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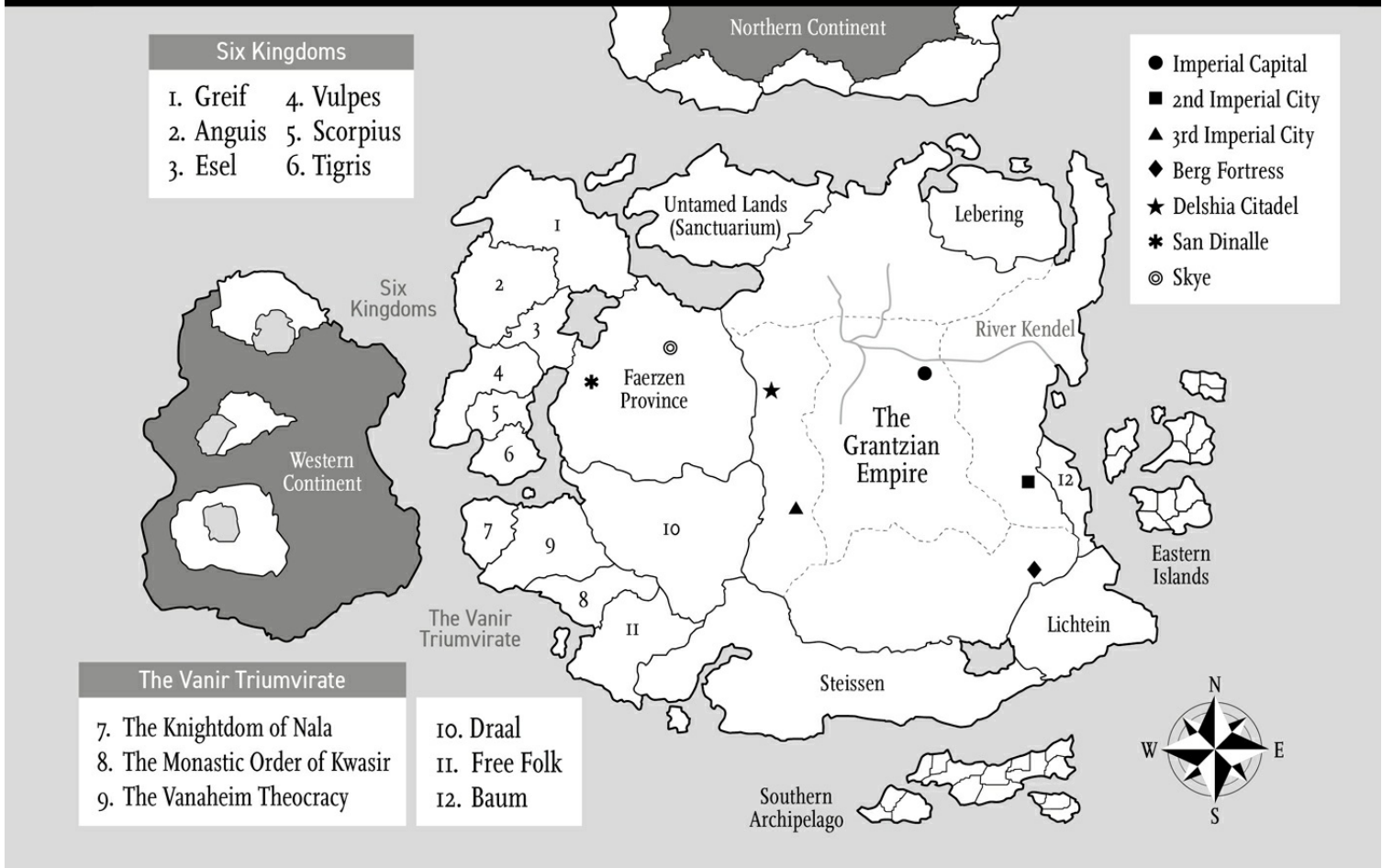


The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles

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

Liz grows older and wiser under Hiro's tutelage while the empire spars with its neighbors. However, their lives are thrown into chaos when a Six Kingdoms plot results in the murder of the emperor. With an invasion sweeping in from the west, Hiro leads a handful of troops in a desperate counterattack, only to seemingly perish on the battlefield. Yet he soon 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.

And now, two years after they went their separate ways, their paths converge once more...





The
Mythical
Hero's
Otherworld
Chronicles

9

Tatematsuri / Illust. Miyuki Ruria



Hiro Oguro/Surtr, the Black-Winged Lord

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



Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz

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



Treya Verdan Aura von Bunadala

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



Culann Scáthach du Faerzen

The last surviving member of the royal house of Faerzen. She’s working with Liz to restore her homeland, which was ravaged by the empire before being occupied by Six Kingdoms. The wielder of Gáe Bolg.



Myste Caliar Rosa von Kelheit

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



Claudia van Lebering

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



Luka Mammon du Vulpes

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



Straea

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



Leon Welt Artheus von Grantz

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



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Illust: Ruria Miyuki

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Prologue

The sky was cloudless and the air humid, with no sign of rain. On an ordinary night, the stars would have shone. On an ordinary night, the world would have been silent. Yet this was no ordinary night. Plumes of smoke rose to smother the stars. Beneath a somber sky, the land burned red with pitiless flame.

Screams and cries pierced the night, calling out in rage and grief, begging for deliverance. The stench of blood rose skyward on a storm of clashing steel. An unstoppable tide of malice surged through the streets, cutting down innocent lives in its path. It was brutal. The work of fiends. But it was reality, and reality would not be denied.

“Hope comes only to those who know despair,” the masked boy murmured as he watched the town burn.

His voice was level, far too calm for the frightful spectacle before him. His words carried no inflection. No emotion lay within. An effect lent by the mask obscuring his expression, perhaps—or perhaps not.

“Hate me all you like. I won’t ask for your forgiveness.”

His right hand rose to touch his mask as he seared the sight into his memory. The night wind set his mantle billowing even as he dismissed the air he wore.

“It’s finally time for this stalemate to end.”

Cries for help reached his ears. He lifted a hand, thinking for a moment to answer them—and let it fall.

“No. I won’t pretend to be a savior.”

Casting aside every last shred of compassion, he turned and spread his arms wide.

“Let us go to war!”

Chapter 1: Before the Storm

The thirteenth day of the eighth month of Imperial Year 1026

Cladius, capital of the Grantzian Empire, was the beating heart of human prosperity and one of the oldest cities in Soleil. More commonly known simply as “the imperial capital,” it famously never slept. The most popular destination was the central boulevard, where merchant stalls boasted wares from the farthest corners of Aletia, delicious scents stoked the palate, and merry voices issued from all sides every hour of every day. Parents looked on contentedly as their children ran around the square, toys in hands.

Such was the city’s reputation, at least, but even places that would normally have been bustling did not match it now. Night had fallen. The clouds were one with the darkness, and stars shone through the gaps between. The moon’s gentle light emerged to succeed the sun’s fierce glare. Yet while the stalls’ popularity usually endured long into the evening, they were as silent as the grave. The night was so still that one could have heard a pin drop.

A somber silence hung over the boulevard. The air had a gravity that made the townsfolk feel unwelcome, as though they were trespassing on sacred ground. No one dared draw near. Only the twelve figures lining the sides of the road remained to keep vigil—the statues of the Twelve Divines.

Zertheus, the First God.

Mars, the War God.

The Valditte, the God of Beauty.

Corpal, the God of Smithing.

Belvard, the Guardian.

Carall, the Sage.

Orlaga, the God of the Harvest.

Banietta, the God of Commerce.

Vulcan, the God of Arms.

Parla, the God of Medicine.

Urall, the God of Music.

Seldra, the God of Water.

Ten were emperors who had brought glory and prosperity to the empire. The remaining two goddesses had never sat on the throne, but they had been deified nonetheless in recognition of their feats. All were rendered in minute detail. While the turning of the years had left them pockmarked with small imperfections, their majesty remained undimmed.

The moon shrank behind a cloud, and the statues receded into darkness. At the very same moment, the sound of footsteps broke the silence. The newcomer was the only individual in the empire permitted to enter this place. Her hair shimmered like flame in the gloom, endowing her with a presence that she could not have hidden if she'd tried.

With a clack of boot on stone, she came to a halt before the statue of the Valditte. This was Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz, sixth princess of the empire and, now that she was first in the line of succession, empress regent.

"Sister to the first emperor and the first archpriestess to shepherd the people..."

In life, the Valditte had risen up alongside her younger brother, Artheus, to free humankind from the yoke of zlosta tyranny. In addition to being a courageous warrior, she had contributed to the forging of the Spiritblades. In short, she was one of the architects of the empire's first victory, and the legends spoke of her in terms no less glowing than those they used for the War God.

"Celia Rey Sinmara von Grantz..."

Blessed by the Spirit King's favor, she had brokered the alliance between the humans and the álfar and even treated with their mutual enemies, the zlosta. All five peoples of Aletia had loved her, and when she died young from illness, all five had mourned. Consensus among historians was that she had accomplished a great many other feats that had never been recorded, and Liz

agreed. It would have taken no less for someone who had never sat the throne to earn a place in the pantheon.

“I don’t understand... Why did I see you in my dream?”

Two years prior, when Liz’s heart had been on the point of breaking from losing Hiro, the woman had come to her with words of comfort. Only on returning to the imperial capital had Liz’s nagging suspicions crystallized and she had realized she had spoken to the Valditte. She could have laughed then, as she gazed up at the statue. The real thing had been so much more beautiful than her likeness, she almost felt jealous.

“I had so many questions for you...”

Liz hoped the woman would visit again. They had a great deal to talk about. She wanted to ask about Hiro, about the feats he had accomplished a thousand years ago, about the sides of his story she did not know. What had he gained? What had he learned? What had he lost? And what had called him back to this world one thousand years later?

She had never found the courage to confront him about his true identity. The fear that she would lose him had been too great. It was only thanks to the fragmented memories of the first emperor, Lævateinn’s original wielder, that she had been able to piece her theory together at all.

“For the longest time, I didn’t believe it. Didn’t want to believe it. I was scared, I think. Too scared to face the truth.”

She pressed a fist against her chest and breathed a small sigh. As a figure of legend, his presence had been unmistakable, an uncanny aura that he could never fully conceal. But she had pretended not to notice, afraid of what accepting the truth would mean. The War God had been her idol, and yet she had run from him.

“But that’s not who I am anymore. I’ve sworn to get stronger.”

And now she wanted to know just what it was that drove him.

“Do you know the answer?”

She did not truly expect a reply from the statue. She waited even so, hoping

against hope that the woman would appear again, but all that came was a warm summer wind. She smiled wryly to herself and shook her head.

“I thought something might happen if I came to see you, but I suppose that was just wishful thinking.”

Reluctantly, she turned away. At that moment, a presence nearby made itself known—a light footstep in the dark where the moon did not shine. She swept her gaze around, eyes narrowing, but sensing no animosity, she lowered her guard.

The newcomer stepped forward, the moonlight casting her tender features in silver. “It is dangerous to be out alone so late at night, Your Highness...” She trailed off, looked around, and nodded to herself. A faint smile spread across her face. “I see. Unseen, yet always within reach. Your subordinates are quite proficient.”

Liz’s eyes widened. She too looked around. Within the darkness lurked several figures, alert but not hostile. “I’m impressed you noticed them,” she said. “They’re the finest of my royal guard.”

“Hide as they might, my eyes are not so easily fooled.” From anyone else, the claim might have seemed arrogant, but if anything, the figure sounded humble.

Liz smiled, a little defeated and a little impressed. “I should have expected as much from the archpriestess and her Far Sight.”

She turned back to the figure—the archpriestess. The woman’s pointed ears marked her as an álf. She had the youthful figure of a girl in her late teens, but that proved little. Past a certain point, the álfar did not age, and it was not uncommon for humans to address them as peers only to be shocked when they displayed the wiles of somebody far older. Her eyes were a rich, sparkling blue, proof of her favor with the Spirit King. Their clear depths seemed to pierce through everything they looked upon.

“What brings you here?” Liz asked.

The archpriestess rarely left her home in Baum, but she was known to take up residence in the empire under extenuating circumstances. As empress regent, Liz was well aware of the factors that had brought the woman to the capital.

That was not what she was asking, however—she wanted to know why the woman was here, now, on this street.

The archpriestess did not reply. She only stepped closer to gaze up at the Valditte, as Liz had been doing only minutes before.

“The same reasons as you, Your Highness. It is not often that I have the chance to visit my predecessor.”

That was believable enough. Liz looked around. Where the boulevard would typically have been lined with stalls and heaving with crowds, the two of them were now the only signs of life. The area had been cordoned off in preparation for Lord Surtr’s impending visit. That was also the reason for the archpriestess’s presence: she had come from Baum in anticipation of his arrival.

“It’s been a long time for me too. Since I’ve had the chance to look so closely, at least. I never thought my next visit would be alongside the archpriestess.”

There had been no king in Baum for a thousand years. Surtr’s appearance had been a proverbial bolt from the blue, not just for the empire but for all of Soleil. The empire had even gone so far as to protest his appointment, although fear of worsening relations had kept it from following through on its words. Tensions still had not quite cooled to this day, and now that the archpriestess was in the capital, they had once again bubbled to the surface.

“This fortuitous meeting would not have occurred if not for Lord Surtr,” the álfen woman said. “I daresay I owe him a debt.”

“So do I,” Liz replied. “He’s putting my people through their paces.”

The imperial palace had been a hive of activity for days now. Its officials, normally well accustomed to entertaining monarchs and other dignitaries, had lost their composure to an almost comical degree. Much like the attack on the palace two years prior, they had been slow to respond to emergencies. Peace had made them lax. Evidently, their arrogance was so deep-rooted that repeated upsets were not enough to excise it. It was a vexing problem, but not one that Liz could afford to ignore. Adapting to the unexpected was a skill they would undoubtedly need in the weeks and months to come.

The archpriestess watched her ponder for a while. Eventually, she spoke. “Did

you know that the first archpriestess has no known burial site, Your Highness?"

"Of course. Everybody does." The change of subject took Liz slightly aback, but she quickly switched gears. "But Mars founded Baum on the land she loved as his tribute to her, or so historians think. The whole nation is her grave."

The first archpriestess was almost as enigmatic a figure as the War God himself. Mars had maintained a clear presence in history for a short period, but then he had abruptly vanished, only reappearing to succeed the throne after the first emperor's death before passing away a year later from unrecorded causes. The first archpriestess had also disappeared young from the historical record, passing away suddenly from illness. The enduring mystery surrounding the pair was part of why the people found them so captivating. Even in the modern day, countless scholars combed dusty tomes in the hope of shedding some light on their lives.

"It is because there is so little known about her that the people of Baum visit the imperial capital," the archpriestess said. "They wish to lay eyes on this very statue, hoping to catch some glimpse of her true self."

One could only imagine how they felt to see Baum's spiritual ancestor raised up as the god of another nation. That said, they made no attempt to build their own statues of the Valditte. Adherents of the Spirit King could not acknowledge a foreign deity within his own domain.

"I heard that Lord Surtr's ascension didn't go entirely smoothly."

"Indeed. Many stood opposed to him taking stewardship of the country, but they could not ignore a revelation from the Spirit King himself."

"No. I'm sure they would have had no choice but to fall in line."

The archpriestess's word was law to the people of Baum. If she claimed the Spirit King had gifted her with a revelation, the truth was irrelevant.

"Do you doubt my word?" the archpriestess asked.

Liz only shrugged. She would be lying if she said she didn't, but there was no way to prove her suspicions. Only the archpriestess was privy to the word of the Spirit King. She smiled and shook her head, taking care not to let her thoughts show. "I was just curious, that's all."

“I see. Well, if you have any more concerns, I will do my best to enlighten you.” The archpriestess’s smile never faltered, and her eyes never left Liz’s face. “That is the least I can do to honor our nations’ thousand-year history.”

A chill crept up Liz’s spine. The álfen woman’s smile seemed cold beneath the moonlight, and so faint that it was hard to tell whether it was really there at all. That said, the archpriestess’s role—the role of any ruler—was to make the difficult decisions that ensured the survival of her nation. In that sense, Liz almost admired her cunning.

