fell. But the true terror of the flowing formation had only just begun. As soon as the first wave broke, the next would crash down, and that in turn would give way to an all-consuming flood. Their walls would crumble, and the torrent would sweep all the way to the capital. That had to be avoided, no matter the cost.

Even as Aura watched, the Triumvirate's second cohort crashed into the imperial center. The wall was already webbed with cracks, and she could see the water seeping in.

"Where is their third cohort?"

"Charging as we speak, my lady."

"The moment they make contact, send the signal to Lady Celia Estrella. Tell her to fall back."

"Is that wise, my lady?" The aide looked uneasy. "The Triumvirate has a great deal of momentum. If our center falls back, the entire front line may collapse."

"Do it. It's our only chance." Aura's tone made it clear the matter was not up for debate.

The aide looked like he wanted to protest, but he bit his lip and pounded his fist against the earth. "It will be done, my lady!"

Aura took a deep breath. The battle was approaching its critical point, and no one could predict how the dice would fall. She knew only that everything hinged on the center. If it held, the day would be theirs. If it broke, all would be lost.

She caught sight of enemy troops through the press and drew her spirit weapon. The impact of the Triumvirate's third cohort had widened the cracks in the imperial defense into gaping holes, through which álfen troops were pouring as far as the imperial core. Liz was presumably still fighting, but they had simply circled around her—proof that one woman could not win a war alone, no matter how strong she was. Even Liz would not be able to salvage the battle if the core fell. It was up to Aura to hold the line now. It was up to her to make sure Liz had a place to come home to.

"My lady!" one of her guard cried. "You must—"

The man's blood splattered across Aura's face. Through dripping red, she watched the álf who had cut him down close in and raise his sword again. She forced her knees to stand firm and lunged forward with a wordless cry, swinging her sword with all the strength her slender arms could muster.

"Yah!"

The álf knocked her blade aside. The impact rang though her arm, but she gritted her teeth and held on. As long as her arm still worked, she would not let go of her sword.

Over and over, they traded blows. Seeing Aura swinging wildly like a child with a stick, the álf grew more confident. He began to avoid her strikes with shifts of weight rather than deigning to block. Aura bit her lip in shame, but she knew this was as far as her skills could take her. What else should she have expected? It was she who had ventured onto the battlefield when she could barely wield a sword. If she wanted to get the better of this arrogant álf, she would have to use her wits.

She pretended to stumble and fall. As the álf followed her down, she picked up a handful of dirt and flung it into his eyes, sending him reeling back. She swung and laid open the back of his hand—far from a lethal wound, but the álfar believed they were superior to humans, and it stung his pride. His strikes grew clumsy with rage. At last, his blade caught on the ground. Aura saw her chance and thrust with all her might. She braced her foot against the earth and forged forward, forward, ever forward...and the blade slid cleanly into the álf's chest. Blood sprayed over her face.

The álf sank to the ground. Aura wiped the blood from her sword and raised it high, bellowing as loud as her lungs could manage:

"Hold the line, children of Mars!"

Ever since the day her father gifted her the Black Chronicle, Mars had been her one and only hero. All her life, she had dreamed of being just like him, striding across the battlefield, sword in hand as she led her soldiers to victory. Yet as she grew older, reality had set in. She did not have his talent with the blade or the strength to compel people to her cause. Eventually, she had found a suitable excuse to stop practicing. She was too short. Too weak. Whatever

she learned would only go to waste. It was foolish, she told herself, to chase a dream that would never come true.

And yet...when was it, she wondered, that she had begun to question whether she really should have given up?

"Fight for your families! Fight for your homes!"

Of course. That was it. It was when she'd met Hiro. The black-haired boy had been a mystery in many respects, but his determination was beyond question. Once he set his mind to something, he would not bend. He was surely striving toward some new ambition even now, pursuing his dreams no matter how dearly it cost him. That was why she had been so drawn to him in the first place. He was so very much like Mars.

"Win this day for the War God!"

For so long, she had chased his shadow. For so long, she had watched him sacrifice himself at every turn, no matter how much pain it caused him. And she, in turn, had learned something: just how painful it could be to go unnoticed by the person she admired most.

"Win this day for our Crimson Princess!"

So she had sworn to better him. To overtake and surpass him. No matter what it took, she would not stop until he stood in her shadow. That moment was close at hand now, and she would not let it slip away. She would marshal every last scrap of genius she possessed to make it real...and once she had, she would turn back and tell him what was truly in her heart.

"Win this day and your names will echo in Valhalla!"

A hush fell over the ranks. Her troops turned to her in surprise. None of them had thought they would ever hear such a passionate voice from her throat. There was a moment of silence, and then morale exploded. With a mighty roar, the imperial troops began to drive the álfar back.

"Victory! Victory to the Warmaiden!"

Aura watched them proudly, shoulders heaving, as they took up the cry across the field. Just then, she spotted an approaching aide in the corner of her eye.

"The troops have been driven back far, my lady," he said. "They

can’t take much more.”

“Send word to the rearguard. Tell Chancellor Rosa to send reinforcements to the flanks. And give Lady Celia Estrella the signal. We’ve waited long enough. It’s time to push back.”

“Yes, my lady!” The aide hastened away.

Aura heaved a sigh. They had done it. The imperial forces had managed to weather the assault. It had not been easy, but they had clung on, believing in victory.

“We’ve waited long enough,” she repeated to herself. “Once we set the lion free, they’ll see why it rules.”

Her orders were beginning to reach their destinations. Energized by their reinforcements, the flanks charged forward to close around the enemy. The imperial army was taking on the dragon-wing formation. That said, the encirclement would require time to take effect. The Triumvirate troops pressing against the center did not realize they had been surrounded. It would be a while before the truth dawned and their dismay propagated through the rest of the álfen forces.

“You’ll regret ever setting foot on imperial soil.”

As Aura prepared to deploy her next stratagem, she noticed something wrong with the left flank. It was lagging behind, its sluggish advance threatening to leave the circle unfinished.

“Bring me a messenger,” Aura ordered. The time had come to make her next move.

*

Vias scowled. Before her stood the discomfiting figure of the primozlosta Verona, drenched from head to toe in imperial blood.

“You just can’t stop getting in my way, can you?”

“I suspected the Warmaiden was scheming something,” the auf crooned, “but nothing so ambitious. Then again, I suppose she is named for the War God. Perhaps I should have expected nothing less.”

A host of cavalry thundered past—the Knights of the Royal Black, the elite warriors of the Second Legion. Opposing them were the

Free Folk, the finest riders in Soleil. Soldiers flew from their mounts as the two forces crossed, and skulls shattered beneath horseshoes. They wheeled around to face each other again and charged once more, roaring battle cries.

"Magnificent. Truly, only the empire could offer our people a worthy contest." Verona trembled with mirth as the screams of dying soldiers rang in her ears. "Now, we never did finish our last duel, did we? What say we settle the score?"

"I'm not like you. I don't take pleasure in bloodshed." Vias drew the Drakeblade Fragarach from her belt. "But if you're going to stand in my way, I'll show you no mercy."

Verona lowered herself into a fighting stance. "Then by all means, bring me darkness."

Vias watched her opponent warily, but seeing that the auf showed no sign of moving, she chose to seize the initiative. She swung Fragarach with all her might. The Drakeblade clattered as its segments decoupled, coiling like a whip as its sharpened point bore down on Verona. Yet at the last second, it jerked high in a shower of sparks.

"Again with your tricks," Vias muttered.

As in their previous battle, Verona seemed impervious to attack. Any blow that would have struck her simply bounced away. Nonetheless, Vias reasoned there was nothing for it but to keep up the assault. It would mean letting this duel take the same course as the last, but the more strikes she dealt, the more thoroughly she could probe Verona's defenses.

She thrust Fragarach into the ground and set her hands on the hilt, her gaze burning into her opponent. Innumerable blades sprang up from the ground at Verona's feet, but as before, they all glanced away.

"Very good." Verona smiled unpleasantly. "Every strike a killing thrust."

Vias did not reply. She gazed intently at her foe—or rather, at the sparks spraying in the air around her. Fragarach's steel dance closed in on Verona from every conceivable angle, but still it could not find its mark. She shot a sidelong glance at the nearby Free Folk, locked

in battle with the Knights of the Royal Black. Blades sprouted from the ground, skewering them and their steeds from below.

Verona pursed her lips as she surveyed the carnage. "Are you so dissatisfied with me?"

"I thought your soldiers deserved a little attention too."

With a snort, Vias cut down a Free Folk rider as he made to pass Verona. His horse tumbled toward the auf in a spray of blood. Verona sensed its approach and moved aside with gliding steps, but Vias saw her chance, swinging for the opening for all she was worth.

"Ngh!"

A grunt escaped Verona's lips. Vias's strikes continued to bounce away, but it seemed at least one of them had managed to hurt the auf.

"I see you've caught on," Verona said. She wiped the streak of blood from her cheek with a thumb and brought it to her lips, eyes sparkling with amusement.

"I thought it was strange that both times we fought, you stayed rooted to the spot. Figured that might have something to do with whatever trick you're using. Can I assume I'm right?"

A forest of blades sprang up to butcher the Free Folk riders around Verona, sending them toppling toward her in showers of blood, and every time she moved to evade them, Vias pounced. Fragarach still bounced away, but slashes began to appear on her skin where it slipped through her defenses. Nonetheless, her smile never faltered. A giggle escaped her lips.

"Aha... Aha ha... Correct on all counts." She tapped the hilt of her sword. "Yes, indeed. Why hide it any longer? I wield one of the Archfiend's Fellblades, Curtana the Immovable. All five Fellblades are notoriously unruly, as I'm sure you know, and this is no exception."