“You must have to be strong,” she said.

“Not at all. Influence I may possess, but I am not even free to leave Baum of my own volition. It would be no exaggeration to call me powerless.”

The archpriestess could not act lightly. Indeed, the weight of her actions was what gave her value. Baum was said to be small in breadth but large in stature, and that was a large part of why. Liz was beginning to find herself in a similar position; she could no longer act as freely as she once had, nor could she speak to soldiers or townsfolk as casually as she used to.

The archpriestess broke the silence. “You seem troubled, Your Highness.”

Liz flinched a little in surprise. “Was I that obvious?”

It was dark—too dark to make out the details of someone’s expression, even with the aid of the moonlight. But then the archpriestess gestured to her eyes, and Liz realized her mistake.

“Human hearts are like open books to the Far Sight. You have grown more adept at hiding your colors than you once were, Your Highness, but not enough to fool me yet.”

There were three great arcane eyes in the world of Aletia: Caelus, the Leonine Sight; Uranos, the Empyrean Sight; and the Far Sight, which was passed down through successive generations of archpriestesses. It rendered emotions visible as colors, allowing its bearers to perceive the smallest change in heart. Concealing one’s thoughts from them was next to impossible.

“I have heard much of you, Your Highness. Of your efforts as empress regent too. No doubt the empire’s vastness has impressed itself upon you anew as you

have settled into your role.”

The álfen woman looked up at the sky. Liz followed her gaze. The swift wind had ushered the clouds on, revealing the moon. The stars glittered around it, trying to outshine its gentle glow with their own fierce light.

“You fear that you will assume the throne only to fail to bring the lion to heel.” The archpriestess’s expression was inscrutable. “Is that not so?”

For a long time, Liz did not reply. That was not the whole of the matter, but it was certainly a great deal. Should she acknowledge as much or try to conceal it? It did not take long to reach a decision. There was no fooling the archpriestess’s eyes, and it would be inconvenient for the woman to look deeper than she already had.

With a faint smile, she admitted the truth—or part of it, at least. “I really can’t keep any secrets from you, can I? Yes, you’re right. I worry that I’m not fit to be empress.”

Now that she was closer than ever to the height of power, she could see the empire’s woes more clearly. Despotic nobles abused their power, and resentment smoldered in the bellies of the commonfolk. The fires of war spread by the day. Many of the empire’s neighbors wished for its downfall, and more than a few were working in the shadows to speed things along. None of that was new, however. It was simply the accumulated sins of a thousand years of rule coming home to roost. The previous emperors must have been plagued by similar worries as Liz was now, terrified they would be the ones to pull the wrong stick from the pile and bring the whole affair crashing down.

“Do you know, my predecessor once told me that His Majesty Emperor Greiheit felt much the same.”

“He did? Really? My father?”

In his youth, Emperor Greiheit had set out to unify Soleil, aspiring to make himself the thirteenth Divine. Many smaller nations had fallen prey to his ambition, and many more had capitulated through force or revolt. He had been arrogant, ruthless, and even more bellicose than Stovell, or so the stories said. Liz herself remembered him champing at the bit to invade Faerzen since her early childhood.

“It may be hard to believe, perhaps, but he visited Frieden many times to seek my predecessor’s counsel.” The archpriestess’s gaze softened as she looked up at the imperial palace. “She said he was a kindhearted man. Far more so than the world gave him credit for.”

That was an unexpected appraisal, to say the least, and one that was hard for Liz to fully accept. The archpriestess seemed to see her confusion and lifted an amused hand to her mouth.

“Are you familiar with his Fifth Spring, Your Highness?” she asked with a giggle.

That was a particularly famous anecdote of Greiheit’s rule, a short period before Liz’s birth when there had been no war in Soleil. As he had been among the most warmongering emperors the empire had ever seen, the time had been remarkable enough to be christened with a name.

“That was when he met your mother, Lady Primavera. We call it his Fifth Spring in the interests of preserving his imperial dignity, but the truth of the matter is that he was stricken with lovesickness.”

Liz knew her father as more monster than man. It was difficult to believe that he had even been capable of falling in love. Her mind struggled to grapple with the idea, and she could do nothing but stare at the archpriestess in surprise.

“Their meeting was a tumultuous one to say the least,” the woman continued. “I am told she struck him across the face—with muddied hands, no less. She had been working the fields, you see.”

The southern territories had been saddled with heavy taxes at the time, leading to discontent with Greiheit’s rule. He had been touring their cities in an attempt to alleviate the people’s frustrations. In time, he had grown weary of traveling and stopped by the town of Linkus with only his royal guard in tow. He and his entourage had descended on a tavern, emptied it out, and proceeded to grow rowdy with drink. Disgusted by their conduct, Primavera—the daughter of the then-margrave, Liz’s grandfather—had lost her patience, walked up to Greiheit, and punched him.

“‘What kind of emperor carouses while his people suffer?!’ she shouted, or so I am told.”

Liz paled. “She’s lucky she wasn’t executed for that...”

“She was fleet of foot, it seems. And those present were naturally slow to respond.” The archpriestess gave a small giggle. Judging by the trembling of her shoulders, the cover of night was all that saved her from descending into gales of laughter. “But she could not flee forever. Her beauty and willfulness were famous throughout the south, you see. Her identity was soon uncovered, and she and her father were obliged to visit the imperial capital to make a formal apology.”

Even that, however, did not proceed as planned. Perhaps deciding that she was doomed to execution no matter what, Primavera had lambasted the emperor in front of all his nobles and officials.

“Yet even then, he did not execute her,” the archpriestess said. “Indeed, not only did he forgive her transgressions, he furnished her with an abundance of riches.”

“Maybe she hit him a little *too* hard...”

The archpriestess blinked. “Do you know that she said much the same thing?”

Primavera had not accepted the emperor’s gifts. She had asked for them to be divided among her people and returned to Gurinda empty-handed. The nobles had been outraged at her impertinence, but that, too, Greiheit had forgiven with a smile. In the following months, he reviewed his tax policies and set about reforming local governance, throwing his support behind the southern territories with particular vigor.

“For perhaps three years, His Majesty sent Lady Primavera letter after letter and traveled south whenever he could spare the time from his duties. She could not resist his advances forever. Eventually, despite her low standing at court, she acquiesced to be his fourth empress consort.”

The archpriestess said no more. She looked back up at the statue of the Valditte as though to signify that her story was over.

Liz did not need to ask why she had fallen silent. Spring had not lasted long for the emperor. Shortly after Liz’s birth had come the Tragedy of the Rear Palace, perpetrated by none other than the first empress consort.

Greiheit had been traveling at the time, surveying the north. He returned to find the rear palace burned to ashes. Both the first empress consort and Liz's mother had been pulled from the wreckage, their bodies unrecognizable. Miraculously, Liz had managed to escape harm due to being in her grandfather's care, but he had followed his daughter shortly after. Kiork, Liz's uncle, had succeeded the title of margrave, but it had proved a heavy burden for his young shoulders, sending Gurinda into a period of decline. Without his support, Liz had been ousted from noble society, setting her on the thorny road that had brought her to the present day.

"It hasn't always been easy," Liz said, "but my mother made sure I wasn't alone."

She might not have had any clear memories of her mother, but—perhaps sensing that her time might be short—Primavera had left behind a wealth of letters.

"She gave me the strength to keep dreaming until I met Tris and Dios. And then I found Hiro to teach me, and Aura, and Scáthach, and so many more..." With one last look up at the Valditte, Liz turned her back on the archpriestess and began to walk away. "I have to go. The palace will be in uproar if I'm away for too long. You should head back as well. I'm sure it's the same for you."

"I will return in due time. I thought I might stay a little longer."

Liz stopped and looked back, cocking her head. "Would you like me to leave my guard behind for you?"

"Thank you for the offer, but that won't be necessary."

Hearing that, Liz cast out her awareness and was astonished to discover the presence of several people nearby, watching the proceedings. She hadn't even heard them breathe. They blended into the darkness so perfectly that they were barely distinct from thin air. It seemed the archpriestess had her own capable guards.

"So I see. In that case, good evening." Liz's footsteps were muffled as she walked away, perhaps in consideration of the late hour.

The archpriestess breathed a sigh as she watched her depart. "Perhaps you

do not realize how extraordinary that was, Your Highness,” she said in a whisper too soft to hear. “Even a Spiritblade’s chosen should not have been able to see them.”

Astonishment lingered in her gaze for a long time, even after her initial shock cooled. In time, her expression turned to sorrow, and she raised her eyes to the sky so no one could see.

“The time of her awakening is close. Whatever shall I tell Lord Surtr...?” She shook her head in vexation before looking to the brightest star in the sky. “Or could this, too, have been planned?” Her voice took on a pleading edge, audibly hoping to be told that she was wrong. “Oh, great Spirit King... What is it that you desire?”

No answer came. The archpriestess’s shoulders slumped in defeat. She cast another glance after Liz, but there was nothing there now but darkness, a black abyss that only exacerbated her unease.

“Do you know why Emperor Greiheit was so taken with Lady Primavera, Your Highness?”

The summer wind warmed the air, but it brought her no relief. An icy chill settled over her, sapping the warmth from her limbs, and as her anxiety grew, a knot of terror tightened in her chest.

“Because of her crimson hair.”

The wind snatched her fears away before they could take shape, and they melted into the dark, a tangle too tight to be unwound.



* * * * *

In the center of Natua, Baum's only city, rose the square structure of the Spirit King's Sanctum, where the Spirit King dwelled. The building had a long history. Erected when Mars founded Baum one thousand years ago, it was as old as the palace of the Grantzian Empire, and on account of Baum's influence over the affairs of Soleil, it frequently played host to rulers and other dignitaries come to pay their respects to the archpriestess. Now that Baum had a king, however, it had fallen under the control of Lord Surtr—that was to say, Hiro.

"How the archpriestess ever managed to entertain all these visitors by herself, I'll never know," Hiro murmured.

He gazed up at the moon through his chamber window. The writing desk behind him was piled high with books and other documents. He had turned his chair away as if trying to avoid looking at it.

"Not pointless, not unimportant, but so low priority that attending to them is a waste of time. Those are the worst kind of tasks, don't you think?"

"So you would prefer to pretend they don't exist?" replied a curt voice. "I daresay you spend more time concocting excuses to avoid your duties than they ever would have taken."

The voice issued from Hiro's bed. A woman lay beneath the covers. Most of her form was swathed in darkness, but her eyes gleamed with a bestial sharpness.

Any ordinary person would have been intimidated by the intensity of her gaze, but Hiro only gave a nonplussed shrug. "I'm not pretending they don't exist; I'm just putting them off. It's hard to be enthusiastic about doing chores when they'll cost me sleep."

He picked up a sheet of paper by his feet and pulled a face. Had it been a petition from the people of Baum, the imminent problem might have given his mind the jump start it required, but it was only a letter from a Lichtein noble. The contents were simple: an offer of marriage to his daughter, with documents and a portrait included. Similar proposals had arrived from Draal, which never seemed to take no for an answer; at least their persistence assured him that

Baum would not want for paper anytime soon. More than a few of the remaining letters were clearly written by people hoping to use Baum for their own ends, begging for spirit stones and the like.

“Maybe paperwork could be enjoyable in its own way during peacetime,” he said, “but not with war on the horizon. We need to think about what the future will look like, not how to spend the present.”

“Then why not leave it to that blockhead you named the king’s counsel?”

She was referring to Garda Meteor, a lilac-skinned zlosta. Dutiful and loyal, he served as Hiro’s right hand. Indeed, Hiro relied on him so heavily that Baum’s affairs would likely have fallen apart without him. He had earned the trust of the people too, to the point that they had recently begun to approach him with gifts as he made his way about town.

“I tried. He refused. In his words, he already has enough on his plate, so I could at least do my share.”

“Then how about your two shadows? I don’t doubt they would both jump at the chance.”

This time she meant the human siblings Huginn and Muninn. They were no less indispensable than Garda, frequently infiltrating foreign nations to gather intelligence on Hiro’s behalf. Even allowing for personal bias, Hiro was quietly confident that the unit of spies they had assembled outclassed even those of the empire. The pair could lack a little for formality, but he often found their candor refreshing in the course of his royal duties.

Thinking of them left him smiling a little. “Huginn is away on reconnaissance, and Muninn’s busy as well. Besides, they’re hardly state officials. Baum wouldn’t last three days with them in charge.”

With them and Garda indisposed, the only remaining candidate was the woman on the bed.

“Don’t even think about foisting your duties on me,” she said.

Although she showed no sign of emerging from under the covers, she watched his every move from the darkness. She was Luka Mammon du Vulpes, a former princess of Six Kingdoms. She had entered Hiro’s service after losing to

Liz in battle, and for the past two years, she had spent every minute of every day looking for an opportunity to take his head. It was all too clear what would happen if he delegated any matters of state to her.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “I wouldn’t dream of it. If I left you in charge of Baum, we’d be at war by tomorrow.”

With an irritable scowl, Luka lay down and retreated under the covers. Evidently, no help was forthcoming from other quarters. Hiro turned back to his desk, already composing tactful rejections to his marriage proposals.

At that moment, there was a thud from the door.

“Don’t mind me.”

A colossal man clad in heavy armor entered. He had not waited for a response to his knock. It was Garda. *Just my luck*, Hiro thought sourly. He’d finally worked up the energy to get to work, only to be interrupted before he could start.

Garda drew closer but stopped, conscious that Hiro was staring. “If you’ve something to say, take that mask off to say it. You’re too hard to read with it on.”

“No, never mind. It’s nothing.” Hiro pushed his mask back into place and looked at Garda afresh. “What do you need?”

The zlosta raised a hand containing two parchment scrolls. “Reports from the siblings. Should I start with the good news or the bad news?”

“Let’s go with the good news.”

“Huginn, then.” Garda unfurled the scroll, heedless of Luka’s eyes flashing in the dark beneath the bedcovers—an impressive feat, given that if looks could kill, he would probably be dead. “She’s succeeded in infiltrating the Anguis troops occupying Faerzen. Gotten herself hired as Queen Lucia’s assistant, no less.”

Hiro blinked. “How did she manage that?”

He had never even considered she might position herself so well that quickly. Normally, it would have been unthinkable. His highest hopes had been for her to find a placement as a military clerk.

“Lots of unemployment in a war-torn nation, and a lot of dead men leaving their positions open. Seems the queen’s letting women and Faerzen citizens cut to the front of the line. A calculated move, of course, but it’s working out for her.”

Winning the people’s hearts was a vital part of establishing order and stabilizing a nation’s affairs. By preferentially promoting women to official roles, Lucia was trying to do just that. Her strategy would take time to pay off, but it was well considered. The people of a war-ravaged nation wouldn’t care much if she had ulterior motives as long as she could put clothes on their backs, food in their bellies, and a roof over their heads.

Hiro rested his elbows on the desk, folded his hands, and rested his chin atop them as he expelled a troubled sigh. “It’s going to be hard for the empire to take Faerzen back if she starts winning its people’s loyalty.”

The empire might have had Scáthach, the last of Faerzen’s royal line, but however righteous her cause, it would mean nothing without the will of the people behind her. Retaking Faerzen would be one thing; ruling an unwilling populace, quite another. Nobody wanted to see the crown reinstated if it meant more bloodshed. Their affection for the royal line came a distant second to the interests of their own families.

“Huginn might have overreached this time,” Hiro mused. “It’ll be hard for her to act freely when she’s so close to Lucia.”

That was another problem to consider. It was hard to tell whether Huginn’s success had been a stroke of good fortune or a poisoned chalice. What was true for her, however, was also true for Lucia. The queen of Anguis had put herself in a position where she could not act on idle suspicions without consequence. Even if she had appointed Huginn knowing her true identity, the woman would be safe from any careless retaliation for the time being. In Lucia’s position, Hiro mused, he would try to use Huginn’s talents as best he could, especially considering the current state of Faerzen and the hard times facing Soleil. Whether Lucia was quite that shrewd, however, remained to be seen.

“We must have other agents trying to infiltrate the Anguis forces. Leave the intelligence-gathering to them while Huginn focuses on her duties. Tell her to

prioritize avoiding suspicion.”

Playing this wrong would destroy all they had gained. For now, the best way forward was to prioritize winning Lucia’s trust and securing Huginn’s position.

“Understood.” Garda cupped his chin in his hand and nodded thoughtfully. “I’ll have to see about finding a more secure line of communication.”

Huginn’s situation might not have been ideal, but at least she was now something of an ace in the hole. Still, if that was the good news...

“What’s the bad news?”

“Word from Muninn up in the north.” Garda’s voice lowered, and his eyes turned steely. A chill wind blew in their depths, advising Hiro to brace himself. “House Scharm’s lost control of the northern nobles. House Brommel, one of the other big players, has seized power.” He fell silent, regarding Hiro steadily as he waited for a reply.

Hiro didn’t need any help processing the information; he had already expected it. “Chancellor Graeci’s death dealt a heavy blow to House Scharm’s authority. I suppose they must never have recovered. Still, I wouldn’t be too quick to count them out entirely.”

Second Prince Selene was still alive and well. While he had been injured in the attack on the imperial palace, he was still the next likely candidate to succeed the throne after Liz.

“The north’s alive with whispers that the little lady is certain to be empress,” Garda said. “And with House Kelheit and House Muzuk dominating affairs at court, it’s little surprise the lesser nobles are turning on their leaders.”

Selene had always insisted that he had no interest in the throne as long as the north was secure. Now, it seemed his love for his homeland had come back to bite him. With House Scharm’s grip on power shaken by Chancellor Graeci’s death, the northern nobles must have seen the writing on the wall.

“Let’s talk about House Brommel,” Hiro said. “What do you know about them?”

He had heard the name on several occasions during his time in the empire.

They were an old and powerful household with a pedigree to match House Scharm's, but that had seemed to be the only noteworthy thing about them.

"I've been keeping an eye on the north these past two years," Garda said. "They've been biding their time for a long while, but it seems they've seen their chance."

"Have they been pushed into this by their peers, or were they pulling the strings from the start?"

"The latter, I'd wager. They've too much sway to be figureheads."

Hiro nodded. He concurred. "Now, the real question is what their next move will be. Dialogue or force, do you think?"

"The north's kept its hands clean of the fighting so far. They'll not bother with talking when they have whole legions unscathed. At the very least, they've the strength to lean on the empire's leaders if they wanted to."

Hiro lowered his gaze, his mind churning. With the imperial leadership's eyes turned to the occupied Faerzen, most of their forces were away from the capital. He couldn't afford for anything untoward to happen while they were distracted.

What's Selene playing at, letting the north fall apart so easily?

Hiro removed his mask, pinched the skin between his eyebrows, and sighed. "I suppose I'd better do something. This is as good a time as any to put our queen to the test."

"Are you certain? I thought you had decided the time was not yet ripe for that."

"Beggars can't be choosers, especially in times like these." Hiro settled back into his chair and looked up at the ceiling. "I'd hoped to wait a little longer before intervening in the north, but there's no point putting things off if the empire falls in the interim."

I can't expect everything to go to plan, anyway. People are unpredictable. Something will always go wrong somewhere.

His mind made up, he flashed Garda a grin. "Let's take this as an opportunity.

I've been hoping for a chance to adjust my plans anyway."

"Then I may leave this in your hands, One-Eyed Dragon?"

Hiro's smile widened. "Of course. Let's keep it between the two of us. I'll take care of matters in the north."

"And what of Muninn? Shall we let him continue his work?"

"Let someone else look into House Brommel and the northern nobles. Send Muninn on to Friedhof."

Friedhof, the Spirit Wall, was a great barrier built across the western border of the northern territories. It divided the empire from lands populated by the so-called wild races: archons, yaldabaoth, and monsters. The former two had appeared five hundred years prior, a discovery that had stricken the region with terror. Fortunately, the twenty-second emperor—who would later be known as Vulcan, the God of Arms—had recognized the threat they posed and used the power of the spirits to drive them to the farthest reaches of the north. Those untamed lands had become known as the Sanctuarium. Even now, they remained sealed behind Friedhof's bulwark, with one of the empire's five high generals charged with maintaining its defenses. Several incursions had been attempted over the centuries, but thanks to the brave efforts of generations of high generals, the wall had never been breached—or so the empire claimed, anyway.

"I want to know what's going on up there," Hiro said. "The instability in the north could affect Friedhof's defenses. If nothing else, I want to know the local nobles aren't going to switch their allegiances."

The empire's current domestic situation was complex. From Hiro's point of view—situated outside, but with knowledge of its internal affairs—it was clear as day that there were enemies within as well as without.

"No harm in being too cautious, I suppose," Garda grunted. "I'll send our best to look into it. Any messages for Muninn?"

"Tell him not to hesitate to come back if he thinks he's in danger. The same to the rest." Hiro's voice took on a more serious tone. "There's something rotten in the north. I've sensed it for a while."

Garda nodded in agreement. “Troubles ever piled on troubles. One look at your desk would attest to that.” He grinned at his own humorless joke.

Hiro smiled wryly. “Oh, that’s right. We’re marching in two days, aren’t we? Are the men ready?”

“You’ll have a guard of two thousand Crow Legion. I’d hoped to field more, but we’ve no Knights of the Spirits to maintain order while we’re away. Between that and our deployments in other lands, two thousand is all we can spare.”

The archpriestess had gone ahead to the empire in order to receive Hiro upon his arrival, and she had taken all of Baum’s knight-priestesses and Knights of the Spirits with her as her guard. All told, they barely numbered fifteen hundred. Armed with spirit weapons, they could give a much larger force a run for its money, but they were still a light guard, considering the renown and influence of their charge.

“I’ll send the archpriestess back to Baum as soon as I arrive,” Hiro said. “The people will be anxious without her here. Until then, you’re in command.”

Garda opened his mouth to reply, only to be interrupted by Luka’s languid voice. “Leaving a zlostia in place of the archpriestess? The people will riot. This oaf’s head will be lying in the town square by tomorrow morning.”

Garda jabbed a thumb in Luka’s direction with a scowl. “Is it truly wise to bring her with you, One-Eyed Dragon? Even if there was no risk of her being recognized, that tongue of hers is a diplomatic incident in the making.”

“What choice do I have? If I didn’t take her, she’d only follow me.”

Luka thought of nothing but taking Hiro’s life, and he had a feeling that her attempts had only been growing more frequent in recent weeks. The prospect of war between the empire and Six Kingdoms seemed to have roused her bloodlust. Gardia was right—it *was* risky to take her to the empire in that state—but there was no telling what she would do if forced to remain in Baum. If he was lucky, she might only demolish her chambers, but he didn’t want to risk coming back to corpses.

“Leave me behind with this oaf,” Luka spat, “and his head will be lying in the

town square by tomorrow.”

Why she was so fixated on Garda’s head ending up in the square, he could only guess, but there was no doubt she meant what she said. He shot her a conciliatory smile and turned back to Garda. “Sounds like I don’t have a choice. I don’t want blood all over the streets.”

“So it seems. Well, I’ll not complain about you taking the shrike off my hands. I’ve no wish to bloody these floorboards either.” The sour look on Garda’s face made it clear that he had no intention of assuming responsibility for Luka.

“It sounds like we’re settled, then. You’re in charge here until I get back. I’ll do my best to clear my plate before I leave.” Hiro looked at the mountain of documents and portraits on his desk and sighed. If he didn’t make an effort to reduce the pile, it would be several times higher by the time he returned.

“Very well. I’ll see myself out. I’ll send word if anything happens.” Garda turned and exited the room, waving over his shoulder as he departed.

Once the zlostá was gone, Hiro stood up from the chair and glanced at the bed. Luka had retreated into the dark beneath the covers. He turned away again and walked to the window, gazing up at the stars. Even as turmoil gripped the terrestrial world, the glimmering ocean shone on, as beautiful and indifferent as it ever was.

“Light would not be so brilliant without darkness. And the moon would not be so beautiful without the stars.”

The two were bound together forevermore, companions through years, decades, centuries, and on until eternity.

“And yet they’ll never meet. The moon can’t reign over the skies forever. Sooner or later, it has to yield its throne to the sun.”

A summer breeze caressed his cheek as he opened the window, stoking the conviction in his heart.

“Only one can rule. The moon and the sun cannot occupy the same sky.”

He had fallen short one thousand years ago. Even now, he could only stare from across a vast distance. But soon that would come to an end.

“I will reach out far enough to touch the stars. I will stretch out my hand until it grasps the moon.”

Darkness could not defeat light, no matter how hard it tried.

“When dawn breaks, the sun will burn me away.”

And the moon could not replace the sun, no matter how wistfully it dreamed.

“Grow stronger, Liz, until nobody can match you. Slay the gods. Make all one.”

The sun stood alone, burning those within its orbit and blinding those without, far beyond anybody’s grasp.

“This world has no need for five Lords.”

* * * * *

The empire’s northern territories lay under the control of the northern nobles and their leaders, House Scharm. As the climes of the far north were bitterly cold, most of the population resided in the comparatively temperate south, home to the belt of fertile land that formed the backbone of House Scharm’s wealth. Their seat of power was the Whitesteel Castle of Riesenriller, located in the center of the region.

Summer had no meaning in the Whitesteel Castle. The north knew nothing but winter all year round. Nobody was foolish enough to be out in the streets at this late hour, and the night was quiet but for the rattling of windows and the howl of the gale. The castle gate was locked shut, cold and impassive as ice. Fur-clad guards patrolled the battlements, stopping occasionally to peer down with torches in hand.

The interior of the castle’s snow-dusted walls was under such heavy guard that it may as well have been wartime. Numerous soldiers patrolled the grounds, their faces stern and their eyes alert. Not so much as a mouse would get past them unnoticed.

There was one place, however, without a guard in sight, and that was the private chambers of Second Prince Selene. He was currently bedridden, as he had been for two years since the attack on the palace. He had lost an eye as

well as his uncle, Chancellor Graeci, and was yet to recover—or so went the official story, at least. The truth was a little different.

“Lord Graeci’s remains have been discovered, Your Highness,” one of his retainers said regretfully. “They were found beneath his chambers.”

The speaker was Herma, one of Selene’s trusted Twinfang Generals. Thirty this year, he was a man of slight build, but beneath his armor, his muscles were hard as steel—he was in perfect shape, with not an ounce of fat on his body. His eyes, sharp as a hawk’s, softened with sorrow as he bowed his head.

“As I suspected, although I take no joy in being correct.” With half of his face swathed in bandages, Selene cut a sordid figure. He sighed, making no effort to conceal his dismay. “What state was he in?”

“Only his bones remained, Your Highness. It appears that he passed away a long time ago.”

Flesh took a long time to rot in the frozen north—longer than a year or two, at least.

“When did my lord uncle last return to Riesenriller?”

“Around three years ago, Your Highness. I believe His Majesty was preoccupied campaigning in Faerzen, and Lord Graeci took the advantage of the lull in his duties to return home for a while.”

“A rare opportunity to elude Gandiva’s sight,” Selene mused. “Still, it’s hard to imagine he could have been killed beneath his own roof. Perhaps he was waylaid on the road...”

Even that seemed unlikely. Graeci had been an exceptionally cautious man. Any vulnerability he displayed was in truth safeguarded by dozens of traps designed to ensure his safety. It was hard to believe that anybody could have managed to assassinate him—and yet it was evident that somebody had.

“If my lord uncle truly was killed and replaced within Riesenriller, there can only be one explanation.” Anger and sorrow did battle in Selene’s voice. “There is a traitor in our inner circle.”

Herma’s breath caught. He looked appalled by the very possibility. It was hard

to blame him—the north had been bound as fast as iron under Graeci and Selene’s leadership. The northern nobles had admired both deeply, to the point that they banded together to insist that Selene was worthy of the throne.

“Believe it or don’t, the truth will not change,” Selene said. “And if you look around us, you’ll see that it must be the truth.”

The enemy must have been spinning their web for years, if not decades, taking care to evade his and Graeci’s notice as they waited for their chance. That much was clear to see from the northern nobles’ actions over the past two years.

“No sooner am I wounded and my uncle struck down than the whole north falls apart.” The second prince’s voice took on an edge of contempt. “Everybody acting in their own interests, without a thought for duty or compassion. Such is the age we live in now.”

Herma frowned. “There is truth in what you say, Your Highness, but the world will not reward the unfaithful. Lord Graeci often said that the people of the north were like his own sons and daughters. Every noble in these lands owes him some manner of debt. To turn on him so callously...” The man was clearly holding back anger. His teeth crunched like grinding stones.

Selene tried to think how to convince his loyal subordinate, but found little of substance to offer. “Don’t forget,” he said finally, “House Scharm are only custodians of the north. It’s the royal family that rules. Besides, our nobles may be loyal to the throne and grateful to my uncle, but they owe me nothing.”

He had forgotten that when he turned his eyes away from the capital. It had been arrogance to assume they cared for him as he did for them. Perhaps this was his punishment for that misstep.

Herma, however, was not so resigned. He struck the floor with his fist. “Are you not the second prince? They have let House Brommel cajole them into turning their backs on the royal family!”

“Who would call them traitors for supporting Liz? Her blood is as royal as mine.”

Anyone would choose the princess who had won a victory in Steissen over the

prince who had been outfought by ne'er-do-wells. More to the point, while officially she was acting at the bedridden emperor's behest, in practice she and her aides were already ruling the empire. She was surrounded by veteran nobles who had seen all the glory and shame, all the rise and ruin, and all the highs and lows of life under the sun. They would be attentive to the slightest change at court.

"We were naive. We thought the security of the north was all that mattered, and it cost us."

"Nobody could blame you for loving your homeland, Your Highness. And besides, with Friedhof to our west, we are harder-pressed than the other territories."

Herma had a point. It was no exaggeration to say that the stability of the north was the stability of the empire. If the wild races were to breach the Spirit Wall, the tragedy of five hundred years ago would spill out afresh across imperial lands, and the modern empire had no champions like the twenty-second emperor with three Spiritblades at hand. Indeed, Liz's Lævateinn was the only one that remained in imperial possession.

"My father is dead. My uncle is no more. The west is in tatters and the central territories are in turmoil. Only the east and the south still stand strong. The north is dry tinder, and there's no telling when it will catch fire."

Selene sat up on his bed and gazed out of the window. The north saw snow even in summer, and the chilly air pricked at his empty right eye socket. Still, he had grown more mobile in recent months, and that was progress.

"It won't be long before I'm fully recovered, and then I'll be able to put these rebellious nobles in their place. It's just a matter of whether we have that long."

"House Brommel has been entertaining the prominent noble families with nights of feasting, Your Highness," Herma said. "Their intent to curry favor is plain. It seems they are set in their course."

"I still think we ought to speak with them."

"With respect, I fear the time for talk may have passed. The old head may have been willing to listen, but the same cannot be said of the new. He thinks

only of his own ambitions, Your Highness. He will make you his puppet if given the chance.”

“Perhaps, but I owe it to the old head to try. Maybe we’re fated to oppose one another, but we might still find some common ground.”

Selene still had no intention of taking the throne, even knowing his lack of interest was fuelling his nobles’ discontent. If he couldn’t even hold the north together, he certainly wasn’t qualified to shoulder the weight of an entire empire. And what was more...

“I have no right to be emperor. Not like Liz does. I’m no Spiritblade’s chosen. I can’t even be certain that I’m a legitimate heir.”

“You must not lend your ear to such wicked rumors, Your Highness. Plenty of emperors did not wield Spiritblades.”

“Yes, the twenty-eighth, the thirtieth, and the thirty-sixth. And do you know what they all had in common?”

Herma looked puzzled. “They did not even know how to wield a sword, or so I hear.”

His failure to grasp Selene’s point earned him a sharp glare from the second prince. He stiffened, realizing that he had answered incorrectly.

“Everybody talks about their lack of martial skill,” Selene said, “but for a long time, every emperor was chosen by a Spiritblade. Until three hundred years ago, that is.”