Another weapon flitted through Vias's mind: the Dharmic Blade Mandala, a Noble Blade capable of nullifying any attack. Presumably, this Curtana's Graal had a similar power.

"In which case," Vias murmured, "the advantage is mine."

If Curtana worked as she assumed it did, it would present no threat at range. Armed with that knowledge, she decided to bring the battle to a swift close.

“Tell me,” she said, “have you ever been cut by a blade you couldn’t see?”

The beastwoman drove Fragarach’s hilt down. The blade sank deeper and deeper until the pommel vanished into the ground.

“Fragarach’s Graal is Answerer. And it won’t give up until it gets its prey.”

The air snapped taut. Sensing something amiss, Verona leaped back. She landed in a crouch with her hand on Curtana’s hilt. Countless sparks sprayed around her as the air filled with the clashing of steel. She was no longer smiling.

The exchange dragged on and on. At last, Verona’s defenses failed her. Her left arm spun free from her body and arced through the air, splattering blood.

“This is over.” Vias spread her arms wide as she pronounced her opponent’s death sentence. The thunder of the cavalry faded away as a metallic keening filled the field. A tempest of blades descended on Verona, sweeping up a number of unlucky Free Folk as it came.

“Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha... Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Verona laughed wildly as lacerations opened up all over her body. Faced with such an overwhelming onslaught, she could only scoff at the futility of her own efforts. Yet even then, Vias continued to probe for the hole in her defenses. Her blindness had created a chink in her armor. Her Graal protected her from most attacks, but from time to time, she too lashed out at astonishing speed, drawing her blade in the blink of an eye—a technique known as iaijutsu.

“An art to deflect an opponent’s blade, as I recall,” Vias mused.

Therein lay her weakness. In the moment she sensed and deflected an incoming strike, the Graal’s protection vanished. In short, there was a hole in Curtana’s defenses that Verona was being forced to cover for. Under ordinary circumstances, that would have been no concern for her. She was accustomed to fighting by instinct. A swordswoman of her skill could simply keep an eye on the opening and wait.

“But it seems you have your limits.”

Verona’s brain still processed the incoming attacks, but her body could no longer keep up. New wounds sprouted across her skin by

the second. Here, she had met her match; Vias was perhaps the only warrior in Soleil who could have exploited this vulnerability. Nonetheless, Verona was not acting like someone hard-pressed. Laughter poured from her mouth unabated.

"Aha ha ha... Oh, yes. Yes, indeed." Verona braced her foot against the ground and surged forward, closing on Vias in a blink.

Sparks sprayed inches from the beastwoman's nose. A new wound opened on her neck, bleeding profusely. Verona took a brutal thrust to the flank, but she only pressed closer, a point-blank maelstrom of dancing steel. If she was to die, she meant to take her opponent with her.

Vias had only contempt for her desperation. "Lay down your sword."

The battle was already over. Verona had lost an arm, and blood poured from her shoulder. Her face was deathly pale, and she had grown visibly sluggish, moving as though covered in mud. Nonetheless, she kept going, fixated on winning a pyrrhic victory.

"Grant me darkness, Lord Surtr! I beg you, honor me with the dark's embrace!"

Spewing madness, she drew her blade and swung at Vias, abandoning her strange iaijutsu. Yet her efforts were in vain. Vias restored Fragarach to its original form and countered the strike, knocking Curtana high with stunning force. The Fellblade spun from Verona's hand, and blood burst from her mouth as Vias rammed Fragarach through her chest.

"At last...true darkness... The Lord of the Skies... My...Mars..."

She sank to her knees, reaching blindly into empty space with her one remaining hand. Her enraptured smile never faded, and until her last breath left her body, she continued to stretch for something beyond her grasp.

By all rights, Vias ought to have taken the auf's head and hoisted it high to bolster imperial morale, but it did not seem right to deface her corpse. They may have been enemies, but Verona had been a worthy foe. Vias took off her cloak and laid it over the auf's body—and as she did, she exposed herself for a fatal moment.

"Argh!"

Pain lanced down her thigh, and her vision flickered as something struck her hard in the shoulder.

"Verona was once taken captive by the War God, just like her fellow primozlosta," a dispassionate voice intoned. "But unlike her fellows, he left her eyes and manastone alone."

Vias shook her head, fighting to stay conscious. She looked up to see Straea. With her face swathed in horrific burns and her mouth twisted in manic glee, the woman looked positively demonic. Every hair on Vias's body bristled. She scrambled to raise her sword, but Straea was faster. A greatsword longer than the álf was tall bore down on Vias with air swirling along its length.

"In her shame, she plucked out her own eyeballs and pledged her loyalty to the man who had defeated her. How deluded she must have been for her heart to take such twisted form."

Vias parried the strike by the skin of her teeth, but it left her arm unaccountably numb. Fragarach skittered across the ground.

"Ngh... Curse you!"

A piercing blow struck her in the midriff. As she twisted in pain, a kick to the shoulder sent her bouncing across the ground.

"Now, I do believe I have a score to settle with you. I do not look kindly on those who interfere with my plans."

The great blade swung down, cleaving the air asunder as it closed on Vias's neck. With no means of defense, the beastwoman could only watch as death approached. Yet at that moment...

"Don't you dare lay a finger on my sister."

A voice sounded, burning with fury, and the world shuddered with an almighty clang. Vias looked on in astonishment. The greatsword grated against a scarlet blade, and crimson curls danced on the wind.

*

"Well, well." Straea's voice had an unmistakably mocking edge. "Lady Celia Estrella deigns to join us."

Lævateinn grated against Bebensleif as Liz returned the álf's stare with fury in her eyes. Vias sat on the ground behind her, fighting to

catch her breath as she pressed a hand to her wounded flank.

"Your sister?" Straea continued. "What a peculiar thing to say."

She was well aware why Liz had chosen that word. She had been there in person when Liz first encountered Cerberus, and she knew how much solace the neglected sixth princess had found in the white wolf. That was why she was here—she had hoped to enrage Liz by robbing her of a loved one. Her interruption had been an unwelcome surprise. She was supposed to be fighting in the center.

"Ah, I see. Lady von Bunadala's powers of prediction are truly fearsome."

Straea had to admit that she had not expected the empire to withstand the Triumvirate's superior numbers, let alone respond by attempting to surround them. Nonetheless, she had spied an opportunity to thwart their plans. Seeing that the clash between Vias and Verona had delayed the empire's right flank, she had ventured there to try to break the circle.

"So she sent you in person, did she? My, my. Another audacious ploy by the Warmaiden."

The right flank was vital enough to commit Liz to its defense, but the center would suffer for her absence. Straea could only sigh. For better or for worse, there was no strategist as daring as Aura.

"A girl who can barely swing a sword presuming to duel with Noble Blades with only the brain between her ears... It's remarkable that she has not yet succumbed to despair."

"Aura's a prodigy. One of the best minds in the empire." Liz grinned. "There's a reason we call her the Warmaiden. She may not have a Noble Blade, but that doesn't make her any less of a commander."

She shoved back Bebensleif, then glanced down at the palm of one hand. When she looked back at Straea, there was recognition in her eyes.

"I know that sword. Bebensleif... So you really are in league with the Demiurgos."

"Our interests were aligned for a time, it's true, but he does not command me now. He no longer needs me, and I no longer need him."

Straea swung Bebensleif in a sweeping arc, but Liz deflected it with ease. Straea's eyes widened. She knew Liz had faced Bebensleif before during the slave rebellion in Lichtein. She also knew that its wielder, the zlosta Garda Meteor, had overpowered her and would have killed her if not for Hiro's intervention. With the Far Sight, she had been watching Liz for years—watching as the sixth princess came into her own.

"How you have grown, dear Elizabeth."

She was not just stronger of arm, but stronger of spirit. Her heart had been tempered by frustration and failure, and it would not break easily. Even with the full might of Bebensleif's Force leveled against her, she stood her ground with ease.

Seeing that more was required, Straea shifted Bebensleif to her right hand and summoned the Dharmic Blade Sudarshana in her left. With a tinkling of bells, a forest of identical clones appeared, created by Sudarshana's Graal, Replication. Each carried its own copy of Bebensleif.

Her eyes narrowed in amusement. "You might be a match for one woman with two Noble Blades, but how will you fare against twenty of her?"

Liz scowled. "Fine. I'll fight a hundred of you if that's what it takes."

She slammed a fist against the earth. Fissures radiated out from her knuckles. The Straeas staggered as the ground rocked. They managed to hold their balance, but all around, Triumvirate soldiers stumbled and fell, knocked off their feet by the tremors or tripped up by the cracks.

The blood drained from Straea's face. No ordinary human could have done such a thing, no matter their strength. Even Lævateinn's Graal, Might, had its limits. She found herself smiling at the scale of the destruction. It was simply too absurd to believe...but that did not mean she would concede.

"It will take more than that to frighten me."

The Straeas fell upon Liz as one. Liz backed up against Vias, defending the beastwoman as blades closed on them from all sides. Steel clashed. Sparks showered. She punched one clone in the face,

eliciting a grunt, kicked another in the chest, breaking bone, and dodged a swing from a third before driving Lævateinn through its skull. Every motion dealt a lethal blow. One by one, the Straea clones fell before her fury.

"I'll burn you to ashes!"

She slammed her palm down against the earth. Lævateinn's blade flared, and fire erupted from the cracks in the soil. The raging flames spared her allies but showed her foes no quarter, consuming the ground and scorching the sky.

Straea watched in silence as her copies writhed on the ground, burning. Her smile deepened as she looked at Liz. "I learned a valuable lesson in our last battle, dear Elizabeth. So surprised was I by the fury of your fire, it took me too long to notice how dearly it costs you."