A particular theory was gaining traction among the nobles: that the imperial family no longer bore the blood of the first emperor. While it had only surfaced recently, the central elements had existed for much longer. The key claim was that the first emperor’s lineage had ended with the imperial assassination three hundred years ago. The recent deaths in the royal family had galvanized the theory; its proponents claimed that generations of illegitimate emperors had invited the Spirit King’s wrath, and the empire was now bound for an unprecedented crisis. Even the commonfolk had begun to whisper of the darkness within the house of von Grantz.

“For that, you would yield the throne to the Rose Princess? That pernicious

speculation?”

“Crimson hair is as holy as black. It is the mark of the God of Arms.” Selene shot a dumbstruck Herma a glance before turning his gaze out of the window, where a fierce wind was blowing. “They say that was why Father took Liz’s mother as his consort. And of course, she was chosen by Lævateinn, its first wielder since Emperor Artheus himself. There’s enough evidence to convince anyone.”

“I still cannot believe it. The commonfolk are too quick to credit rumors in this nation, just like they were with Fourth Prince Hiro.” Herma’s voice was growing firmer and his gestures more animated, unable or refusing to believe what Selene was saying. “And even if it were true! Even if the royal family no longer bore the blood of von Grantz, have they not steered this empire for three hundred years?!”

“Not everybody feels the same. The citizens of the empire take pride in being ruled by descendants of the divine. People place weight on history, and most of all on blood.” Selene turned away from the window and leveled a stern gaze on Herma once more. “What do you think the commonfolk would do if they learned the present royal family was descended from those who slew the true heirs?”

“Y-Your Highness, surely that cannot be...”

“They would want to restore the rightful heir. Or perhaps they would simply avert their eyes from the truth.”

In the worst case, paranoid commonfolk could even be incited to uprising by foreign agitators.

“I don’t want the throne if it will mean the collapse of the empire. I’d be glad to give it up to Liz.”

Three years prior, when Stovell and Brutahl were still alive, few people would have flocked to Liz’s cause. She might even have split the empire in two. Now, however, no one would object to her taking the throne.

“The darkness within the royal family must never be brought to light.” Selene spoke the words with such force that Herma could not object. A small but

conciliatory smile spread across his face. “Now, what about Phroditus?”

Phroditus, Herma’s sister, was the other of the Twinfang Generals. While younger than her brother in years, she was a hot-blooded warrior who reveled in battle. She was currently stationed at a fort on the Lebering border, keeping a watchful eye on the kingdom during its recent resurgence.

“It seems she has been scouting out Lebering’s movements, but her work is mostly done. She means to return tomorrow.” Herma did not seem pleased by the prospect of his sister’s homecoming. His shoulders slumped in undisguised dismay.

Selene offered the man a consolatory smile. “I’m guessing she hasn’t been very successful.”

“Many nobles to the east are deep in bed with Lebering. And Baum holds sway over them as well...” Herma spoke like he had something caught in his teeth.

Selene’s lips curled in a self-effacing smile. “I see. I left House Brommel unattended for too long, and they lost patience.”

Lebering had been growing rapidly in strength ever since the coronation of Queen Claudia. Perhaps that was only to be expected—the zlosta had once ruled Soleil, and they easily could again under the appropriate leader. By contrast, the north had grown weak, and its nobles—particularly those with lands near Lebering—lay awake at night worried for their livelihoods. Fear of the zlosta had sent them running to save their own skins.

“They will all be justly punished in due time, Your Highness. I will make sure of that.”

“Before then, we must shore up our defenses. Once Phroditus returns, assign her to keep watch over the lands around Riesenriller. I want her alert for the slightest movement from House Brommel or Lebering. This is a strange time, and war may spark in strange ways.”

“Understood, Your Highness. I will see to it.” Herma bowed low and, with one final worried glance at Selene, left the chamber.

Once he was gone, a deep sorrow came over Selene’s face. He turned to look

out of the window once more.

“The Demiurgos... The dream-wracked Faceless King... Ngh!”

A twinge of pain ran through his right eye, and he grimaced as he bore it.

“Did you know this was coming?”

He recalled the last time he had seen the fourth prince, just before his fateful departure two years prior. In retrospect, there had been a hint of foreknowledge in his resolve—but had that been knowledge of the present crisis, or of something else entirely? In any case, how shameful to have presumed to caution him, only to end up like this.

“Forgive me, Hiro...”

A chill wind rattled the window, exacerbating his unease, filling the chamber with fear. The clouds were gathering, and the whirling snow steadily obscured all sight.

* * * * *

The northern territories were home to a great many prestigious houses, but the oldest were House Scharm, House Heimdall, and House Brommel. All three had produced empress consorts, and their ties to the royal family ran deep. While overshadowed by House Scharm’s prominence in recent years, House Heimdall had defended Friedhof for generations, and its current head, one Hermes von Heimdall, was one of the five high generals. His children proudly served House Scharm as the twin lieutenants of Second Prince Selene. House Brommel, on the other hand, had almost fallen apart two years prior with the death of its former head, but his firstborn son and heir had turned its failing fortunes around, making it into a power to rival House Scharm.

The center of House Brommel’s power was Logue, one hundred sel—three hundred kilometers—to the east of Riesenriller. It was one of the largest cities in the north. In recent years, however, Lebering’s prosperity had drawn the attention of the merchants, leaving a sullen cloud hanging over Logue’s streets.

In the center of the city towered Castle Himinbjörg. Soldiers filled the grounds, training intently, and the air was so tense it could easily have been mistaken for wartime. Guards clad in heavy armor patrolled the interior.

Nowhere was more heavily protected than the private chambers of the head of the house—and yet the sentries at the door were oddly dead-eyed, their faces hanging slack.

A curious gathering had assembled inside the room. The candle on the table wavered in the windless air, casting their shadows across the walls. There were seven in all, each wearing a hood that obscured their face.

“Oh lord, blessed lord, father to us all...” The figure’s voice quavered as they spoke. “How fares your body?”

The question was directed to the man seated in a chair by the window, sipping from a glass of wine. His attention was not on the figures around the table, but on the moon outside—or perhaps, judging by the distant look in his eyes, on something farther still.

The man’s name was Typhos von Brommel, and he had become Duke von Brommel at the age of sixty-seven after his father passed from old age. Despite taking his position so late in life that he had briefly become the talk of the court, he looked hardly a day over thirty-five, and his blond hair and golden eyes radiated a dignity that lent him an aura of grandeur. Noble as a lion, his presence filled the room with solemnity.

“Well enough,” he replied. “But it may be prudent to ready replacements.”

“What of your old vessel?”

“It is too steeped in curses to be of use. Even I would struggle to wear it now. I wonder how I ever did.”

Typhos’s tone was unsettlingly lacking in inflection. His icy demeanor was not even cruel, but simply vacant—it sounded like every emotion had been shorn from his voice. He could almost have been talking to himself as he addressed the hooded figures. Perhaps even more unnervingly, they did not seem to find that remarkable.

“The threat to your life must have been great, my lord. Great enough that you had no other choice.”

“And yet, it ended as it ever does. Naught more than bluster, incapable of dealing a fatal blow. And as ever, our sole recourse was to retreat to the

shadows, bide our time, and plot our foes' torment."

Even then, Typhos's voice took on no emotion. The hooded figures, on the other hand, began to simmer with hatred. The accumulated loathing of centuries radiated fire enough to warp the air.

"Yes, my lord! Oh, yes, indeed! But now, the time for waiting has passed!"

The man spoke with theatrical gestures, as though he were a player on the stage, although even that was not enough to draw Typhos's interest.

"The Spirit King is nowhere to be found, his power lost! The Faerie King, too, suffers the ravages of age!" The man's voice grew wilder as loathing twisted his lips into a bestial growl. "Surtr, the Black-Winged Lord, once proud equal to our Father, was bested by a lowly human! Now, only the Iron Monarch remains, keeping his quiet watch across the sea to the north!"

His oration became so wild toward the end that he forgot to breathe. As he finally concluded, Typhos waved a dismissive hand and looked around the room.

"It brings me no pleasure to see a sibling fall. Yet at last, this war that has continued since antiquity will come to an end, and the world will become one." He kicked the wine from the table and watched the unbroken bottle roll across the floor. His empty eyes never wavered from the indigo liquid. "The central territories will soon collapse without our assistance. They no longer require our attention. By the time we reach our full power, the humans will be ripe for the slaughter."

He gestured idly with his hand. The spilled wine reformed into a map of the world.

"Let us not be too hasty, lest we trip over our own feet. Better to corner our prey slowly and surely."

He rose, kicked the bottle aside, and stomped down on the northern continent. Wine splashed high, but he paid it no mind, crushing the land underfoot with visceral hatred.

"First comes the northern continent and the Iron Monarch."

The hooded figures bowed as one, quiet but radiating zeal. Their lips curled into grins of equal parts anticipation and delight.

“Of course, my lord,” one said. “Our preparations have already begun. They have built quite the curious culture for themselves, one that was no small matter to infiltrate, but our work is almost done.”

“Good. Let us show the little folk what a true Lord is capable of.”

“As you command.” With that, four figures vanished without a sound.

Typhos turned his attention to the three who remained. “I have not forgotten you. Nemea, you will go to Lebering; Khimaira, to Six Kingdoms; Hydra, to Faerzen. You are to undermine those nations to the best of your ability.”

The man named Hydra stepped forward. “May I take that as permission to intervene in the war, my lord?”

“Do as you will. I would not stop you from taking pleasure in your work.”

“As you command.”

“I ask only that you do not force me to intervene. I will not suffer a repeat of the second prince.”

“Of course, my lord. But, if I may...what of Baum?”

“They are of little consequence. Let us leave them alone. Allow them to enjoy a fleeting peace.”

“Understood, my lord.”

With that, the three figures vanished. Silence fell once more. The room was empty but for Typhos...and one other.

“My curse grows in strength, Ladon.” Typhos lowered himself back into his chair, crossed his legs, and cast his eyes to the floor.

At that moment, a crash rocked the room. The bottle had exploded—and yet no sooner had it shattered than it began to repair itself, the splattered wine lifting from the surroundings to return inside the glass. Before long, it had reverted to its former state. Yet it was far from a perfect reproduction. Typhos grasped it by the neck and lifted it up to the candlelight. Impurities swirled

within the wine.

“Death, life, and antipathy intertwine, and they would ripen into foul fruit. The upstart would surpass the deity.”

“What would you do, my lord?”

“Better to leave well enough alone. Extend ourselves on one side, two sides, three sides, four, and soon enough we will spread ourselves too thin. We cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the past.”

“Perhaps it would behoove us to keep a closer watch, my lord. Several persons have caught my attention. I will include them in my operations.”

“As you will. And do not neglect to submit your selection. Those most fit to receive my power.”

“What of the troublemaker? Shall I retrieve her?”

“Leave her. She will return to the fold soon enough. Besides, she is a known quantity, not strong enough to stand in our way. Let her have her fun. Better that than to earn her pique.”

“As you command, my lord.”

With that, the final figure disappeared, leaving Typhos alone, gazing at the bottle of wine.

“Black-Winged Lord. Mars. Dáinsleif. Hero King of Twinned Black. All these names you wear. The hour when I wring your neck with my own hands is not so distant.”

With no one around to hear, Typhos finally let his emotions loose. The bottle shattered anew under the weight of his wrath, and the sound of wrenching air echoed through the room. At last, he let slip hatred worthy of a human—more than worthy of a human. So great was the shame he had suffered so long ago, a grudge that festered even after a thousand long years. He would wash clean the humiliation of his past. It was for that reason that he had clung to life.

“I will take your head, I swear it.”

An icy smile spread across his face as he rubbed feverishly at his neck.

The fourteenth day of the eighth month of Imperial Year 1026

The northern quarter of Frieden was cloaked in silence, and the guards who usually patrolled its chalk-white corridors were nowhere to be seen. The Knights of the Spirits, Baum's elite troops, were all in the empire, attending to the archpriestess. With them absent and the common soldiery forbidden entry, the place was an empty husk ruled by quiet. Yet none would dare intrude—not while it lay under the watchful eye of King Surtr of Baum, the strongest and most fearsome guard in Soleil.

Hiro walked through the corridors of Frieden with Garda by his side. The clatter of the zlosta's armor broke the silence, ringing loud enough to obscure both of their footfalls. At last, the pair reached their destination.

Garda breathed a sigh of admiration. "Now there's a sight. Like stepping into another world. To think it was hidden away in Frieden's belly..."

"This is where the Spirit King lived. Only a chosen few were ever allowed inside."

"Hm." Garda blinked. "And you'd allow a zlosta into such a sacred place?"

Hiro spread his arms wide and smiled mischievously. "The archpriestess might not like it, but she isn't here right now."

He cast a sideways glance at the foot of a tree where Luka sat. The woman was staring fixedly at the ground, muttering under her breath as she jabbed feverishly at the earth with a stick. It was a disconcerting sight, but not a new one. He turned back to Garda, who was looking on with a slightly pained expression.

"More to the point," he continued, "nobody will overhear us here."

Garda glanced around warily. "You suspect enemy spies in Frieden?"

Hiro shrugged, then lowered himself into a garden chair facing away from the door—the same chair that Claudia and the archpriestess had used. "I don't know what they are. But something means us harm."

He seemed oddly relaxed, enough to persuade Garda to sit opposite him,

although the zlostas did not lower his guard.

“So?” Garda leaned closer. “Why have you brought me here?”

Hiro closed his eyes and cupped his ear in his hand. “A great many spirits reside here. Can you see them, by any chance? Or perhaps hear their voices?”

“You should know as well as anyone that I cannot. But I feel their pull on my mana.”

There was a power at work here that was anathema to mana. As a zlostas, Garda would be able to sense that most keenly of all. He would feel as though his reserves were being forcibly drained, even though he was not consciously using them.

Hiro removed his mask, revealing his face. “There is only one such place in all of Aletia.”

Garda leaned back, his breath audibly catching. The boy’s right eye gleamed gold, and his left swirled with the uncanny black light of the abyss. Both of them were trained on Garda, suddenly intense.

“Its name is the Forest of Anfang.”

That was the same forest where Hiro had first appeared after being summoned back to Aletia; the same forest where he had stumbled upon Liz returning from bathing. In other words, it was the site of their first meeting.

Hiro silently indicated behind Garda. The zlostas stood up and turned around. Ahead rose the statues of two of the Twelve Divines: Zertheus, the First God, and Mars, the War God. A shining sphere floated in the air between them, beneath which bubbled a small, clear spring.

“This is very much sacred ground. One that, as I said, only a chosen few were ever allowed to enter.”

Garda turned back to Hiro. “What do you mean by—”

He didn’t finish his sentence. Hiro thrust out a hand, interrupting him.

“You may not believe it, but this is imperial soil.” The corners of Hiro’s mouth pulled into a faint smile, as if to say that the time was at hand. “You’re no fool. I’m sure you have an inkling of what it is I’m hiding. What it is I want.”

His eyes filled with sorrow, as though he were cursing himself—as though he were confessing to a grave sin.

Garda drew himself up, his expression stiffening. He sensed the weight of the words to follow, that once he heard them to the end, he would have no choice but to follow Hiro until his life was spent. But he did not falter. He only stared back.

“It began a long, long time ago. Longer than you might even believe.”

Seeing Garda’s resolve, Hiro had no more reason to hold back. His voice almost sounded apologetic as he began his tale.

Chapter 2: Roar in the Silence

The fifteenth day of the eighth month of Imperial Year 1026

On the empire's border with Faerzen lay the key strategic location that was Delshia Citadel. Pending Liz's arrival, it was currently under Aura's command.

"Pff."

A dissatisfied sigh sent the girl's silver hair fluttering. Her leaden gray eyes darted about anxiously, filled with a stern glint. Put together, those two features tended to give others the impression that she was coldhearted, but the longer they looked at her, the more entranced they became by her dainty figure. With bangs trimmed level with her eyebrows and large, doe-like eyes, her appearance would stir anyone's protective instincts. Combined with her slender frame, she exuded the charm of a porcelain doll. It was remarkable that she retained her figure at the age of nineteen.

In short, the past two years had done absolutely nothing for her stature. That was not for lack of wishing, of course. Still, with her growth spurt long over, she had no choice but to abandon any hopes of matters improving. Fortunately, she was one of the sixth princess's most trusted retainers and a commander with a stellar record. No one would dare make any untoward comments about her height.