The sweat on Liz's brow was telling. Straea's smile grew ever wider. She had seen Liz unleash this net of fire before, but never more than once. She could use it perhaps twice in one day, and the second would render her unconscious. That was why she had not deployed it on the front line, despite how hard the imperial forces had been fighting to hold their ground. She could not afford to waste it. Well, Straea conceded, she might have decided she didn't need it, but it made no difference either way.

"A fire that burns forever is a fearsome thing, but a fire too weak to spread is no threat at all."

She unleashed the full might of Sudarshana, spawning as many copies as she could muster. Thirty clones appeared upon the field. She watched from a comfortable distance as they surged toward Liz. The battle was starting to weigh on her too. Strain was showing upon her face, and she was sweating just as much as Liz.

"The empire's sun sets today."

Liz lashed out with Lævateinn, lopping off a clone's head, but the false Straeas had no notion of self-preservation. They lunged at her without regard for their own lives. One grasped her ankle, and she crushed it beneath her heel. A second seized her arm, and she killed it with a stunning punch. A third lunged for her neck, and she splattered its brains across the ground. Nonetheless, the onslaught

kept coming. Liz might have been able to shrug off Bebensleif's Force, but the assault still sapped her strength. Eventually, her injuries built up, until...

No. For a moment, Straea doubted her eyes, but there was no mistaking it. There was not a single wound upon Liz's skin. She looked around in disbelief. "Surely not..."

One among the Spiritblades possessed a power unlike the rest. It bestowed upon its wielder endless vitality, curing every ailment and granting them eternal youth—a power the rulers of its era would have given anything to obtain. And indeed, while the average human lived into their forties, one notable man had endured past the age of eighty: Artheus, the first emperor. Not only had he died at a remarkable age, he had remained active in politics until the day he yielded the throne. His lengthy reign had made the fledgling empire sturdy. If not for that, it could not have survived the civil war brought about by the third emperor's purges.

In the modern age, that Spiritblade—Gandiva—had most recently belonged to Liz's father, Emperor Greiheit. He had remained unusually energetic well into his old age, personally leading the empire to victory against many foes. All his achievements, it was said, he owed to the Gale Sovereign's blessing...and all too late, Straea recalled that Liz now wielded that same weapon.

"Curses..." she muttered. "How could I have forgotten?"

There was no need to worry, she told herself. Perhaps Liz could not be wounded, but no matter. Gandiva could not heal her exhaustion. Panicking or doubting herself was the most foolish thing she could do. She need only remain calm and steadily dismantle her foe.

At that moment, the wind stirred. A gentle gust rolled across the battlefield, carrying away the stench of death. Clean air filled Straea's lungs as the soothing breeze washed away the scum and grime befouling her heart. She almost forgot she was fighting for her life...

And then all was inferno.

Initially, Straea did not understand what was happening. Only when she felt the gale did she comprehend. The clones surrounding

Liz vanished into the flames. The torrent spread outward, a net of fire immolating all who stood in Liz's way.

Straea felt as if she had been plucked out of heaven and plunged into hell. She could only laugh as she watched her world consumed by fire. All her schemes had been spun. She had no more cards to play. At least, none that would avail her here. She had forsaken much to topple the empire—making pawns of her own family, sullying her hands with blood, usurping nations, stopping at nothing to shape the world as she desired. Yet just when her dream seemed closer than ever, she had reached out to find it a mirage. How ironic, to be thwarted at the last by what she had first cast aside.

"Oh, Emperor Greiheit. How dearly you loved your daughter."

Here, on the cusp of her victory, her own family stood in her way. *How very like you,* she thought as she watched Liz bring her fiery lion to heel. *Was there ever a more obstinate father?*

"Had I known the same love, might I have lived a different life?"

The gale shielded the blaze, and the blaze spurred the gale.

Its flames were Sheol.

Its flames were Inferno.

Its flames were Purgatorium.

Crimson fire burned all away, giving way to new life. The lion bounded forth on wings of wind, its maw yawning wide enough to devour the world.

Today, the gods would tremble in fear at the advent of a new god of arms.

Today, the gods would attend in rapture the coming of a new goddess of beauty.

"Ah... The flames... Like countless flowers..."

Straea reached out to Liz, and the fire swallowed her. She did not fight it. She did not even try to struggle. It was all too clear that resistance would be useless.

"The end I deserve, I suppose. And not a bad one, when all is said and done."

All she had ever desired was freedom. To walk her own path, unbeholden to anyone. She had never wanted to be the first princess, that rank she had discarded, or the archpriestess with her

fawning faithful, or even the Holy Emperor with his devoted legions. She would rather have been born no one at all. Unremarkable. Ordinary. Nameless.

She had only ever wanted the right to choose and the freedom to live in peace. Yet in her desperation to fill the emptiness within, she had told herself it was vengeance she sought. Eventually, she had grown to believe the lie, letting the thirst for revenge become her guiding star. She had soon grown tired of that existence. More than once, she had considered taking her own life and leaving the uncaring world behind. But then she'd met a young girl who was a mirror of herself; a crimson-haired unwanted scion of the royal line. She had resolved to see what this mirror made of herself—and then, once Liz's ambitions had fully flourished, she would determine once and for all which of them was right.

"Ah... Daybreak..."

The sun rose above a world awash with red. Straea reached out to the inferno, a smile filling her face. The flames did not relent even as they burned her to ash. The earth was now hellfire's domain, and proudly did it reign.

Liz watched in silence as the álf met her gruesome end. Once it was over, she sagged, shoulders heaving. She wiped the sweat from her brow, then turned and ran to Vias, who was still tending to her wounds.

"Are you all right?"

"I'll live. You must go, my lady. You are needed in the center—"

At that moment, horns blew in the imperial core, signaling that the encirclement was complete. The battle was over, and the massacre had begun. The Triumvirate forces did not realize the sound sealed their fate, but the truth would dawn as their numbers dwindled. In time, they would understand they had nowhere left to run. There was no way out now but death.

"Some of them might escape, but they won't get far. Draal will mop up the stragglers."

Draal would not look kindly on the troops who had so arrogantly forced their way through their lands, and they would not risk letting deserters become looters. Any álf who entered Draal was as good as

dead. Liz had no intention of showing them mercy. They had earned their fate, and besides, she had more important matters to attend to.

"There's not a moment to waste," Vias said. "Hiro's fighting in the capital. We must hurry to his side!"

Liz nodded. "Of course. And you know Aura. She tells me she has a plan."

She did her best to hide her unease, but one doubt remained. The distance to the capital was great. Would she be able to make it in time?

*

The seventh day of the twelfth month of Imperial Year 1026
Two sel from Fort Caputo, in the central territories

Corpses littered the ground as far as the eye could see. The dead were so many that they outnumbered the living. The rays of the setting sun filtered over the horizon, painting the plain a deeper scarlet.

The human and monstrous forces had merged into one confused melee. Relying on sheer force of numbers to carry the day, a host of monsters crashed into the allied forces' shield wall, forging ahead even as spears pierced their flesh. They held mighty clubs in their colossal fists, sending clumps of men flying with every swing of their arm. The human forces hurried to repair the breach, but more monsters poured in, forcing the hole wider. Similar scenes played out all across the battlefield. It was impossible to tell who had the upper hand.

The Demiurgos, one of the deities of Aletia known as the Five Lords of Heaven, looked on in silence from afar. The ruler of the zlosta, the father of monsters, and the god of the Wild Races, he sat in a command center built from human material. Around the perimeter, human corpses stood skewered on great spikes, their eyes plucked out and their skin peeled away so that blood dripped from their legs. The skin had been stitched together into a tent canopy, while their bones had been used for chairs and desks. Their

flesh and viscera had been given to the horde. Every part of a man was good for something, monsters often liked to say. Human lands were a veritable treasure trove of resources.

The Demiurgos sat with one elbow on his armrest and his chin resting on the back of his hand. He glanced at Ceryneia, who was waiting at his shoulder. "How fares the battle?"

The primozlosta took the implicit order and stepped forward to report. "Well enough, my Lord. We have successfully worn down their numbers. We expect the battle to conclude before the day's end."

"I count less than an hour before the sun sets."

"More than enough time, my Lord. Their front line is in tatters. The only choice yet to make is how to deliver their ends. Before nightfall, I shall bring you Mars's head on a platter."

"Will you indeed." The Demiurgos sounded more disappointed than delighted. "What a pity that first day was all he had to offer."

How his heart had danced to watch Surtr's schemes thwart peril after peril. He had never been more entertained. Yet now that his forces had dug in for a battle of attrition, his enemy had adopted an equally passive position. If anything, the monsters had suffered greater losses than the humans. Even accounting for reinforcements trickling down from the north, they only had one hundred twenty thousand remaining. A full hundred thousand had died on the field—most during the initial engagement, but still, those were crippling losses for any army. By comparison, the human forces had lost forty thousand soldiers, leaving them twenty thousand strong.

"The Mars of one thousand years ago would have put on a far better showing," the Demiurgos mused. "Has he finally exhausted his bag of tricks?"

"Surely it must be," Ceryneia said. "Why else would he have taken to the fray himself?"

The Demiurgos felt less confident. Something was amiss. One of the most basic principles of warfare was that the odds lay with the greater numbers. No one would be foolish enough to face a larger force without a plan to balance the scales.

"What if he is waiting for something? Reinforcements, perhaps."

“If I may, my Lord, what reinforcements? Surely the sixth princess is too preoccupied with the Vanir Triumvirate. It does appear that House Scharm and House Brommel have made peace, but they must reorganize their forces before they can march.”

“And what of Lebering?”

“Our agents report that Queen Claudia has satisfied herself with the black soil of the north. She has commandeered a strategically located fort and appears content to stay there.”

One thousand years ago, the zlosta had worshipped the Demiurgos as a god, setting out to conquer Soleil under the auspices of their deity and the twelve primozlosta who ruled as their kings. The old loyalties held strong to this day in Lebering. The Demiurgos had never wanted for information from the northern kingdom.

“Then we must wonder what Surtr is waiting for,” he said to himself.

“If waiting was his intention, would he not retreat inside the fort?”

Mars would do no such thing, the Demiurgos knew. True, settling in for a siege might buy him time, but that was a dangerous tactic when he was so heavily outnumbered. If the walls failed anywhere, his stronghold would become a tomb, and the ramshackle Fort Caputo would not last for long against the army that had breached Friedhof. Mars would be signing his own death warrant. If he intended to hold up anywhere, he would have fallen back to the capital. The fact that he was here suggested he was scheming something—taking his time, luring the Demiurgos and his forces into a false sense of security. And if he was ever going to spring his trap, he would do it when it would have the greatest effect: today.

“If he is trying to draw our attention to the fore...” The Demiurgos brought a hand to his forehead and sighed. A small smile appeared on his lips. “Ceryneia, when did you last make contact with our agents in Lebering?”

“Perhaps two weeks ago, my Lord? I do not recall precisely.”

“They are upon us.”

“My Lord?”

The drumming of hooves resounded from the rear. Bells rang

from the watchtowers. As the camp erupted into chaos, the Demiurgos sat back in his chair.

"The faithless children of my zlosta."

Ceryneia paled. "You cannot mean..."

Battle cries broke out behind them. From the rear of the camp came sounds of havoc and the clashing of steel. They grow louder until the zlosta, the former tyrants of Soleil, burst into view, skillfully maneuvering their horses around the lumbering monsters. A rider broke from the pack and bore down on the Demiurgos with spear in hand.

"Why, Queen Claudia."

He shifted his head just in time to avoid the spear. It tore through where his skull had been and sank deep into his chair, sending white dust scattering as the human rib backrest fractured.

"My Lord!"

Ceryneia dove between Claudia and the Demiurgos, but the latter kicked him in the back, knocking him sprawling. He looked back up at his master in dismay, but the Demiurgos did not so much as glance at him. The Lord lifted his hand to Claudia and crooked a goading finger.

"Come, child. Prove you are worthy to take my head."

Claudia snarled. "With pleasure."

She swung Hauteclair, the treasured blade of Lebering's founder and in truth the Fellblade Asura. The temperature plummeted as ice raced across the ground. It aimed squarely for the Demiurgos, only to part around his chair like a wave just before it struck.

"I expected better." The Demiurgos stood up and summoned Epetam to his hand. "Come. Entertain me if you can."

Claudia did not engage him. She brought her horse to a halt, turned about, and galloped away. The rest of the zlosta followed behind her. As the thunder of their hoofbeats faded away, the Demiurgos sat back down with a disappointed sigh.

Ceryneia approached, looking flustered. "Are you hurt, my Lord?"

"No. And it is the battlefield you should be watching, Ceryneia, not me. The tide has turned."

Ceryneia spun to look at the field. A host of zlosta was sweeping

across the field, butchering all the monsters in their path.

"It appears we have fallen for a ruse."

Ceryneia's mouth fell open. Even as he watched, the human forces reformed their shattered vanguard and rallied, driving into the monsters from the front as the zlosta carved through them from behind. Their fatigue of minutes prior was nowhere to be seen. They looked more ready to fight than ever.

"I would expect nothing less from you. Mars, my enemy. Held, my rival. Surtr, my nemesis!"

The Demiurgos gazed in delight at the vanguard where Hiro fought, clapping his hands in unreserved praise. His laughter echoed behind Ceryneia as, with a howl of rage, the primozlosta kicked a fallen monster in the head.

*

The real Surtr proved less fearsome than his reputation suggested. Hiro accepted the offer to make another attempt at his head, returning time and again to the Lord's lair. Each time, he brought a gift of liquor, and after the Lord drank his fill, they fought.

"I respect your tenacity, brat. But you really should know when you're beaten." Surtr took another hearty swig from his bottle.

Hiro lay on the ground before the Lord, coughing violently. Again, he had failed. He had tried everything—catching him unawares, even sneaking up on him in his sleep—but he had yet to land a single blow. The gulf between them was too vast to bridge. One soared the heavens while the other crawled upon the earth. Yet that was all the more reason to keep trying. If he could somehow make that strength his own, then perhaps... Just perhaps...

"I'm running out of time," he groaned.

"Whazzat?"

"I have to get stronger or she's going to die."

Surtr scratched his cheek awkwardly. There was an earnestness in Hiro's voice that was hard to simply disregard. It was, it seemed, to save this "she" that he had embarked on this doomed quest.

"What, she sick or somethin'? Hate to break it to you, brat, but

killing me ain't gonna—"

"She's a vessel."

The Lord understood at once. He looked away, rubbing the back of his neck. "Ah. Well. That's a rough hand and no mistake." He stepped closer, wrapped an arm around Hiro's shoulders, and held up the bottle of liquor in an attempt to cheer him up. "Best forget about her. Dunno which of the Lords she fell foul of, but once you catch their eye, nothin' to be done. Plenty more fish in the sea, eh? Now, drink up and forget your sorrows—"

Hiro shrugged his arm away. The bottle flew through the air and shattered on the ground.

"You think I should just let her die?! Do you know how much she means to me?! How can you just sit there and say that?! You could save her!"

With a helpless shrug, Surtr got to his feet and started to pace. "So that's why you turned yourself into a fiend? You think you can help her with a bellyful of curses?" With a sigh, he picked up a new bottle from beside his rock and glared back at Hiro.

Hiro sensed the accusation and shook his head. "No, I—"

At that moment, an explosion rocked the cavern. Hiro spun to look. Sunlight streamed in through a hole in the roof that swirled with white smoke.

"Surtr. It has been far too long."

The smoke cleared to reveal a woman—one who spoke with the voice of an elderly man.

"Well, well. The Demiurgos." Surtr drawled. He took a swig from his bottle and narrowed his eyes. "Takes real nerve to break into a Lord's lair, you know that?"

"Why do you hide yourself away in this dreary place?" The Demiurgos spread his arms wide in exultation. "And in such an unsightly form. Have I not made you a perfectly good vessel?"

"So it was you who made the brat a fiend, eh?" Surtr seized Hiro by the head and glared back up. "Now why'd you go and do that?"

"Why, I could hardly bear to see one of my own siblings so diminished. Can you blame me for wanting to intervene?" The Demiurgos's grin grew broader as he pointed at Hiro. "Surely even

the mighty Surtr would find a fiend to be a worthy vessel."

"I ain't in the market."

Surtr turned the offer down without so much as a moment's consideration. The Demiurgos looked a little stunned.

Surtr smiled wryly as he looked around the cavern. "There ain't much left for me on the outside. 'Sides, I like it here. I ain't doin' no one no harm."

"A grave to rot in."

Surtr shrugged. "I'm a Lord. I ain't goin' nowhere. I'll live here quietly until the end of time, and that'll be that." He took another swig from his bottle and gave a satisfied sigh, as if to say the matter was settled.

"Will you indeed."

The Demiurgos's shoulders slumped in disappointment. A shadow fell over his eyes. When next he raised his head, he was barely recognizable. His face was twisted in fury, his eyes were bloodshot and brimming with tears, and he had bitten his lip in such chagrin that blood trickled down his chin.

"Very well."

He thrust his arm out to the side. A tear appeared in space from which a spear emerged.

"Then I have no more use for him."

The spear rocketed forth. It cleaved through the air with a dreadful noise, forging straight for Hiro. There was nothing he could do to save himself. It moved too fast to see. He felt the wind of its approach, and then he saw only red. He remembered little of that moment. Only the stench of blood, warm wetness on his cheeks, and a smile seared forever into his mind.

So ended his short but memorable time with the black dragon, Surtr. By the time he recalled this story was long over—by the time he realized he was dreaming—he was already awake.

He opened his eyes to darkness. As they grew accustomed to the gloom, he recalled where he was: Fort Caputo's war room. Despite the prestigious name, it was a threadbare affair, with only a rotting table and chairs to serve as furnishings.

"I haven't thought about him in a long time," Hiro murmured. He

looked down at his chest and laid a hand on the Black Camellia. "What's got me dreaming about him now, I wonder? Is he trying to tell me I'm running out of time?"

The dark had no answer. As he eased himself to his feet, he caught sight of Luka out of the corner of his eye, Huginn dozing uncomfortably in her arms. It was unusual to see Luka in such a deep slumber. Usually she was there to glare at him the moment he awoke, but it seemed the protracted battle had left even her exhausted.

He padded to the door. As he slipped out into the corridor, he sensed someone beside him and glanced across to see Claudia.

"You slept well, I see," she said. "Do you feel better for it?"

Hiro owed her a greater debt than he could repay. It was only because she had struck the monsters from behind that he had managed to repel them.

"Well enough." He set off, and she fell in beside him. "Thank you for coming. If it hadn't been for you, we wouldn't have made it."

Claudia's intervention had evened the odds, and there was little question the resulting victory had bolstered the imperial forces' flagging morale.

She giggled. "Please. It was no act of charity. I joined the side with more to offer me, that's all."

Her implication was clear: She preferred her gratitude in a more material form. Well, Hiro thought, she had little to worry about there. If the empire survived this war, she would be richly rewarded.