Her quarters in Delshia Citadel were sparse. They contained little more than a bed, a writing desk, and four chairs—one at the desk, three for visitors. The only other addition was a large bookcase set up against the wall, packed with texts on the subject of her beloved War God.

Today, the curious room had a visitor: Culann Scáthach du Faerzen, last of the royal line of Faerzen. She was a handsome woman of perhaps eighteen or nineteen years of age. Her turquoise hair, lustrous as silk, was gathered up in a bun at the back of her head. Her features were as delicate as spun glass, and her skin seemed as fine as porcelain. She wore a suit of sturdy armor on top of her slender frame, sheathing her quiet serenity in battle fervor. The maturity

she had gained over the past two years gave her the peerless charm of a valkyrie.

“Lady Aura?” she asked. “Are you listening to me?”

Aura remained unresponsive, her gaze downcast. Scáthach stepped closer, eyeing her dubiously. Eventually, she spotted the book in Aura’s hands and planted her hands on her hips in exasperation.

“Again with the Black Chronicle? Surely you must already know it by heart.”

Aura was silent for a moment. “I just got to the good part.”

“The battle between Mars and the primozlosta Hydra, I presume?”

That episode was Aura’s particular favorite, as she had told Scáthach at great length. After so many lectures, Scáthach would daresay she herself could recite it word for word.

“Hydra tried to trick him, but it didn’t work. Mars was too clever.”

“If you’re there, I suppose you’ll be finished soon.” Scáthach took a seat on a nearby chair rather than pushing the point. Better to wait. Interrupting Aura while she was reading was a good way to put her in a bad mood for the rest of the day, and if the War God was involved, she would grow so irritable that it could impact her work. Her obsession only seemed to have deepened over the past two years, and she was getting harder to rein in by the day.

“Mm.”

At last, Aura set the Black Chronicle down and nodded to herself several times in satisfaction. She closed it carefully before returning it to the shelf as though she were handling a delicate vase. Her expression remained as blank as ever, but her general demeanor changed dramatically.

“A report came today,” she said bluntly. While her expression remained as blank as ever, her demeanor switched dramatically. “The Resistance is down to five thousand men.”

Her outward appearance might not have changed much over the past two years, but she had matured in other ways. As of yet, there had been no large-scale battles to showcase her strategic acumen, but when the time finally came

to unveil her talents, her name would no doubt resound throughout Soleil.

“So you are already aware,” Scáthach said. “Our situation grows direr by the day.”

Not so long ago, the Faerzen Resistance had fought against the empire, but now that the land was occupied by Six Kingdoms and the domestic situation was beginning to stabilize, its members were starting to trickle back to their wives and children. Scáthach had no intention of stopping them. She would not call them traitors, nor could she force them to stay. Their happiness was their own, and she would not ask them to give it up for the interests of their former rulers.

“The road ahead will not be easy,” she continued. “Even if our cause is righteous.”

Aura nodded. “We can’t leave Six Kingdoms unattended any longer. The people of Faerzen will grow hostile to the empire.”

Faerzen’s scars had yet to heal, but its people had accepted their futures under their new occupiers and were beginning to move forward. To drag them back into war would be like a blow to the back of the head.

“Queen Lucia is quite capable, it seems. She has abolished any policies that caused suffering to the citizenry and instituted more progressive practices.” Scáthach unfurled a document her subordinates had sent her and held it up for Aura to see. “And Faerzen’s new capital is recruiting residents. They promise food, housing, and low taxes.”

Lucia was casting out tempting bait. No doubt her intention was to render the Resistance powerless. She had already given them ample reason to set down their weapons and return to their families. Now she was trying to win the people’s support in order to deny the empire justification for their war.

As Aura scanned the document, she reached into a desk drawer and took out a small piece of paper. It was a detailed map of Faerzen.

“It would be stupid to attack Anguis’s strongholds first. We should start with another kingdom’s territories.”

Anguis enjoyed especially high support from the people. An attack on its

territories was guaranteed to meet with resistance from the commonfolk. They would have to think of somewhere else to begin their campaign.

“Somewhere order is less established, then,” Scáthach said. “Although that may be hard to come by. The other kingdoms are following Anguis’s lead.”

“Probably. But it’s álfar that are ruling, and they’re arrogant. Human policies won’t work as well for them.”

“The people are still tired of war. They will see us as invaders.”

Many of the commonfolk still had affection for the royal family, but nobody would want to give up their newfound stability after so many years of uncertainty. The empire’s war preparations were progressing, but moving to action would require an inciting spark, and so far that had proven hard to come by.

“Liz will be here next week with the Fourth Legion. I’ll think of something by then.”

Strength was filtering in from across the empire’s territories. Some wanted to pay their respects to the imperial heir apparent, some saw the opportunity to make their name, and some hoped to win themselves a fortune. All sorts of motivations were converging on Delshia Citadel, and some could not be trusted. Aura and her allies would have to winnow those out in the battle to come. It was a good opportunity to see who was likely to prove an obstacle to Liz’s reign. If such individuals were not ferreted out, they could potentially undermine the empire’s very foundations.

Scáthach stood and turned. “I ought to go. I will ask my subordinates to see what they can— Oof!”

All of a sudden, she tripped, falling face-first to the floor.

“Are you all right?” Aura asked.

For a moment, Scáthach did not move, but after a second, she stood back up. “Please pretend you did not see that,” she said, flushing beet red. Her expression turned sheepish as she looked up at the ceiling.

“You must be tired. Get some rest.” Aura slipped down from her chair and

walked around the desk to where Scáthach stood.

“Perhaps so. I have no desire to be a burden.” Scáthach’s hands moved to hide her face.

“No need to be so embarrassed. You only tripped.”

“I have never disgraced myself like this in public before. I admit, I am not certain what I should say.”

Aura fell silent for a long moment. “I understand,” she said finally. She produced a cloth from the depths of her sleeve and held it out.

“N-No, I’m quite all right! Um...I ought to be going!” Somehow flushing even redder than before, Scáthach stalked out of the room.

“Wai—”

Before Aura could say anything, the door slammed shut. Scáthach felt the guards’ eyes boring into her as she exited the room. She acknowledged them with a wave before either could speak and walked off down the hallway.

Eventually, once the light in the corridor had faded to dingy gloom, she sagged against the wall and stared up at the ceiling. She struck her head hard against the wall. Again she did it, and again, as though trying to rid herself of a nightmare, but it did nothing to dispel the unease upon her face.

“Curse it...” she spat. “Curse it all! I won’t stop!”

Blood trickled from her nose. She wiped it away carelessly and looked down at the back of her hand. A sticky red stain stared back at her. She wiped again and again, but the blood kept flowing. An iron tang filled her nostrils, and warm wetness clung to the base of her nose.

She chuckled to herself. “All the fault of my own weakness, I suppose.”

A self-effacing smile sent blood dripping from her chin. A shadow fell over her brow as she watched it splatter on the floor.

“Time is no longer my ally.”

She planted a hand on the wall and, with labored steps, set off walking again. She produced a cloth from her pocket and set it to her nose, bowing her head

so nobody could see her face.

“Just a little longer, Gáe Bolg,” she whispered to her absent companion. “Stay with me just a little longer. That is all I ask.”

There was no reply. The corners of her eyes creased, and tears threatened to burst forth as she continued along the hall.

She could not stop. She could not falter. Her place was on the vanguard, and she would not yield it. Her vengeance was not yet done. As long as her nemesis lived, she would brave any battlefield in her way.

“Though my path may be mistaken...”

Her parents and siblings still came to her at night, pleading for help in a world stained red, begging for death as they shed crimson tears. They had not been allowed to die, even as seemingly endless torture robbed them of their dignity. The sight of their suffering refused to leave her mind.

“I know you are close at hand. The Boreal Sovereign tells me so.”

His laughter had echoed through her mind ever since the day she lost her home. Even now, his hateful mirth rang in her ears.

“I will kill you with my own hands; I swear it.”

She piled hatred’s kindling upon the embers of her resentment, stoking it into vengeful rage. Like deadly poison, like stagnant mud, it began to seep into her soul.

* * * * *

The world boiled beneath a summer sky. Sunlight glimmered off the western sea, illuminating the shore. Full-grown trees shielded the streets from the glare, while a cooling tidal breeze blew in over the ocean. Barley-skinned workers unloaded goods from merchant ships, carried new crates aboard, and saw the vessels off to sea.

Such sights were common in the city of Fierte. The capital of the kingdom of Greif, it boasted the largest and most varied markets in Six Kingdoms. Greif’s status as host to the High King did wonders to bolster international trade and encourage immigration. As a result, around half of the city’s population was

foreign-born.

On a hill overlooking the town rose an opulent palace. The road to its gates was thronged with soldiers—over ten thousand, in fact. They made for an intimidating sight, and the charge in the air did nothing to relieve the tension. Their presence filled the hearts of onlookers with unease.

A short distance away from the noise of the road, an open-air camp had been set up. The flags of all six kingdoms fluttered in the wind. The monarchs who should have led them, however, were nowhere to be seen. They were at the end of the heavily guarded hill road, inside the palace of Fierte that formed the beating heart of Six Kingdoms.

“The king of Scorpius is absent again, I see.”

In one of the chairs placed around the round table, a woman sat fanning herself. She was Lucia Levia du Anguis, queen of the kingdom of Anguis. In a word, she was beguiling. A seductive aroma wafted from her every gesture, brain-tinglingly sweet. Her appearance was so dazzling that just a look could hold others in thrall. Her skin was as delicate as an álf's, and the curves of her body were nothing short of a work of art. Crossing her legs revealed a tempting flash of thigh and drew the eye farther up to the darkness at their fork.

“I fear his condition has worsened, Your Majesty,” replied the Scorpius representative. “He has sent me, his chancellor, in his place.” They wore a white hood that left only their mouth visible, making their expression impossible to read, but the paleness of their skin and their distinctive pointed ears left no doubt that they were an álf.

Lucia snorted, unimpressed. “Oh, has he now? He looked perfectly well when I visited him last month.”

“An act, I fear, Your Majesty. He wished to avoid worrying you.”

“Then would you care to explain why the learned álfar still cannot make sense of his symptoms? Has it not been four years since his collapse?”

“We are not all-knowing, Your Majesty. I would flatter myself that I know something of statecraft, but the medicinal arts fall far outside my purview. We all have our specialities, just as humans do.”

The chancellor was evidently avoiding the question. A wicked smile spread across Lucia's face as she moved to press them further, but a booming voice cut her off.

"I second that, queen of Anguis. We álfar are not omnipotent, nor should you expect us to be."

The speaker was the king of Tigris—an individual more rough-spoken than was usual for the typically elegant álfar. His body and head were covered completely by a white hooded mantle, making it impossible to see his face.

"The chancellor has done fine work leading Scorpius while the king recovers. It ill becomes you to cast doubts on such a capable retainer."

That only compounded Lucia's vexation. Raising her fan over her mouth, she rounded on King Tigris with undisguised hostility. "Why, it almost sounds like you would believe any retainer capable so long as they were an álf."

She had no love for systems that gave álfar all the power at humans' expense. Excluding Anguis, only two of the six kingdoms were ruled by humans: Greif, the seat of the High King, and Esel, whose young queen commanded little respect from the other monarchs and ruled as they told her to. The girl in question sat with eyes tightly shut, evidently trying to wish herself away from the chamber. She had not spoken a word for fear of offending the others.

Lucia turned to her. "Have you nothing to add, Queen of Esel? Please, do not hold back on account of your freshness to this table."

The girl rose stiffly to her feet, looking like a cornered mouse. Large drops of sweat beaded on her round forehead. "N-Nothing at all to add, Queen of Anguis!" she stammered. "N-Not that I have no opinion, of course... It is simply... That is..."

Her voice grew weaker and weaker until she finally slumped back into her chair, apologizing profusely. The tension in the air relaxed a little. Before a gloom could replace it, Lucia waved it away with her fan and heaved a sigh.

"Clearly, 'twas too much to hope that you might have developed a queen's dignity. In a few years, perhaps..."

It seemed she truly had no allies at this table. The álfar now ruled the Council

of Six, rendering the humans voiceless. Indeed, humans no longer held a majority share of the population in any kingdom.

“I see that everybody is present,” came a voice. “In that case, I now declare the Council of Six in session.”

A figure entered the room, the same individual who had stolen the throne of Vulpes from Luka and Igel: the woman known as Nameless, the former queen of Vulpes and current chancellor of Greif.

“The king of Vulpes is not yet present, Lady Nameless.”

“We shall proceed regardless. He apologizes by letter for his absence. It appears some matter demands his presence in his homeland, but he agrees to abide by the will of the council.” Nameless took her seat, looking unperturbed. She moved as though she were queen and not chancellor.

When she first showed herself. That was when everything began to go awry.

Nameless had first appeared in Vulpes around ten years prior. Her background unknown and her identity a mystery, she had nonetheless worked her way into the confidence of the king before last. While her rise had caused a minor stir, the other kingdoms had been too preoccupied with domestic politics to take much notice; every kingdom but Greif had undergone a change in leadership around the same time.

And almost all of the new appointees were álfar. Surely not a coincidence.

King Kratos of Vulpes had passed away under suspicious circumstances, and many of his most trusted retainers had been released from their positions. A similar story had played out in other kingdoms; monarchs had taken sick or their bloodlines had fallen from grace, invariably clearing the way for álfar to seize the reins of power. Even the High King had been struck down by ill health. It had also been around that time that the Vanir Triumvirate to the south had begun interfering in Six Kingdoms’ internal affairs.

“Will the High King be absent yet again?” Lucia asked.

“I fear he is not well today,” Nameless replied. “He has charged me with leading these proceedings in his place.”

She had been managing all of the High King's affairs ever since he had ceased to make public appearances. It was fair to say that she—indeed, the álfar as a whole—now held Six Kingdoms in their thrall.

“How unfortunate,” the chancellor of Scorpius remarked, smiling.

“Unfortunate indeed, but needs must,” the king of Tigris grinned. “Yet again, we find ourselves leaving matters to Lady Nameless.”

“Th-The rest of you know best,” the queen of Esel stammered, glancing around the chamber fearfully.

One by one, they signaled that they would leave Nameless's claim unchallenged, almost as if they were reading off the same script.

'Tis a farce, nothing more, and an unnecessary one at that. Nameless will have her way with or without it.

Given the choice, Lucia would have preferred to end the meeting right there and return to Faerzen. Six Kingdoms was now a shell of its former self, and debating in an arena where she had no power was a waste of time. Being too combative would only worsen the human position, however. To have a hope of restoring her homeland to its former glory, she would need to be cautious, bide her time, and wait for her chance. Someday, she would oust the álfar and reinstate a truly equal regime.

Not that I especially enjoy socializing with them in the meantime...

She cast a glance at Nameless. As ever, the woman's face was shrouded in shadow, leaving only her mouth visible. Darkness swirled inside the hood. The woman seemed to have sensed her staring.

“Let us begin,” Nameless announced. “This council is on the subject of Faerzen.”

Her voice betrayed little emotion. There was a lilt of amusement to it, but also an undercurrent of conscious effort. It was difficult to tell how much was genuine and how much was affected.

“While all of Faerzen currently lies under our control, the Grantzian Empire's military presence on the border has caused our influence to wane in the east.

Fearing an invasion, the residents are fleeing westward, commonfolk and nobles alike.”

The exodus was placing every kingdom’s finances under strain, Anguis’s included. Even after Faerzen had left imperial control, the Faerzen Resistance had remained active, resulting in the loss of several villages and towns. The ensuing deterioration in law and order had left Six Kingdoms footing the bill for feeding, clothing, and housing the commonfolk who abandoned their homes. Scorpius and Tigris, the kingdoms with the largest territory in Faerzen, had been the worst affected. Poor decisions in the early stages of the crisis had erupted in their faces, and now they had too much manpower tied up in trying to contain the damage. Moreover, they had needed to relinquish assets to humans in order to placate the anger of the citizenry, which had earned them complaints of discrimination from their fellow álfar.

All their own fault, of course. They cared for naught but short-term gains, and it cost them dear.

Anguis, meanwhile, had received a small territory in the west from the High King. It had been comparatively more stable than the rest, allowing Lucia to devote all her efforts to easing the people’s misgivings. In recognition of her efforts, the High King had permitted her to expand her territories, first to three times their size and now to contain the new royal capital. The other kingdoms had since adopted her methods, but they had yet to meet with the same success.

“I ask you not to avert your eyes from these refugees,” Nameless continued. “Feed them to the best of your ability. Any less and we risk sowing the seeds of future unrest. If you feel that your kingdom cannot support them alone, work with your neighbors to cover the shortfall.”

Her hood turned toward Lucia.

“Our foremost priority is securing our hold on Faerzen, and that can only be accomplished if its people are willing. The Faerzen Resistance remains a thorn in our side, but while we could certainly take up arms and root them out, it would not be wise to give the empire cause for war. Better to maintain our peace and watch as it rots from within.” A smile spread across her lips. “Still, dialogue

alone will not resolve everything. And on this point, I would turn to Anguis for assistance.”

It was an abrupt request. Lucia’s brows knitted together.

Nameless’s smile widened—in amusement, perhaps, at her consternation. “Anguis has been remarkably successful at ingratiating itself with the people of Faerzen—a testament to Queen Lucia’s statecraft. There is a great deal she could teach us all.”

“If there is something you wish to say, Nameless,” Lucia said, “out with it.”

“Not at all. I had simply hoped that you might share your wisdom with your fellow kingdoms. I am certain they could benefit from the knowledge of your retainers, if you were willing to provide them.”

“’Tis impossible, I fear. Anguis has no men to spare. We would be delighted to share our knowledge with you, but you must apply it yourselves.”

“If you worry that you will be left wanting for statesmen, Greif would be more than happy to provide. No doubt the other kingdoms will as well. I can assure you that we will send only our best.”

Lucia gritted her teeth. The other attendees’ eyes burned into her; clearly, they were in accord with Nameless. She technically had the right to refuse, but Nameless had the power to see her deposed if she did. The woman feared that Anguis would grow in strength once Six Kingdoms consolidated control over Faerzen. No doubt that was the true nature of this ploy: she wanted to wear down Anguis’s assets while it was still weak.

“I have no doubt the other nations would be willing to volunteer whatever goods you need,” Nameless continued. “I ask only that you contribute to bettering our human resources in the interest of Six Kingdoms’ continued glory and prosperity.”

On the face of it, she was simply asking for cooperation—equal nations helping one another equally. In practice, however, refusal would quickly worsen Lucia’s standing. Burning bridges with the other kingdoms would only strengthen the position of the álfar. That said, acceptance would mean watching Anguis’s knowledge and talent bleed away.

Does she mean to merely keep them under supervision or to claim them for her own? Whatever the case, I cannot leave this unaddressed.

She quashed the anger swirling in her chest, brought her fan to her mouth, and fixed Nameless with a cold glare. "Very well. Let it not be said that Anguis failed to play its part." With great effort, she kept her voice level, but she could not resist adding a final remark. "I shall make you regret this," she said, her voice dripping venom that only Nameless could hear.

Nameless seemed unperturbed. The corners of her mouth pulled upward in amusement. "I look forward to seeing how."

Every party at the table sensed the air crackle between them, but the sight was a common one to those familiar with their relationship, and they did nothing more than watch in silence.

* * * * *

Within the imperial palace of Venezyne lay a room filled with fine goods from all over Aletia. While its furnishings were certainly magnificent, however, they were assembled without rhyme or reason, causing much of its extravagance to fade into a bland melange. Formerly, the master of this chamber had been Emperor Greiheit. Now it was Liz. She sat on a gaudily decorated chair, listening anxiously to Rosa.

"The Fourth Legion has just arrived. That's twenty thousand men. House Muzuk has volunteered another twenty thousand of its own forces, making forty thousand in all. The thirty thousand soldiers the eastern nobles have lent the south should take up their positions soon enough, and then we will be able to march on Faerzen without worrying about being attacked from behind."

"I'm not concerned about that," Liz said. "I'm concerned about the negotiations."

The empire was slated to hold talks with Steissen, Lichtein, and Baum in the coming days. The discussions were an attempt to mediate between Steissen and Lichtein, who were currently feuding over control of the River Saale. The prickly situation had continued for a month now, ever since Lichtein had taken advantage of the civil war in Steissen to cross the border and capture Fort Brucke. However, neither side had much stomach for further conflict. Steissen

was exhausted from its civil war, while Lichtein was only now recovering from a famine. Both were looking to back down and focus on stabilizing their internal affairs.

“Just our luck that the duchy would call on Baum,” Rosa sighed. “With the boulevard closed off and the archpriestess’s security draining our coffers, we’re bleeding coin. I’ve half a mind to suspect Lord Surtr is doing this on purpose.”

Judging that resolving matters between themselves was unlikely, Steissen had called on the empire to intercede. Lichtein, however, perhaps fearing Steissen getting the upper hand, had countered by bringing Baum into the negotiations. Rosa did not mean what she said. Baum had provided funds to cover its expenses. Still, closing the capital’s central boulevard for days at a time would deal an unwelcome hit to the imperial economy.

“On the bright side,” she continued, “we’ll have the leaders of three nations tied up in the capital. At least we won’t have to worry about them interfering in the Faerzen offensive.”

Still, perhaps even that had been part of Surtr’s plans. The negotiations were not exclusively beneficial to their hosts. Baum would not have taken part if they did not have something to gain from it.

Liz recognized as much. “You should be careful,” she said. “Baum wouldn’t help Lichtein out of the goodness of their hearts. They’re sure to be planning something.”

“I know, believe me. I mean to probe our friend while he’s here. Find out what he wants, what’s driving him. If we can learn that, we’ll have our answer to why he left the empire.”

Liz had told her sister about Surtr’s true identity. She wanted them to be on the same page for the weeks and months to come, and besides, if Rosa were to learn the truth during the negotiations, it could threaten her composure. The empire could not afford mistakes from her. Better to confess what she knew and ensure that the talks went smoothly.

But Scáthach knew, even before I told her. I wonder how...

Seeing that Liz was on the verge of sinking into thought, Rosa quickly

interceded. “I also wanted to talk about the First Legion.”

The legion of the lion was said to be the strongest fighting force in the empire. As it lay under the direct command of the throne, the death of Emperor Greiheit had left its soldiers with nothing to do but maintain order across the central territories.

“I don’t have the authority to command them,” Liz said. “I could try to use my standing as empress regent, and you could use your position as chancellor, but the nobles would push back every step of the way. Short of a national crisis, we’ll be better off keeping things as they are.”

They couldn’t afford to give House Muzuk and the southern nobles an inch of leverage. Retaking Faerzen was the priority now. There was no point in making unnecessary enemies.

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” Rosa said. “But at least send the Knights of the Golden Lion to the western territories. Call it keeping the peace. It would be a waste to leave them twiddling their thumbs in a time of need.”

“Who’s going to command them?”

“You will, once they’re there. The whole empire thinks you’re going to be the next empress. They’ll follow your orders.”

“House Muzuk is in charge of military affairs. They won’t stand for that.”

“There are ways. Seeing as Baum’s going to be joining us, we might as well put them to use. It’s about time we started chipping away at House Muzuk’s authority.” Rosa chuckled, a wicked smile spreading across her face. She radiated mischievous glee. Evidently, she already had some ideas in mind.

Liz smiled ruefully. “Just as long as you’re careful. There’s at least one man I know won’t take this lying down.”

“Ludurr, you mean? He’s going to be joining the Faerzen offensive.” Rosa grinned. “It seems like he’s more interested in you than me.”

Liz pulled an exasperated face. “No chance of a break for me, then. At least it’ll be a good opportunity to see what he’s capable of.”

“On that point, remember that you’ll have Aura and Scáthach with you. No

doubt they'll be happy to help you. Rely on them. Don't try to take everything on your own shoulders."

"Of course. I'll bear that in mind."

"The good news is, if Ludurr's leading House Muzuk's troops, that means Beto intends to stay in the south. I'll try to dig into what he's up to, but chances are good that he simply means to watch and wait."

Sooner or later, their feud with Beto would come to a head. He knew that as well as they did, which was why he was holing himself up in his domain, preparing for the confrontation to come.

"Keep a close eye on him," Liz said. "He might try to reach out to Six Kingdoms."

There was no such thing as being too cautious. Anything could happen in imperial politics. At times like these, overpreparation often paid off in the long run.

"I can't imagine he would be that reckless, but I accept the warning. I'll be careful."

"Please."

Now there was only one matter left to discuss.

"We should talk about the north," Liz said. "I've been hearing ominous rumors for a while now, but recently they've only gotten worse. How is Selene?"

"Recovering slowly but steadily, or so I hear, but House Brommel is gaining a lot of ground. The balance of power is crumbling. I doubt he'd accept our help, though, even if we offered it. There may be nothing for it but to wait."

"I'll write to him myself. There's no point waiting until it's all too late."

"He's more stubborn than he looks, isn't he?" A flash of skepticism crossed Rosa's face, and she lowered her eyes gravely. "Well, nothing for it but to persuade him gradually. I only worry that we won't have the time."

"Are things that bad?"

"Officially, House Scharm still has more power, but geographically, House

Brommel's new allies have Riesenriller surrounded."

Selene had enemies on all sides. If they attacked, Riesenriller would fall to House Brommel long before any allies could arrive. The north would inevitably destabilize, and the south would not pass up the opportunity. They would surge into the central territories.

"If that's their goal," Rosa continued, "they'll strike while our eyes are on Six Kingdoms. House Brommel will move fast and hard. Once they've gotten rid of Selene's retainers, they'll take him hostage and use him as leverage to negotiate."

"Then we'll keep one eye on them while we're in Faerzen. If things escalate too far, we'll act, regardless of whether Selene asks us to. I'll leave it to you to decide whether that's necessary."

"Understood. I'll start making ready." Rosa seemed ready to end the conversation there, but then she appeared to think of something else. "We could send the Knights of the Golden Lion north, of course. What do you think?"

They would certainly help to keep House Brommel in check, but given the current state of the nation, there was a serious risk of making the situation significantly worse.

"Any spark could set the north off. I don't want to risk doing it ourselves. Selene is probably pushing back in his own way. For now, let's leave him to it and try not to get under his feet."

Selene was not the kind of person to take this kind of treatment lying down. He would almost certainly be thinking of a way to strike back.

Rosa nodded, smiling. She seemed to agree. "Very well. I shall commit some more of our agents and see what we can learn."

"Thank you."

"Now, I fear I ought to be going. I have other duties to be getting on with." Rosa got to her feet and turned to leave. "Ah, that's right. I've received the results of our investigation of the imperial burial grounds, although I'd recommend not getting your hopes up. I'll look into the matter further when I can." She laid a thick sheaf of paper on the table. "Take the rest of the day off.

You're departing for Faerzen tomorrow. There will be more than enough time to read this on the road."

With that, she left the room. Her attitude toward Liz had not changed even now that the latter was fully grown—their respective stations might have switched over the past two years, but she would always be the elder sister. Liz felt grateful every day for that candor. Many people who used to think nothing of addressing her now hesitated to even talk to her. It was hard not to feel a little lonely, even knowing that was simply the price of growing closer to the throne. Still, it was important to remind herself that it was only thanks to the support of others that she had come so far.

She picked up the weighty report. "I'll have to read this thoroughly," she murmured, pressing a hand to her forehead. Rosa had taken time out of her busy schedule to put it together, and without complaint, even though it did not technically fall under the chancellor's purview. She had even shirked sleep to visit the burial grounds. The least Liz could do was honor those efforts.

"Still, this might not be the place." She tore her gaze from the report and looked around the chamber. "What a strange room... Surely the previous emperors can't have slept here?"

The assemblage of furnishings had no cohesion at all. As lavish as it unquestionably was, the chamber seemed to Liz no better than a storage closet. She'd been told that some of the items could buy a small town, but they held no interest for her. She would have preferred to sell them off and use the coin to stock the empire's treasury.

"Everything in here tells the story of a ruined nation. A history of plunder."

That was the true nature of the emperor's chambers. Past rulers had lined it with their spoils of war for their successors to gaze upon—a challenge to demonstrate the empire's might anew and add their own winnings to the collection.

"There will be a reckoning for this someday. In dozens of years, or maybe hundreds."

Rise and ruin, ruin and rise. History was a tale of cycles, and even the Grantzian Empire could not escape its hold.

“But it won’t be today.” Liz turned from the darkness of the chamber and looked out of the window. “You think so too, don’t you, Hiro?”

* * * * *

The twentieth day of the eighth month of Imperial Year 1026

In the town of Lyon, close to the imperial capital, lay a graveyard for the dead of the nearby towns and villages. Although small and deserted, it was clearly well cared for. There were no weeds to be seen.

Tris von Tarmier’s gravestone lay among the throng. It was larger than the others but no more richly adorned, blending in easily with its fellows: a modest resting place for the trusted retainer of an empress regent.

Hiro dropped to one knee and laid a flower before the grave. A gentle wind ruffled his hair as he traced the letters carved into the stone.

“I have to say, this isn’t how I thought we’d meet again.”



Tris had been killed during the civil war in Steissen. His life had been a tumultuous and often unfair one, but he had served Liz faithfully to the end. By all accounts, his final moments had been as heroic as he had been in the rest of his life.

“Watch over Liz,” he said. “She’s setting off on a thorny road.”

Tris would not be the last loyal subject she lost. People she cared for would precede her to the grave, and yet the fighting would not end. Her heart would wither and grow cold. Perhaps it might even shatter, like his had a thousand years ago.

“But don’t worry. She’s stronger than me. She won’t break as easily.” Hiro rose to his feet again and inclined his head to the stone. “I’ll take care of her, Tris. I won’t let her walk the same path I did.”

His mantle fluttered as he turned about. With certainty in his stride, he began to walk away. A small smile spread across his face as he pushed his mask back into place.

“I will devour the world’s despair. All she has to do is follow the light.”

At that moment, Luka appeared soundlessly behind him. “Some messengers have arrived for you,” she said. “They’re wondering where you are.”

Hiro continued walking, unperturbed. “I’m sure they are, but they can wait. This is the main reason I’m in the empire at all.”

There were several reasons he had accepted the appeal from the Duchy of Lichtein. First and foremost was that it provided him with a chance to visit Tris’s grave. A king’s crown weighed heavily. He had little opportunity for any excursions, let alone a visit to a minor grave, and crossing national borders was no longer something he could do on a whim.

“Who’s asking?” he continued.

“The chancellor of the empire, the high consul of Steissen, and that pitiful worm who calls himself Duke Lichtein. All three messengers arrived at once. You certainly appear to be in high demand.”

“I can’t say I’m particularly happy about it.”

“If you didn’t want them to pursue you, perhaps you should have made it to the talks on time.”

“Haven’t you ever heard of being fashionably late?”

Luka snorted. “You think too highly of yourself.” She reached up to fidget with her mask. Wearing such an alien object seemed to sit uncomfortably with her. “I cannot believe I consented to wear this. Igel would turn in his grave.”

“You might have been able to get away with a life of seclusion in Baum, but the walls have eyes in the empire. I can’t have you going around with your face exposed.”

Luka gave a derisive laugh. “Yes, yes, I am well aware. I wanted to complain, that’s all. You could stand to be a little more tactful, or at least less dense. Learn to listen in silence, as all men ought to do.”

“I suppose I can’t argue with that.”

That would teach him to try to explain himself. Luka was apt to return any attempt at humor with ten times the strength and a hundred times the acidity. He had known that, but he must have dropped his guard. He put a hand behind his neck and took a few breaths, recovering his footing.

“So the archpriestess has said nothing?” he asked.

“I doubt she needs to when she can see you well enough. The spirits are many in the empire, if not as numerous as in Baum. Her eyes are everywhere.”

“It’s easy to forget how powerful she is, isn’t it?”

The Far Sight was capable of seeing across vast distances, and while it could not relay spoken words, it could read human emotions as plain as day. It was an immensely powerful ability that allowed the wielder insight into virtually any situation.

“Your Uranos is no less unfair,” Luka said. “And I would swear there is something amiss with your right eye as well.”