"You'll have to speak with Liz about that."

"Negotiating with Lady Celia Estrella... Why, just the thought exhausts me."

Liz's pleasant nature fooled many into thinking she would fold to any demand, but she became a different person entirely once she sat down at the negotiating table. Still, she was generous enough to those who had earned rewards...provided they did not ask for too much.

"This war will grow harsher yet. Lady Celia Estrella is still campaigning in the west, is she not?"

"She's holding off the Triumvirate now. But she's still too far away

to get here in time."

They emerged onto the balcony. A scattering of soldiers were visible in the moonlight, but aside from the groaning of the wounded, the night was quiet. The troops were exhausted, and the monsters' forces seemed endless. There was no relief in sight. With that knowledge weighing heavily on their minds, Fort Caputo languished in a weary silence. Faced with such insurmountable odds, they were beginning to lose hope.

"We shall have to fight again tomorrow. Do you believe we can win?"

Hiro did not answer in so many words. He reached up as if to grasp the moon. "We'll do what we can. And if we do, maybe fate will smile on us."

*

The eighth day of the twelfth month of Imperial Year 1026

A flock of birds soared overhead in the gentle morning sun. Glittering rays illuminated the earth. The weather was brisk, but the air was muggy, heavy with the stench of death. There was no question as to the cause. Corpses covered the earth in horrifying numbers as though belched up by some convulsion of the hells, a sight almost too pitiful to look upon. Trodden over again and again by armored boots, most of the bodies were too mangled to tell whether they were even human.

A sword stood thrust into the earth near its dead owner's hand. After some time, it began to shudder. The vibrations grew stronger until it shook itself free from the earth, falling on its side just in time to vanish beneath the feet of an armored host roaring battle cries.

The soldiers belonged to the allied human forces holding back the monsters under Surtr's command. After days of vicious fighting, they were on their last legs, and more fell by the hour. Determination and conviction could not fuel them forever, but they persevered in defense of those they held dear. Even Surtr himself fought on the front line, inspiring those around him.

Hiro wiped a spray of blood from his cheek as he came to a stop.

Something seemed amiss. He surveyed the field suspiciously before turning to Garda. “Does something seem strange to you?”

“More so than usual?” the zlosta asked. “What about this war is ordinary?”

“That’s not what I mean. Something’s wrong.”

The monsters had begun the morning with a furious assault, quickly turning the battlefield into a chaotic melee. That much Hiro had anticipated, and he had placed seasoned commanders in charge to ensure his forces held formation. Second Prince Selene led the right flank, Claudia and her zlosta made up the bulk of the left, and he held the center personally with his lieutenants and the Crow Legion. Thanks to their prowess, the allied forces had stood strong against the monsters’ greater numbers. Everything seemed to be going to plan. Nonetheless, he could not shake a growing unease.

He stopped in the middle of the battle and studied the fight raging around him. The movement of the air, the shifting of formations, the chaos in the ranks, the fluctuation of morale—he absorbed every last piece of available information.

“What are you doing, One-Eyed Dragon?!” Garda bellowed. “You might not have noticed, but we’re at war!”

Hiro was too preoccupied to hear him. The monsters had begun their onslaught early and kept it up, a crude yet ferocious assault...almost as if they were trying to distract him from something.

“So that’s their game...” Something clicked in Hiro’s head, and he spun to stare into the distance. “Garda, reinforce the right flank. Actually, forget that. No time. You’ll have to go in person.”

Sensing Hiro’s alarm, Garda moved to mount up, but he only had his foot in the stirrup before Hiro interrupted him again.

“Never mind. It’s too late.”

“Hm?” The zlosta peered back quizzically.

At that moment, a dust cloud billowed over the right flank. Distant shouts and screams filled the air. Anyone could tell something was badly wrong. Hiro’s face turned grave.

Garda cut down a monster with a single weighty stroke, then strode up and grasped Hiro’s shoulder. “What shall we do, One-Eyed

Dragon? If we sent reinforcements, could we restore their line?”

Hiro knew he could salvage the situation if he went in person, but there was no guarantee he would arrive in time. Besides, if he left the center, the enemy would come for that next.

“No. They’ve been pushed back too far already.”

He was concerned about Selene’s well-being, but no matter how much he worried, he would not learn whether she was alive or dead until the dust had settled. What mattered now was to staunch the bleeding on the right flank and to fall back before the impact reverberated through the rest of the army. If necessary, he would settle in for a siege behind the walls of Fort Caputo.

“We need to retreat. Tell all units to fall back, maintaining formation. And send a messenger to Claudia too.”

“Aye, I’ll see it done.” With a curt reply, Garda hoisted himself into the saddle and galloped away. He cut an inspiring figure as he departed, barking orders to his men as he clove through the melee with his broadsword.

Once the zlosta was out of sight, Hiro returned his attention to the front line—or rather, to the enemy camp that lay beyond. “So you’ve finally taken command, Demiurgos.”

The monsters were moving with a new clarity of purpose. It was clear now that the reckless charge of earlier had been a ploy to pin down the imperial center and left flank, keeping them from responding to events elsewhere on the field. After battle was joined, the monsters had coordinated deftly to mount a focused assault on the right flank. Selene was not at fault. No doubt she had responded as best she could, but there was only so much she could do against such numbers.

“Now I see why you let your followers take charge. You couldn’t risk Uranos seeing through your plans.”

Leadership of the monstrous horde had changed hands several times over the course of the battle. Hiro had adapted to each new commander, analyzing their character and changing tactics appropriately to maintain the upper hand. To prevent Uranos from realizing he had taken control, the Demiurgos had opened with an offensive just as simplistic as the rest before abruptly pivoting once

everything was in position. Hiro had fallen squarely into the trap, and now he was paying the price.

Garda returned, his chest heaving. "Word has been sent. We should fall back, One-Eyed Dragon."

Hiro smiled, shaking his head. "I don't think we're going to have the chance."

The Demiurgos was no fool. He would not have sprung his trap unless he knew it would succeed. He would not let Hiro escape so easily.

Hiro looked around. The allied army's flanks were falling back on either side, but instead of chasing them, the monsters' flanks were collapsing on his position. The Demiurgos had never cared about winning this battle. From the moment steel was first drawn, he had sought one thing and one thing alone: to take Hiro's head. No doubt he had predicted exactly what Hiro would do.

Hiro smiled ruefully. "He knows me too well."

"Then you go first," Garda said. "I'll take the rear guard."

Just then, Luka came galloping up with Huginn and Muninn in tow. "Have you a death wish?!" she cried. "The rest of the army has fallen back already! Why are you still here?!"

Hiro breathed a sigh of relief to see the three of them safe. As he did, Luka thrust her hand out for him to take.

"Are you just going to stand there grinning like a fool?! Get on! Let's be away from here!"

Hiro smiled but did not take her hand. He produced a long, cloth-wrapped object from within the Black Camellia and laid it in her grasp.

She frowned at him. "And what is this?"

"Igel's arm. Just like I promised."

Once upon a time, on a distant battlefield, he had offered her fallen brother's arm in exchange for her allegiance. That had not stopped her from trying to take his head every chance she got, but even that had died down in recent weeks. The invasion of Six Kingdoms seemed to have calmed something in her.

"But..." she spluttered. "Are you saying...? No!"

Hiro pressed a finger to her lips. The glint in his eye compelled

her to listen. “Enough, Luka. I’ve kept my end of the bargain. Our contract is dissolved.”

“How dare you? How dare you?! I... I will not...!”

Hiro pointed south with a smile, privately amazed she was resisting Caelus so fiercely. “Get out of here. Live to fight another day.”

“I’ll kill you!” Luka screamed as she rode away. “I’ll rip off your head and spit down your neck!”

Hiro shot Huginn a meaningful glance. She nodded and turned about, although not without glancing back over her shoulder. For a long moment, it seemed as if she was going to say something, but in the end, her nerve failed her and she took off after Luka.

He turned back to Garda and Muninn. “You two had better get out of here too. I’ll take care of the rear guard.”

“I thought you’d say that,” Garda grunted. “But if you’re staying, so am I.”

In a blink, Hiro closed the distance and drove a fist into Garda’s sternum, then grasped him by the neck and threw him to the ground. Satisfied that the zlosta was out cold, he picked him up and tossed his limp body to Muninn.

“Boss?!” Impressively, Muninn managed the catch, although the effort nearly took him off his horse. He looked at Hiro reproachfully. “You didn’t have to rough him up like that.”

“Anything less wouldn’t have knocked him out. He’s hardy like that.”

“I s’pose, but still...”

“Take care of him, Muninn.” As his allies fell back, Hiro turned on his heel and walked away, waving over his shoulder.

Muninn grinned. “You take care of yourself, chief. I’ll see you once this whole mess is through.” He dipped his head and took off across the plain with Garda in his arms.

As the hoofbeats of Muninn’s horse faded behind him, Hiro faced down the approaching monsters. A horde of teeming figures filled the plain in front of him, extending all the way to the horizon. He unleashed a blinding slash. Blood rained.

With a small sigh, he looked up. The sky stretched out above

him, clear and blue as far as the eye could see. It was beautiful. Had he the wings of a bird, it would have been a fine day to soar high without a care in the world. He had once known someone who wanted nothing more, only to pass away before he ever had a chance to fly free.

"Surtr, my old friend," Hiro murmured. "This time I'll keep my promise, I swear it."

He clasped his chest and closed his eyes. Surtr's face flashed through his mind, just as it had looked on the day they'd parted ways—smiling in a world stained red with blood.

"You meant what you said, brat?" Blood trickled from Surtr's mouth, forced up by the blow that would have taken Hiro's life. "You really want to slay the Lords?"