“Oh?” Hiro stopped and cast a meaningful look back at Luka.

“What?”

“It’s nothing. You’re overthinking things, I’m sure. Perhaps it just looks strange when it’s a different color to the left.” With a shake of his head and a shrug of his shoulders, he resumed walking.

“Perhaps so,” Luka said. She did not press the point, but Hiro could feel her gaze boring into him from behind.

He lifted his hand to cover his right eye. *Perhaps a little more fine-tuning might be necessary.*

After he had lost his eye in the battle with Six Kingdoms, it had been regenerated by a miracle left behind for him by Artheus. Strictly speaking, it was not entirely the same eye, but it was still indispensable to his plans.

Now that I think about it...I wonder which one she’ll develop?

There was no longer any doubt in his mind. He had known ever since his visit to the imperial burial grounds, when he had seen the infant Liz in Greiheit’s arms.

It won’t be long, Artheus. If she really does have your blood, she’ll awaken soon.

* * * * *

The imperial palace of Venezyne was a hive of anxious noise. The banners of Steissen and Lichtein fluttered above the grounds, divided into eastern and western camps by the central rose garden. In the west, at the entrance to the residential district where the powerful nobles had their mansions, the beastfolk of Steissen stood in disordered groups, conversing merrily. In the east, where the First Legion’s Knights of the Golden Lion were quartered, grave-faced soldiers of the duchy stood guard in quiet ranks. To the north rose the keep proper, the beating heart of the empire. Imperial soldiers kept watch at its weighty doors, alert for any suspicious activity among the other two nations’ troops. Elsewhere around the palace grounds, units of soldiers from all three nations stood on guard, filling the air with an uneasy tension.

The soldiers’ commanders were inside the keep, within a spacious, rectangular council chamber. The room was sparsely decorated, with few furnishings other than a circular table and accompanying chairs.

“And when’s this Lord Surtr planning to show his face?” Skadi Bestla Mikhail, chieftain of the beastfolk and high consul of the Steissen senate, bared her fangs in a snarl, making no attempt to conceal her irritation. Anger aside, she was astonishingly beautiful, dressed in revealing tribal garb and draped in gleaming jewelry. If not for her aggressive manner of speech and the smoked meat dangling from her belt, she might have passed for a nobleborn lady. As it was, her wild streak was impossible to ignore.

“Wh-Who can say, my lady?” Karl Lichtein, the young duke of Lichtein, covered up a nervous chuckle with a diplomatic smile. His face was pale and sickly, and his cheeks were sunken. His journey appeared to have taken a toll on him.

Skadi scowled distastefully. “And what’s got you so twitchy, eh?”

“N-Nothing, my lady. Just nerves, nothing more.”

“That so? Maybe some meat in your belly’ll cure you.” The beastwoman pulled out a dagger and sliced off a piece of meat, which she held out to Karl, blade and all.

“Thank you for the offer, but I-I must refrain. I’m, erm...not hungry.”

“Suit yourself.” Skadi flicked the meat into her mouth and wasted no time tearing it apart.

Karl blanched even further as he watched. He glanced to the side, silently seeking help from the other woman at the table: Myste Caliar Rosa von Kelheit, former third princess, acting head of House Kelheit, and chancellor of the empire. Her fine-featured beauty was known across the continent and her noblewoman’s dignity was tinged with seductive allure, every lascivious movement stimulating the senses. The two years since the emperor’s death had only refined her wiles.

As soon as he met her gaze, Karl grew flustered and looked away. Caught between two beauties, he made for a pitiful figure, even if they were not consciously trying to charm him.

Rosa regarded him curiously as he lowered his gaze to the floor. “Lord Surtr has already arrived, I believe. You must have heard the cheering from the

central boulevard. Still, it may be a little while yet before he joins us. Procedures must be followed.”

Nations as old as the empire and Baum tended to accrue a crust of formalities. Even leaders needed to respect protocol, lest they be chided by their retainers for disrespecting the glory of their forebears. Rosa often found herself chafing against the stuffiness of it all, but there was no escaping that the arrival of another nation’s representative was an important affair. Outside times of great need, etiquette had to be observed, no matter how long it took.

“What’s he done to earn himself this grand welcome, anyway?” Skadi pouted, looking unimpressed. “Baum and the empire go back a long way, I know, but is that really enough reason to shut off your streets for a parade?”

Skadi had arrived in the empire to a certain degree of curiosity from the commonfolk, but little ceremony. Yet now, they were cheering so loudly for the king of some far-flung eastern nation that it was audible from the palace. In both peace and war, beastfolk reveled in being the center of attention. It clearly bruised her pride that the so-called Black-Winged Lord was attracting more notice than she was.

“S’pose I’m still beating out Lichtein, though,” she added, shooting Karl a sympathetic look. The duchy was not popular with the citizens of the empire, and he had arrived in the capital to jeers and boos. Given that the empire was hosting this gathering, the townsfolk had made a poor account of themselves, but it was hard to blame them—Lichtein had been the aggressor in every conflict to date. Common opinion held that if the duchy had not agitated the other nations of Soleil with their attack three years ago, the empire would be in a far better state today.

Karl gave a nervous chuckle. “I simply count myself lucky that nobody threw stones.” He wiped the sweat from his brow, looking more pitiable than ever. It seemed like he wanted nothing so much as to leave the room and ride back home. The experience had clearly been grueling for him, even without stones being cast.

“Stand up for yourself, boy!” Skadi roared. “No need to hold back just ’cause you’re in a foreign land. If someone insults you, smack the shit outta ’em!” Her

encouragement only made Karl shrivel up further. With a heavy sigh, she clapped a hand on his shoulder and flashed him a grin. “Well, if you wanna start a war, anyways.”

The blood drained from Karl’s face as the beastwoman burst into gales of laughter.

“I apologize for the actions of the townsfolk,” Rosa interjected. “The ongoing conflict has them fearful for their futures. I hope you do not take offense.”

If anything, Karl grew paler. “M-My lady! I was not seeking an apology! That is to say...I understand.”

Skadi clasped her hands behind her head and whistled. “Oh, that reminds me, Chancellor. I wanted to ask you somethin’.”

“By all means.” Rosa smiled back. She didn’t so much as bat an eyelid at Skadi’s lack of manners. The beastwoman evidently cared little for etiquette, but her forwardness gave her an honesty that made her hard to dislike—although perhaps some advance warning from Liz was coloring her impressions on that score.

“I heard the princess had headed for Faerzen already,” Skadi said. “You sure the empire’s got enough soldiers in stock?”

It was not entirely clear why she was asking, but as chancellor, Rosa was not at liberty to give a full answer. “My apologies,” she replied with a smile, “but I’m afraid I can’t divulge any information about the state of our defenses.”

“S’pose not, no. In that case, how about I make you an offer?”

“Oh?” Rosa cocked her head. She had been told that Skadi could be pushy. Perhaps this was what Liz had meant.

“I’ve brought five thousand of my best to the capital. If you need blades in hands, say the word and Steissen will answer.”

“I see.” Rosa was not about to turn down an offer of free help, but the beastwoman seemed not to have thought her suggestion through. “Let me ask, though...are you certain you will be able to commit so many soldiers? What if you end up at war with Lichtein? There’s no guarantee these talks will end in

peace.”

It was an astute observation. Karl, too, turned to Skadi in surprise.

The beastwoman only nodded, grinning broadly. “Aye, maybe we will, but no matter. I promised the princess my aid, and we beastfolk don’t break our word.” She brought her fist down on the desk, narrowing her eyes at Karl like a predator sizing up its prey. “If it comes to it, I’ll send my five thousand on to Faerzen and raze Lichtein myself. I should have plenty of time to catch up before the fighting starts.”

“Please, my lady,” Karl stammered, clearly intimidated by the beastwoman’s dauntless confidence. “Surely we can find common ground...”

“Funny thing about we beastfolk.” Skadi grinned. “It’s only when we’re cornered that we *really* show our claws.”

She sounded like she was already dead set on Lichtein’s destruction. Karl stood bolt upright with a face like a convict handed a death sentence.

“You took that fort without spilling blood,” she continued, “so I figured there was room to talk. But I’ll tell you this: if you’d started putting towns to the torch, I wouldn’t have cared that there was a civil war on, or that we didn’t have supplies, or that we didn’t have the men. I would’ve hunted you down and sliced you open from tip to tail.”

The beastwoman’s savage smile radiated such intense ferocity that Karl broke out in a cold sweat. He found himself unable to speak, only to wait for her next words.

“So thank your lucky stars that you were merciful. And that you had Baum behind you.”

Karl gulped, but he retained enough of his wits to keep his silence and meet her gaze—a wise choice, perhaps. If he had spoken poorly, the negotiations might have ended before they’d even begun.

Looking on from the sidelines, Rosa could see that Skadi was trying to take his measure. Her outburst, half bluster and half genuine, had been intended to test him. Admittedly, her actions had risked very real bloodshed, but while Rosa would usually have reprimanded her for that, this time she opted to move

matters on.

“Was that why you decided not to strike back against Lichtein, Lady Skadi?” she asked. “Because of Baum’s alliance with the empire?”

“Eh? Bah. As if the empire and Baum would band together to help the likes of Lichtein. No, it was Baum’s new king who was the biggest reason. The one callin’ himself the Black-Winged Lord.”

Rosa’s ears pricked up at the reverence with which Skadi spoke the name. She still didn’t have a complete grasp of the beastwoman’s intentions, but she was starting to glean a better understanding of what had brought her to the talks.

“The beastfolk worship the Black-Winged Lord as their god, as I recall,” Rosa said.

In other words, Skadi was curious to know more about this man who had taken the name of her nation’s patron deity. It was possible she even intended to cut Surtr down if he fell short of her expectations. Rosa would have liked to think that the leader of a nation wouldn’t act so rashly, but with the beastfolk’s famously warlike temperament, it was hard to know for certain.

“Aye, that’s right. I want to see for myself what kind of man takes the name of a god.”

“I see.” Rosa nodded pensively.

At that moment, the doors of the chamber burst open. One of the sentries stood in the opening. “Forgive my interruption!” he cried, his expression strained. “Lord Surtr has arrived!”

Rosa hardly needed to be told. She sensed him on the wind blowing in through the door. Only a handful of people in Aletia possessed such a tangible presence. Small wonder that sweat was beading on the soldier’s brow; no surprise that the blood had drained from Karl’s face. Even Skadi was emitting a bestial growl, suddenly on guard. Rosa, however, felt no such threat. Indeed, she found herself smiling. The reason was simple: to her, the presence was a reassuring one. It was familiar enough that she could detect its kindness and its tenderness.

“He may enter,” she commanded. “Show him in.”

“At once, my lady!” The sentry turned around and called back to someone behind the door. A moment passed in silence, and then...

“I apologize for keeping you waiting.”

A masked man stepped into the room, clad in a white mantle. His boots clacked on the stone floor as he approached the table. His presence seemed curiously insubstantial, like a cloud in human form, but there was no denying that his aura of might set the air thrumming, and the wicked black blade at his belt exuded a malignant air that none at the table could ignore.

“I am Surtr, the Black-Winged Lord and second king of Baum. It’s a pleasure to meet you all.”

A crushing pressure fell upon Karl and Skadi as he spoke. A strange power began to seep into the chamber.

Skadi was the first to register the change. Her blaring instincts set every hair on her body on end. “Well, well,” she growled. “Lookin’ to bare steel after all, eh?” In the blink of an eye, the bladed claws dangling from her belt were ready on the backs of her hands.

Karl looked around, alarmed by her sudden aggression. “L-Lady Skadi? What are you—”

The so-called Black-Winged Lord stared Skadi down with an indomitable smile.

The beastwoman’s mouth twitched at the provocation. “Aye, you’re on!” she cried, erupting with fury. She lunged at him so fast that in the blink of an eye she had vanished.

The battle was over in a heartbeat. Not an instant had passed before a fierce wind raged through the room, although the windows were all closed. The eyes of everybody present snapped to Surtr as an explosive clang shook the air.

“Is that all? How disappointing.”

Skadi’s claws grated against a sword wreathed in darkness. All present wore expressions of astonishment, but none were more stunned than her. She stared, wide-eyed, at Surtr.

“How did you...?”

She bounded backward, putting some distance between them, but made no move to strike again, simply glaring at her opponent.

A quiet voice issued from Surtr’s throat. “Are you done?” The cold malice in his tone weighed heavy in the air. “Then allow me.”

The others stared, unable to lift a finger as darkness billowed forth.

“Stop!” Rosa’s voice broke the silence as she flung herself between them, heedless of the danger.

Hiro shot her a glance, seemingly disappointed, then shrugged and returned his blade to its sheath. The tension in the air dissolved in an instant, leaving only silence in its place.

Rosa turned to Skadi, disapproval in her eyes. “The fault lies with you, Lady Skadi. What were you thinking, attacking a guest like that?”

“But it was him who...” Skadi trailed off as she registered Rosa’s glare. She raised her hands in surrender. “Aye, fine, fine. I shouldn’t have been so hasty.” That was the extent of her contrition, however. She flashed Hiro a taunting grin. “Don’t he just make your skin crawl, though? Those eyes of his. Like he can see right through you. Like he’s looking down on you.”

Hiro took her animosity in stride. “I apologize for any offense I might have given,” he said in an inflectionless voice before taking his seat at the table.

“You’d better join us as well.” Rosa patted Skadi on the back, prompting her to sit back down. She returned to her own seat and cleared her throat, trying to dispel the unease hanging over the room. “Well, now that we’re all here, I think we ought to begin.”

She cast her gaze at each of the three rulers in turn. Skadi nodded, nostrils still flared. Karl looked away nervously. Hiro folded his arms, the picture of composure.

Rosa breathed an exhausted sigh. “Very well. We are here to discuss a peace treaty between the Republic of Steissen and the Duchy of Lichtein. With regard to your terms—”

A dull thud echoed through the chamber, cutting her off. Skadi had dropped her feet on the table. She turned to Karl, eyes flashing with unspent frustration from her previous confrontation with Hiro.

“Immediate withdrawal. Nothing less. I want every last ducal soldier out of Steissen.”

Karl trembled beneath the intensity of her gaze, as though he were being assailed by a blizzard. Even so, he did his best to return her stare, conscious of his responsibilities as the leader of his nation. “I would propose a compromise. Steissen and Lichtein should share control of Fort Brucke and the River Saale.”

“Where’d you pull that from? We already told you we’d free the river; what more d’you want?”

“But you would still have your hands around our throat. How could we agree to anything knowing you could choke us at any time?”

“Don’t trust us, eh? S’pose I can’t blame you.” Skadi gave a sheepish smile and continued, scratching one of her horns. “But just so’s you know, it was the Nidavellirites who cut off your river. We ain’t underhanded like them.”

“With respect, my lady, it was Steissen who dammed the river. It doesn’t matter which faction was to blame.”

“Aye, fair enough. Still, doesn’t strike me as if you’ve got much leverage. Your folks in Fort Brucke can hole up for a while, but they’ll starve eventually. It’s only out of the goodness of our hearts that we haven’t taken back our wall already.”

The border wall between Steissen and Lichtein was currently under the control of the duchy, but while it was constructed to fend off attacks from Lichtein, it would quickly fall to an offensive from within Steissen. The duchy’s army was plagued with starvation and did not have the strength to hold out for long. That much was common knowledge. Karl had no choice but to back down, grinding his teeth.

“Way I see it,” Skadi said, “we’re throwing you a bone here. I reckon you should be happy with it.”

“How can we be? We have only just told the people that the river will flow

freely again. If we were to announce we have given up Fort Brucke, there would be riots in the streets.” Swallowing his pride, Karl began to explain Lichtein’s domestic situation. Presumably, he meant to show that his conviction would not waver, even with his vulnerability on full display. Unfortunately, the person he was trying to negotiate with was not given to sympathy, but that did not stop him.

“I have managed to ease the nobles’ nerves a little,” he concluded, “but if the river were to dry up a second time, it would mean the end of Lichtein. I cannot afford for that to happen.”

“Aye, and I’ve given my word that it won’t.”

“Forgive me, Lady Skadi, but your word is not enough. The dwarves may have been avaricious, but the beastfolk are greedy too, in their own way.”