Hiro nodded. "But...I thought they couldn't die..."

"There's a way. Just one. But first..." Surtr wrenched Longinus from his chest, spat out a gout of blood, and turned to face the Demiurgos. "I owe this bastard some payback."

Rage darkened his face, and his shape began to change. His back bulged outward, bursting through his clothing in a blur of jagged scales. His skin turned black and his mouth enlarged, sprouting fangs. Hiro could only watch in awe as Surtr transformed into a great black dragon. The Lord of the Skies opened his cavernous maw and unleashed a deafening roar.

"Tell me, what do you know of despair?"

What followed was a battle of gods, a titanic contest that cast the world in its dread shadow. The heavens turned, the earth convulsed, and calamities befell the people of the land. Cities were razed. Nations fell. Towns were wiped from the map. Yet their struggle knew no end. A Lord could not slay another Lord. By their very nature, the greatest and most terrible could not harm the weakest. So what recourse was there?

"It's easy, brat. Usurp them. The name of Surtr is yours now."

Once upon a time, a great black dragon, the loftiest and most dreadful of all the Lords, bequeathed his wisdom to a young boy and was usurped and slain. Having claimed the power he sought, the boy crafted the five Drakeblades from the dragon's corpse and

declared war upon the Lords of Heaven. Yet in the end, he fell short of his ambitions. He found his wings, yet he never soared. And defeat left him with nothing—with all he held dear lost and his vow to Surtr unfulfilled.

"I failed you once, but please...grant me your strength once more."

Hiro opened his eyes upon the encroaching horde. He surged forward, Excalibur clutched in his right hand, Dáinsleif ready in his left.

"Now dance with me."

With a feral grin, he charged fearlessly into overwhelming odds—into the midst of thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of foes. His allies had fully fallen back now, but still he sprinted toward the churning horde, flying over corpses lying in the muck.

"I'll show you despair."

He closed in on an ogul and swung. His blade flashed, tearing through the ogul's distended stomach with prodigious force. In a blink, he turned the assault on the monsters nearby. A web of gleaming blade-trails cut them down at blinding speed. Blood blossomed across the blue sky. Head after head smacked gruesomely to earth. All living creatures were born with survival instincts, and monsters were no exception. As they realized what they were fighting, they broke and began to flee.

"Don't run. You'll only make this harder."

He held one arm out to the side. Countless rents appeared in the air behind him, from which the hilts of swords emerged. A silver shimmer played along Excalibur, and Hiro vanished. A rushing of wind filled the air, a discordant cacophony that grew steadily louder. The spirit weapons shot forth with fearsome speed—one, three, eight, more—striking home among the monsters in sprays of gore. Silver streaks ricocheted around the field, growing ever faster. They were a hundred motes of light, a thousand bonfires, a million shooting stars. Lucifer, the pride and privilege of Excalibur's chosen, opened its maw to devour its foes.

Divine Lightning—Liegegrezalt.

A storm of steel tore through the monsters at light speed, a definitive refutation of the superiority of numbers. Ogres keeled over with shattered skulls. Decapitated oguls thudded into the mud. With overwhelming power, lethal precision, and an utter lack of mercy, Hiro showed his foes terror. Even after he finally reappeared, the monsters kept their distance. They formed a circle around him but came no closer. Yet other creatures forced their way through their ranks.

"Archons," Hiro murmured to himself. "The yaldabaoth's mindless foot soldiers."

Wailing shrieks tore from their throats as they fell on him with simian agility. They were duller than oguls, but far stronger, and their potent regenerative abilities meant their wounds quickly closed. Using their formidable vigor, they pinned him down. They clung to him like lions pouncing on their prey, seizing his limbs, mounting his back, sinking their teeth into his neck. He twisted at the waist, and the Black Camellia fluttered. Its cloth transformed into black spears that flung the archons free. Yet they still managed to hold him in place for a crucial moment...

And Longinus descended like a thunderbolt.

Hiro grunted in surprise as the spear struck home. It pierced clean through the Black Camellia and into the flesh beneath. Nausea surged up his throat, and he threw up across the ground. He glanced behind him. Longinus stood tall in the middle of a smoking crater.

"Finally joining the battle yourself, are you?"

Hiro's fiendish regeneration immediately set to work, but the hole in his chest was unusually slow to mend. It was no normal wound. He rocked on his feet, breathing shallowly. The monsters realized he was incapacitated and advanced with spears at the ready. He felt himself run through from behind and lifted high. His feet left the ground, and the sky came into view.

"Get out of my way."

He grasped the spear blade protruding from his belly, gritted his teeth, and snapped it off. Landing on one knee, he glared around. The monsters quailed at the intensity of his fury.

“Tell me—what do you know of despair?”

The heavens churned. The clouds swirled. The earth trembled and fractured as if screaming with a vast throat.

“Weep for spirits broken. Shed tears for hope lost. Wear with pride futures undone.”

Space buckled beneath the weight of his power. The air tore asunder and despair bled through the cracks, blanketing the earth like a great carpet. Silence fell upon the field. All sound was gone, all heartbeats stilled. Dread might reigned over a world painted black.

“I am Surtr, the Black-Winged Lord.”

The monsters’ heads caved in beneath the pressure. One by one, they toppled in sprays of brain matter. His very presence was a violence none could escape. And as the dark extended its invitation, he raised Dáinsleif level.

“He who beckons all lives equally to nothingness.”

Mortal Terror—Muspell.

Time halted in its tracks. All who lived fell free from time’s flow and succumbed to death, their heartbeats snuffed out. The grass wilted. The flowers shriveled. The earth rotted. The sky fell in.

“Come. Fall into despair.”

Deathly Stillness—Schwartzwald.

The black dragon’s maw yawned wide, falling shut upon the world like a deluge of curses. It struck the ground and burst apart, flooding the land with darkness that grasped the monsters’ feet and dragged them down into nothingness. At last, light returned to the world...and Hiro looked around to see the horde barely diminished. He smiled ruefully. A human army would have broken and run, but it seemed monsters were not so obliging.

He took off again, sprinting toward his goal. He could not stop now. Oguls moved to stand in his way, and he struck them down. Archons pounced on him and he cut them in twain. Arrows rained down on him, but he kept to his course. Even as blades thrust through his breast, he forged on. His life was a small price to pay for the prize he pursued.

After I lost you, Rey...I couldn’t...

With her death, he had ceased to feel. His heart had grown cold,

black, and dead. He had fought to tread water, but leaden fetters had dragged him down. In time, he had forgotten how to fight at all, accepting his fate as he sank to the bottom of a deep, dark ocean. But then...

But then I met her. A girl who could have been your twin.

And a flame had kindled once more in his heart.

Maybe now I can atone for what I've done.

It was his fault this world had come into being. Liz's tragic destiny was his doing. For her sake, he would not fail again. He would set her free to live a life of her choosing.

She's your legacy. Your final hope.

He would give anything to keep her safe. His miserable life was a small price to pay to atone for his sins, to keep the flame of hope alive. His only fear was losing her. The threat of death held no sting. If it would bring her happiness...

"I will slay even the gods."

There was no way back now. No way forward. No hope of survival.

"This time, I'll keep my promise."

With one leg dragging, Hiro burst clear of the ring of monsters and into open space. A golden-haired man spread his arms wide in greeting, a rapturous smile painted across his face.

"And so you come before me. Magnificent. Magnificent!"

Hiro's vision wavered, but he reached out nonetheless with a handless stump. Yet just as his goal seemed within reach, an arrow pierced his knee and a spear skewered his shoulder. He fell to his knees.

"You are too sentimental, Surtr. That was always your undoing. Had you only left those lesser creatures to their fate, you could have escaped with ease."

"So, all this time... This was just a ploy to draw me out?"

"And long in the making. You always did prize your friends too highly. Without the resolve to change the rules, what could you do but come here, to me?" The Demiurgos grasped Hiro's head in both hands, leaning in so close that their noses almost touched. "And now, at long last, I have you. My vessel is finally mine to claim."

His voice was ecstatic, but bitter tears flowed from his eyes even as a smile filled his face. Grinding his teeth as if biting back shame, he stared through Hiro's eyes to someone else deep within.

"Now only the Spirit King remains."

He pressed Hiro against the ground. Ipetam appeared in his hand, its scarlet blade glistening with bloodlust.

"At last, Surtr, you shall become part of me."

The Demiurgos had waited a thousand years for this moment. He did not hesitate to seize it. His blade descended without a hint of mercy. Powerless to resist, Hiro looked down at his own bloodstained hands and smiled.

"You can't stop the sun from rising."

This was just punishment, nothing more. A fair price for the sins he had committed. He had no more regrets. He closed his eyes. Was he pleased or displeased, satisfied or disappointed? His face was unreadable, but the answer would soon become clear.

"Don't you dare touch him."

A voice rang out, clear as a bell.

And the world burst into crimson bloom.

Epilogue

In a world consumed by chaos, in the depths of a blazing hell, a crimson flower bloomed in splendor. Flames consumed a world reduced to shades of red. Buffeted by the searing heat, the Crimson Princess stood coolly. Behind her lay the boy she was here to defend; before her stood the enemy she had come to slay; on her lips were the immutable feelings in her heart.

"Not again."

She had been too naive to stop him two years ago. She could only watch as he charged toward his own destruction. Just when it had seemed she was on the verge of catching up to him, he had vanished, leaving her fumbling blindly in the dark. Many moons had passed since then, but now...

"I won't lose you again."

She had forged ahead with all her might, navigating a path veiled in darkness, pursuing someone she could no longer see. But at last, she had reached the end. She could stand alongside him and look him in the eye. Now, she would voice her feelings more decisively than he could ever doubt. She would hold him so tight he would have no choice but to believe her.

He didn't need to cry anymore.

He didn't need to suffer anymore.

He didn't need to be alone anymore.

She was here for him now. And here she would stay, proud to protect the one she held dear.

"Leave him."

Sixth Princess Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz leveled a blade as crimson as her hair upon the Demiurgos. She looked every bit the first emperor reborn.

"Now you face me."



Afterword

Thank you for picking up volume 12 of *The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles*. To my returning readers, it's a pleasure to see you again.

Let me jump right in. Did you all see Hiro on the cover? I feel like he's always showing up in profile, or masked, or cutting a handsome figure from behind, but when I first saw the roughs for this volume, I said to myself, "Wait... Hold on... He's kinda hot!" It's been a long time since I got a proper look at his face, so that was really refreshing for me. But we can't forget Aura, can we? As always, she looks dignified but adorable, and what's that in her hand but the Black Chronicle? This is only her second cover appearance since volume 2, but with both *Mythical Hero* and the Heisei era coming to an end, this feels like the right time for things to come full circle.

That's right. You heard me. The next volume of *Mythical Hero* will be the last.

It's been four years and a change of calendar since volume 1. I really can't believe how much time has passed. Either time really does fly or my internal clock is running fast! How have the past four years treated you? Things haven't changed much for me personally, but that's just how I like it. The Heisei era may be ending, but that's no reason to rush. It's always best to take life at your pace.

Once you do have volume 13 in your hands, make sure to look back over all the covers. You might notice something interesting. Oh, and one more thing: This is a spoiler for the volume 13 afterword, but if you read back over the first half of the series, you may just find a secret hidden in the volume numbering.

But my line count is running out, so I'd better get to the thank-yous.

To Ruria Miyuki-sama, your incredible art empowers my chuuni soul from the moment I first see the roughs. It's thanks to you that I

can evolve to greet the new era as *homo novus.*

To my editor, I-sama, thank you for putting up with me for another volume. I know I put you through a lot, but I hope you'll continue to lend me your assistance into the new calendar.

To everyone in the editing department, the proofreaders, the designers, and everyone else who helped to make this book a reality, thank you very much.

And last but not least, to you, my readers. Without your support, I never could have told this story. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

I'll keep the chuuni rays on full blast for whatever comes after Heisei, so I hope you'll continue to support me.

Until we meet again in the new year.

奉 (Tatematsuri)

Bonus Short Stories

Spreading the Gospel

Scáthach woke with a start, a nightmare lingering in her mind. It was far from her first. Bad dreams had become an almost nightly occurrence for her. Their terror had left its mark; her bangs were stuck to her forehead, and her nightwear was almost see-through with sweat. She heaved a sigh and reached for a carafe of water, which she poured into a silver goblet and drank in one gulp, then groped weakly for the chair by her bedside and levering herself into it. She tilted her head back to see a sky of white canvas.

"What a sorry sight I make. I am in no state to serve Lady Liz in the western territories." She pinched the skin between her eyebrows and lowered her eyes, smiling ruefully. "If only Lady Aura was not so..."

She cut herself off, her face filling with surprise. The tent was swathed in darkness, but a warrior of her caliber could easily sense someone lurking in the shadows. The blood drained from her face. She gazed into the gloom, eyes widening in disbelief.

"L-Lady Aura?" she ventured, voice trembling. "Is that you?"

The darkness shifted in answer. Scáthach reached for a candle by her bedside and held it up. A small, dainty girl emerged into the light. She was so delicate, one might have thought she was some kind of nymph. Scáthach could scarcely believe she was older in years, although that hardly mattered now. The real question was one that made her tremble in fear: Why was Aura here at all?

With a small nod, Aura laid several sheets of parchment on the bed. "You haven't turned in today's essay. You need to get started."

Scáthach peered at her dubiously. "How long have you been there?"

“A while. I didn’t want to wake you. It’s a good thing you got up when you did.”

“Lady Aura, perhaps I am misunderstanding, but...did you wait by my bed all night just to ask me to write an essay?”

Aura cocked her head. “What about it?”

“Lady Aura, I... Where do I begin?”

It was all Scáthach could do to keep her jaw off the floor. As chief strategist of the imperial military, Aura was one of the busiest women in the empire. She had no time to request essays from anyone, let alone watch over their shoulder as they wrote. The Vanir Triumvirate was encroaching on the empire at this very moment, to say nothing of the fall of Friedhof and the ever-present threat of Lichtein to the south.

“Do you not have better things to do?”

“No.”

Scáthach blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I know what you’re thinking. Writing down your thoughts on Mars doesn’t seem important right now. But that’s blasphemy against Mars. You don’t understand him at all. The Vanir Triumvirate’s invasion couldn’t break a true believer’s admiration. True faith in him never fades, even on the brink of death. The very sweat on your brow shows your devotion to Mars. You’re suffering because you’ve read the Black Chronicle, but you don’t have an outlet for your wonder. But don’t worry. Mars has brought me here to help.”

Scáthach blinked. “I see.”

She did not. Aura’s voice went in one ear and out of the other. The girl had said “Mars” so many times it no longer sounded like a real word, and she was starting to sound worryingly fanatical. What was more, the hour was painfully late. Scáthach looked around for a way out, but Aura was standing between her and the exit, blocking off her escape with terrifying nonchalance.

“The night is long, but don’t worry. Mars will never leave your side. He’s a part of you now.”

She was sounding more and more deranged. Scáthach was starting to wish she had never woken up. Her bad dreams seemed

far more appealing than this waking nightmare.

"Now, what are you waiting for? Start writing."

As Aura took a step closer, a stack of parchment slipped out of her robes with a thud. The string came undone, sending sheets flying everywhere. There were more than Scáthach could count—several hundred at the least. While she couldn't see them clearly in the dark, each one seemed to be covered in dense writing and what looked like tearstains.

"Whose are those?" she asked warily.

"Sir Spitz, the rest of the Knights of the Royal Black, the Knights of the Golden Lion, the Knights of the Rose. And the other aides too, of course. They didn't want to at first, but they changed their minds when I said it was for Mars. You should have seen them smiling after they were done." Aura cradled the pile tenderly.

A drop of sweat trickled down Scáthach's cheek and fell to the floor. "You made the finest warriors in the empire write you essays?"

"I didn't make them do anything. They wanted to. Anyway, they've all finished now. You're the only one left."

"Indeed." Scáthach sighed. "The last woman standing..."

Aura's eyes sparkled. "I can't wait to read your work."

Scáthach looked up at the ceiling, trying her best to hold back tears. Her nightmares were a long way from over. In both her dreams and the waking world, Aura continued to hound her.

No Escape for the Crimson Princess

Liz opened her eyes to find a dainty girl's face inches from her nose. At once, she was wide awake, although she thought better of reaching for the crimson blade at her bedside. As she rubbed her eyes and sat up, the nymph-like figure wordlessly held out her mantle.

"Aura..." Liz groaned. "It's so late. Has something happened?"

Aura nodded. "It's important."

Liz slipped on her mantle and got out of bed. "What is it? Word from Friedhof? The central territories?"

She sat down in her chair and crossed her legs, unknowingly emphasizing her thighs. Her beauty would enthrall men and women alike the whole world over, but Aura seemed immune. She lowered her eyes, her face grave.

"If not that, then..." Liz paused. "Is it to do with Hiro?"

"No. There's no news about any of those."

"Then Lichtein? Or the Triumvirate."

"No. And no."

Liz's brow furrowed. "Then what's this about?"

Aura wordlessly held out the Black Chronicle. Liz unconsciously grimaced. It was all she could do to stifle a cry of horror.

"I've been waiting and waiting, but you still haven't turned in your essay. All I hear is 'I'm busy,' 'I'm busy,' 'I'm busy.' You're a member of the royal family, but you won't write a word about Mars. Don't you see? This is a serious problem. No, an existential threat. If you don't appreciate the Black Chronicle, you don't appreciate our history, and if you can't appreciate our history, the empire's culture is doomed. I couldn't call myself your strategist if I ignored this."

Aura's concerns seemed a little overblown, but before Liz could protest as much, she caught a glimpse of the intensity in the girl's eyes and fell quiet. Unfortunately, Aura interpreted her silence as agreement.

"I'm glad you see the error of your ways. But you still have to do your duty." Pursing her lips, Aura laid a sheaf of parchment on the bed.

"Um..." Liz began. "Forgive me if I'm misunderstanding, but...do you want me to start now?"

"Of course. You're a member of the royal family. You can't have the War God without the royal family. You can't have the Warmaiden without the War God. You can't have your chief strategist without the Warmaiden. And without your chief strategist, you wouldn't have the commander of the imperial military. That's you."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"You would if you loved Mars enough. To anyone in my Mars Appreciation Society, that would have made perfect sense."

Her what society? An involuntary shudder shot up Liz's spine. As

the heir to the throne, she had a duty to disband this organization for the sake of the empire. If left alone, it might produce a second or even a third Aura, and she would have an extremist uprising on her hands before she knew it. The threat of the Vanir Triumvirate would pale in comparison.

"I *do* love Mars, but we're going to fight the Triumvirate soon. If I don't get enough sleep, I won't be able to—"

Aura threw up her arms. "The Black Chronicle cures all ills!"

Liz looked at her, nonplussed.

"Enemies flee from its cover! Sickness trembles at its name! With every page you turn, your knowledge grows and your mind gets sharper until you could win any battle! The more you read, the more you discover! And the best part is you'll be so spellbound, you won't care what time it is! It doesn't even count as losing sleep!"

"Come on, you know how busy I am," Liz said. "Aren't you rushed off your feet too?"

"That's no excuse to neglect my duties. The Black Chronicle is as good as any meal. It gives me all the nutrition I need. It would be worse for my health *not* to read it."

Liz silently resolved to send Aura to a good physician once they got back to the capital, but that was a matter for another day. Right now, she needed to sleep. There was nothing for it but to play her trump card. With an internal apology to her friend, she asked:

"Has Scáthach turned in her essay yet?"

Aura's eyes flashed triumphantly, as if she had expected just that ploy. "She's writing it as we speak. Unlike some people, I can trust her not to run away once she starts."

Liz fell silent as her last hope crumbled before her eyes. With a triumphant smile, Aura patted her on the shoulder.

"But you have a point. I should keep both of my disciples in one place."

"I never said you should... Wait, 'disciples'?"

"Don't worry about it. I misspoke, that's all. Now, come on. Scáthach is waiting."

Aura's invitation was as sweet as honey, but there was nothing adorable about the vise grip around Liz's arm. The bone creaked

under the pressure. Liz could only hang her head, unable to resist the angelic smile leading her onward.

"We'll start you both off with twenty pages. Then you can both present your findings."

"Ah ha ha... Ha ha... My precious sleep..."

Liz forced a smile, trying to hold back tears. She already knew her fate was as good as sealed.

The First and Second Emperor

Lying in the grass, Artheus reached up into the sky and closed his fist around the sun. "So many nations, flocking to us in search of sanctuary from the zlosta. Soon we may declare ourselves an empire." He turned to look at the black-haired boy sitting nearby. "What say you, my brother? Is the time not right?"

Hiro narrowed his eyes against the light. "I think so. Honestly, we can't afford much more expansion. We still have zlosta on our borders, and I'm sure House Krone wasn't the only noble house in league with them. If they attacked at once, we'd only lose more comrades."

"A wise warning. I shall bear it in mind."

Hiro's eyes took on a distant look. "I wonder what Rey and Meteia would say if they could see what our old kingdom has become."

For some reason, he seemed very far away. He was close enough for Artheus to reach out and touch, and yet his presence felt somehow thin, as if he might disappear at any moment.

"They would be proud. Proud to see the dawn of an age of peace, free from the terror of the zlosta."

"I hope so. If not, I don't even know why I'm here."

Hiro's smiles had grown few and far between after Rey's passing, and when Meteia followed, it had been as if he had been shorn of all emotion. His black eyes had become an empty void. Bereft of the future they had striven for together, he had lost all sense of purpose —and yet still he fought on, hailed as a hero he did not recognize, wielding his sword for a hollow cause. Artheus could not be the one

to save him. He would never presume to replace Rey or Meteia. And so he could do nothing but watch his brother unravel day by day, searching in vain for words to ease his torment.

"You must succeed me when I pass, Hiro," he said. "You are a Lord's vessel. You would be a fine fit for the throne."

"You know I can't. I have Baum to take care of. Rey and Meteia's people need me."

"The second archpriestess is more than capable. She will steer them true."

"You can't be serious about this, Artheus. What about your children?"

"That is for you to decide. None will object to see the War God become emperor. Besides, I have little interest in children for the time being. Who knows? I may well die without an heir."

"Tell that to all those women you're courting."

"Always so sharp-tongued. But I turn the question back. Have you given no thought to marriage?"

Artheus knew that was an ill-advised question. It would only throw salt on Hiro's wound. Even so, he would gladly have gathered all the greatest beauties in Aletia if it would fill the hole in his brother's heart.

"Not for me, I'm afraid. Everyone I love always leaves me sooner or later." Hiro only smiled ruefully. He looked on the brink of tears. "How long has it been since the war, Artheus? You're the only one who's still here. Everyone says it was Soleil's darkest hour, but...I don't know. Maybe you'll hate me for saying this, but I don't think I've ever been happier."

Those words told all. After hearing them, Artheus could no longer deny the truth. There was nothing left to tie Hiro to this world.

"Do you remember? How you'd say something stupid, and Rey would get mad at you, and I'd laugh, and Meteia would jab me in the ribs. How the Venerable Master would watch us and smile. How all the soldiers would grin."

The reign of the zlosta had been the brightest time in Hiro's life, and a dark age for humanity. That said, Artheus had found his own modest joy in that time of hardship. He could not say whether he

had been happier then or now. To choose the past would disown all the work he had done to build a better world, but to choose the present would disavow some of his dearest memories.

"You do not play fair, my brother. What am I to say to that?"

"Right. Sorry. That wasn't fair, was it? Forget I said anything."

An age of peace was dawning, but how long would it take until Hiro found the solace he sought? A hundred years? Two? He was nigh immortal now. There was no question that he would outlive Artheus. What remained to live for in a world where he had lost everything? How would he withstand the coming centuries he would be cursed to endure?

"I shall have to show him the way," Artheus murmured.

He would always watch over his brother, no matter what path he chose.

He turned to regard Hiro again. "Will you not reconsider? I think you would make a fine emperor."

"I've made my choice."

"We shall see. I'll have you succeed me yet. No mere military ranks for you, my brother!"

It might take a hundred years or two hundred or even a thousand, but eventually, that would serve Hiro well. All Artheus could offer beyond that was an encouraging hand on his back.

"My empire will be yours to shape as you please. Let it prosper or perish as you see fit."

As the first and founding emperor, that right was his to bestow.

The Writing of the Black Chronicle

Walking through the halls one evening, Rey found her brother sitting in the garden in the light of the setting sun. He was hunched over, furiously writing.

She stepped closer, cocking her head. "What are you doing?"

He looked up in surprise. "Ah, sister. I thought I would write something of a memoir."

"I see. Another of your strange ideas."

“You wound me, sister. How else are future generations to know how I lived?”

“Leave it to others to relay your story. You will only cheapen it by telling it yourself. And besides, you will have your entire old age to think about writing books. This war has only just begun.”

Artheus stared away pointedly, for once looking his age. He took care to remain dignified in the presence of the nobles, but he had begun to display a much wider variety of expressions when he was alone with his sister. That was a recent development, and they both knew who he had to thank.

“Well, be at ease,” he said. “I am writing of Hiro, not myself.”

“Of Lord Hiro? Why?” Rey’s ears pricked up at that name. The knowledge volunteered by the mysterious black-haired boy from a far-flung world was the reason for their unprecedented victory over the zlosta, even if he insisted he had contributed nothing of note.

“It seems he struggles to see his own worth. My hope is that once he sees his deeds written down on parchment, he will understand how remarkable they truly are.”

Rey relented. “A good enough cause, I suppose.”

Unexpectedly flung into an unfamiliar world, it had not taken Hiro long to become aware of his own insignificance. In the days after his arrival, he had done little but cry. He was short of stature by the standards of the people of Soleil, and weaker than a child. Given a few years, he might have managed to close the gap, but in a world as brutal as Aletia, that kind of time was in short supply.

“We must watch over him,” she said. “Until he has the confidence to stand on his own.”

“I agree,” Artheus replied. “Which is why I am penning the Black Chronicle.”

“Is that what you’ve called it?”

“Indeed. In addition to my own memoirs, where I write of myself, and the White Chronicle, where I write of you.”

“Three books?” Rey’s voice took on an edge of reproach. “Do you not have more urgent matters to attend to?”

She took the Black Chronicle from his grasp and cast her eyes over it. It caught her interest soon enough. She read in silence, eyes

moving back and forth. The manuscript did not take long to finish. Artheus had barely begun, with only a few pages committed to parchment, but what was there read surprisingly well. She had not realized her brother had such skill with letters. Then again, perhaps she should not have been surprised. He had always been talented at anything he cared to try.

"Some parts need rewriting," she said. "Your reunion with this 'long-lost brother' in particular. I realise some truths must be kept secret, but remember, only I was present for Hiro's summoning. You were not there."

"Details, sister." Artheus snorted with laughter. "You'll give yourself wrinkles fussing over things like that, and what will Hiro think of you then?"

She grasped him by the chest, lifting him off the ground with surprising strength. "Say that again, I dare you."

"S-Sister!" Artheus gasped. "You are forgetting yourself! What if Hiro saw you?"

"Then take it back. Me, grow wrinkled? Say that again, and I shall split your mouth from ear to ear."

"Forgive me, sister. Your skin is as glossy as a pearl."

"Good. Now—"

At that moment, Hiro's voice rang out from behind them. "Rey? Artheus? What are you doing?"

Rey turned with a smile, the very picture of benevolence. "Why, nothing at all."

She let Artheus fall. He landed on his rump with a cry of pain and stayed on the ground, grimacing.

"Artheus?" Hiro frowned. "What's wrong?"

"He tripped while fooling around, it seems. Dear me. Will he ever act his age?" Rey draped an arm over Hiro's shoulders and swiveled him around. "But never mind him. Would you care for some tea? Meteia is brewing a pot as we speak."

"What? But..."

"Come along or it'll get cold. You wouldn't want to make Meteia angry, would you?"

"No. No, I wouldn't..."

Artheus watched the pair walk away, tears beading in his eyes. “Go then, you she-devil! I hope Hiro sees you for who you really are!”

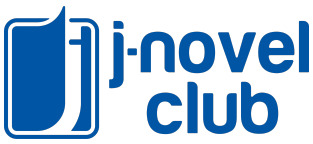
For a while, he glared furiously after Rey. Soon enough, however, he lowered his eyes.

“Forgive me, Hiro. What a villain I have left in charge of you.”

A bitter tear trickled down his cheek. He could only imagine what hardships awaited his comrade in arms.







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by Tatematsuri

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