The conversation was starting to go in circles. Neither of their positions had any room for compromise. Rosa, the would-be mediator, was left at a loss.

Just then, Hiro raised a hand. “If I may make a suggestion...” All eyes in the room converged on him, but he continued undeterred. “Why not simply tear down Fort Brucke?”

“Scuse me?” Skadi frowned. It was not hard to understand why. Even Rosa looked a little taken aback.

Hiro tactfully ignored their reactions. “If its only purpose is to defend the river, where’s the harm in getting rid of it altogether?”

“The Nidavellirites built it to put one over on the duchy, it’s true,” Skadi mused. “And I’d rather not waste soldiers manning the place if I could help it.”

“Perhaps you could even use field laborers from Lichtein to do the work, seeing as they’re wanting for employment.”

“I see, I see.” Skadi’s brows knitted in distaste. She seemed to have cottoned on. “But what do we get out of that? Plenty of workers out of a job in Steissen too. Civil wars will do that. They won’t be happy with me if I hire another country’s labor.”

Hiro nodded in acknowledgment and raised a finger. “I could at least offer

some of the former Nidavellirites employment in Baum. With some minor conditions attached, of course.”

Skadi indicated for him to continue with a thrust of her chin. She seemed content to listen until he was done.

“Aside from that, a number of towns and villages in Lichtein have been devastated by the ongoing famine. Why not send the rest of the dwarves there to earn some coin? The civil war might be over, but I’d imagine they still aren’t on good terms with the beastfolk.”

Skadi grunted. “Aye, you’re not wrong.”

“Then it would be wise to put some distance between your peoples for now and allow relations to cool off.”

It seemed a profitable suggestion for all concerned. Both Lichtein and Steissen had a great many workers in need of employment, most of them in the prime of their lives. It would be a waste to leave them out of work when they could be earning a wage in other lands.

“It’ll do as far as I’m concerned.” Skadi shot Karl a glance. “What do you think?”

The duke nodded without hesitation. “I agree with Lord Surtr’s proposal.” As terrified as he had seemed of Skadi earlier, he now seemed entirely self-assured.

Skadi narrowed her eyes at the man searchingly, struck by a sudden suspicion, but he only looked away. “That so, eh? Well, no reason to argue.”

“Then we are in agreement. Lichtein’s forces will withdraw from Steissen in the coming days.” Rosa looked to Karl for confirmation.

“I will be happy to oblige. However, I would like some form of assurance that Steissen will not seek to dam the River Saale again after dismantling Fort Brucke.”

Skadi scowled at the shift in Karl’s demeanor, but her glare seemed to bounce off him to little effect.

“Naturally,” Rosa replied. “If Steissen were to renege on its promise—insofar

as our agreement holds, at any rate—Baum and the empire will lend their assistance to Lichtein. I assume you have no objections to that, Lady Skadi?”

“None. As I said, we beastfolk keep our word. The river won’t be touched, even if we come to blows elsewhere. We ain’t the Nidavellirites.”

If Steissen dammed the River Saale, Baum and the empire would move to support Lichtein. By the same token, as long as the river flowed free, they would maintain a neutral stance. It seemed an agreeable compromise for both parties. Still, it sat a little uncomfortably with Skadi. She couldn’t shake the feeling that she had been manipulated into that outcome.

“Well,” Rosa said. “Now that we’ve decided on a direction, we can start working out the details.”

She began to usher proceedings onward, but Skadi’s gaze remained locked on Hiro all the while.

* * * * *

With the talks concluded, Hiro was about to retire to his chambers when a voice brought him to a halt.

“Ah, there you are, Lord Surtr. May I have a second?”

“Oh?” He looked back to see Rosa standing in the corridor, looking faintly pleased. She seemed a little more worn than he remembered—by all accounts, she had hardly had a moment to rest since becoming chancellor—but her beauty had not dimmed. If anything, the intervening two years had polished it to a fine sheen.

“Could you come to my chambers this evening? There’s something I wanted to discuss.”

“Very well. I’ll be there.”

Hiro had followed events in the empire closely enough over the past two years to guess what she wanted. More to the point, his visit in his capacity as the king of Baum would be instrumental in putting Liz’s administration ahead of rival factions. For that, he had to admire Rosa’s sharp-eyed judgment.

“I’ll be looking forward to it,” Rosa said. “Until tonight, then.” She turned and

departed down the hall at a fast walk, waving as she went. No doubt she had many other matters vying for her attention.

Once she was out of sight, Hiro made to set off again, but another voice stopped him in his tracks.

“Lord Surtr. A moment, if you would.” Karl moved around to stand in front of him. The man’s face was filled with delight, and his breathing was a little heavy, as if with exhilaration. “I knew you would not let me down. How can I ever thank you?”

“It was no trouble at all. We both stood to gain. I only ask that you keep your word.”

Hiro’s eyes were dark and cold as he watched Karl bow profusely, but the man didn’t seem to notice. His expression only grew brighter.

“Of course. I will return to Lichtein at once and see about sending what you requested.”

With that, Karl departed, accompanied by his guards. His steps were light on the stone floor. He seemed overjoyed that he could at last return to Rankeel with good news.

Hiro breathed a sigh and shook his head, already exhausted. Again, he made to leave, but at that moment...

“Not so fast.”

Apparently, everybody wanted to speak with him today. He turned around irritably to find Skadi standing behind him, arms folded.

“Is there something you need?” he asked.

“You two were in cahoots, weren’t you? The duke had spine deep down, even if he was a whimpering weakling on the surface, but the moment you piped up, it was all ‘yes, my lord, whatever you say, my lord.’ The chancellor didn’t notice it, but I did. What are you plotting?”

The beastwoman looked irate enough to pounce at any moment, but Hiro only looked back coolly. “Everybody’s plotting something. Baum might be small, but it’s still a nation as complex as any other. I have my people’s interests to

consider.”

The world was not kind enough that countries could run on pleasantries. Those that moved too hastily were conquered; those that moved too slowly fell apart under their own weight. Yet turning back was not an option. They had no choice but to forge ahead. The monsters known as nations would not be halted, even if they marched to their own destruction.

“That’s what nations do,” Hiro continued. “They turn against one another, become friends again, resolve their problems, then find new reasons to go to war.”

That was an endless cycle no one could escape. The people of the world would remain trapped within its confines until the end of time.

“Aye, true’s true. But that’s not what you’re planning, is it?” There was not a hint of doubt in Skadi’s voice. “You’re aiming for something bigger. And you’re looking to use us to get there.”

“What makes you say that?”

“‘Cause you ain’t even looking at us. You’re looking somewhere else, far off over the horizon. Steissen ain’t worth two shits to you. I can see it in your eyes—we’re just one more bump on your way. One more pebble by the roadside.”

“Well, you’re observant, I’ll give you that.” Hiro made no effort to deny it. He lifted a hand with his index finger raised. “You’ve got one thing wrong, though. I’m not particularly trying to use you.” He raised his middle finger and took a step toward Skadi, smiling. “But I’m not looking to be everyone’s friend either.” At last, he raised his ring finger. “If anybody isn’t strong enough for the age to come, I’ll leave them behind.”

He closed his fingers into a fist and swung it into the wall. Skadi leaped back, her guard raised.

Hiro took another step forward, amused by her reaction. “You aren’t an obstacle. I just don’t want to take the effort to kill you. If you’re too weak to be worth using, I recommend you keep quiet, watch from the sidelines, and stay out of my way.”

Only those strong enough to withstand the flames of hell would be needed in

the world to come. Only a handful of champions would survive.

“Bold words,” Skadi snarled. “Let’s see you back them up!”

That seemed to have exhausted the last of her patience. She drew the claws hanging from her belt and slipped them onto the backs of her hands. Their blades glowed black, answering her fury with their own.

Hiro gazed at the weapons with empty eyes, unshaken by the outlandish sight. “The Claws of Madness—one of the five Dragon Emperor’s Drakeblades. The claws of the Lord who once ruled the skies.”

Surprise filled Skadi’s face. “Who are you to know that?”

Hiro lowered his gaze, stifling a laugh. She had reacted just as he had expected. “Do you really want to know?” His voice was amused as he raised his right hand to push his mask back into place. “Do the Claws not tell you?”

“They tell me to rip you limb from limb. That’s enough.” Skadi looked around. Observers were beginning to gather. If they were to fight there and then, the damage and casualties would be great. “But this ain’t the place for a fight. Come with me. We’ll do this somewhere quieter.”

She turned around and strode away. Not once did she look back. There seemed to be no doubt in her mind that Hiro would follow.

“She’s more than just a battle-crazed berserker, I see,” he murmured to himself. “Then again, the Claws of Madness wouldn’t have chosen her otherwise.”

She was frank in speech, fiery in temperament, steadfast in loyalty, and contemptuous of underhanded tactics—a fine example of the brash beastfolk. She reminded Hiro of a beastman he had once known; one who had served as a member of the Black Hand.

“This should be fun. Maybe I’ll even manage to cure your arrogance...just like I cured his.”

A smile spread across his face as he watched Skadi depart, so convinced she would not be defeated.

* * * * *

“Will you not listen while I speak?”

Lucia narrowed her eyes at Nameless, but the álf said nothing. She only continued to stare silently at the eastern sky, as she had been doing since something caught her attention several moments prior.

“You truly are impossible to read.” Lucia followed the woman’s gaze, but there was nothing out of place save for a few clouds moving slowly across the blue. Below stretched the rooftops of the city of Fierte. As ever, the port was alive with marine traffic. Most of the ships were merchant vessels from the Vanir Triumvirate to the south, the pale skin of the álfar they bore standing out starkly against the earthy tones of the dockworkers. If Lucia looked for long enough, she could sense something of the uneasy atmosphere hanging over the docks.

“I am still not used to seeing so many.”

The álfar were not an unusual sight in the west of Soleil; not compared to the east, at any rate. Still, it was only within recent decades that they had become quite so common.

“Whatever has brought the recluses out of their holes, I wonder?”

The álfar historically shunned contact with outsiders. Once upon a time, the only place they could be found in significant numbers—aside from their homelands in the western continent and the Vanir Triumvirate—had been Tigris and its environs. Over the past few decades, they had propagated across the rest of Six Kingdoms.

“One wonders where they were all hiding.”

For many years, the withdrawn álfar had been thought to be few in number. Historical documents asserted that their long lives resulted in a low birthrate, assigning them a certain mystique to compliment their fair features. After spending so long in close proximity to them, however, Lucia had learned that she truly knew less than that.

“After all, they are not nearly so few as the books assume.” She flicked open her fan and wafted herself, turning her attention back to the álf beside her.

“You are returned, I see. May I ask where you were?”

As ever, Nameless's face remained unreadable, concealed by her hood. An observer had no choice but to glean what they would from the portion of her mouth that she showed.

"A little farther afield than usual," the álf said.

"Did something intriguing catch your eye?"

"Intriguing? No, I wouldn't say that. Fearsome, perhaps." Nameless was not usually so forthcoming. Whatever her prying eyes had picked up must have truly shaken her. "Remind me, what were we talking about?"

The question came before Lucia could probe any further. Nameless evidently had no intention of offering any illuminating answers. With no other choice, Lucia let the matter drop and returned to the original topic.

"Whether you would object if I returned to Faerzen."

"Ah, yes. That's right. No, not at all. Have we all not just agreed to defer to your judgment with regard to governance? You may do as you see fit."

"Wonderful. Then we have naught more to discuss."

Lucia turned and began to stride away. She had no intention of spending any longer in Nameless's company than she needed to. Before she got more than a few steps, however, the álf addressed her again.

"A word of advice. Show the empire no vulnerability. The lion will not hesitate to pounce if it senses weakness. Aged though the beast may be, its fangs are more than sharp enough to pierce a heart."

Lucia hardly needed the warning. The empire was only one of the many walls standing in her way. "Then I shall return the favor. Those who gaze overlong at the clouds are apt to fall flat on their faces."

Nameless giggled. "Farewell, Queen of Anguis. Do not neglect to keep a weather eye on those closest to you."

A pointed phrase, but there was only one thing Lucia could think of that it could be referring to. "Fear not. I am well aware."

"In that case, I'm pleased my concerns were unfounded."

“Until we meet again, then.” Lucia’s shoes clacked on the stone as she stalked away, making no attempt to hide her displeasure.

Once she was out of sight, Nameless turned her gaze back to the eastern horizon. “The claws clash with the fangs...”

She wrapped her arms around herself. The warm breeze did nothing to assuage her chill. Her teeth chattered as she recalled the terror she had seen.

“A lord of old that brought the world despair. Though its body is broken, its strength lives on, undimmed after a thousand years... A fearsome beast indeed.”

The destructive force of the clash still lingered in her mind’s eye, seared into her brain. The mere grinding of the blades against one another had shaken the earth and gouged the soil. Every time she recalled the sight, it set her heart hammering anew. Still, it was not long before her ardor cooled. In time, she stopped shaking, and her lips curled into a faint smile.

“Yet it is but a relic of the past in the end.”

She turned around and wandered away. No more did she look back at the horizon.

“Loneliest and most terrible, indeed...but bereft of a body, a Lord no longer.”

Her form shimmered like a mirage and disappeared, leaving behind only an echo of mocking laughter.

* * * * *

“Is something amiss, Your Highness?”

Liz wrenched her attention from the eastern sky and turned to the man who had addressed her: the captain of the Knights of the Rose. A host of soldiers had gathered around her in a protective formation. All at once, sound returned to the world—the crunch of her steed’s hooves on stone, the whisper of the wind in her ears, the steady tread of military boots, and the jangling of armor.

“It’s nothing.” She flashed the man a smile as she rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. They had been acting strangely in recent months, blurring over as if she was looking through a haze. It didn’t seem to have impacted her

vision—if anything, she could see clearer than before. Sometimes, however, it affected her sense of distance. Things that were far away appeared very close, and things that were very close seemed far away.

How long has it been like this? Two years, maybe...

The change had come over her sometime around her battle with Luka du Vulpes. Ever since their clash, she had begun to perceive things she never could before. Shifts in the weather, the currents of the wind, the weight of the air, fluctuations in human emotions—things she had only previously felt now manifested as visible phenomena. It was as if the world were baring itself for her gaze, wanting to be seen. The condition even persisted while she slept. Concerned, she had arranged with Rosa to be examined in secret by the palace physician, but the results had been inconclusive; perhaps her senses had simply been honed by battle, she had been told, or else her eyes were tired from overwork.

But I'm not tired. And my senses aren't particularly honed either. Not like that.

Even now, at this moment, she could sense Hiro's presence far away in the capital. Not clearly; it was vague and hazy, as if seen through mist. But sometimes the mist lifted, as though the sun had shone down to clear it away...and this time, in her newly clear view, she had seen him clash with Skadi.

I'll have to ask Aura and Scáthach once I reach Delshia Citadel.

Between them, they were bound to know something. Odds were good they could tell her what was happening to her eyes.

"I do hope they're doing well," she murmured to herself.

Chapter 3: Schemes Abound

The chancellor's chambers were located near the throne room. They were sparsely decorated compared to the emperor's own, almost uncomfortably bare. Aside from the newly procured desk and chair, there was only a simple bed.

Hiro cast a glance around the room before returning his attention to Rosa in the center. "Not exactly quarters fit for a chancellor."

"Of course not. If I made it any more comfortable, I'd have to live here."

There were several things she could have meant by that. Perhaps she valued the distinction between professional and personal life, or perhaps she had little special attachment to her rank.

"Besides," she continued, "I'd prefer not to stay here any longer than necessary. What little time I do have away from my duties, I try to spend in House Kelheit's mansion."

Certainly, while the palace's security was tighter than it had been during Hiro's last visit, there was no denying their enemies had breached it on multiple occasions. Rosa had reasonable cause for concern on that front. That said, there was a limit to how extensively she could remodel the chancellor's quarters, and she could not equip it with the kinds of defenses she could employ at her own mansion. Admittedly, she had been attacked once at home too, but it offered better peace of mind than an undefended room.

"Why don't you sit down? Anybody would think you didn't mean to stay." Rosa gestured to the chair.

Hiro duly took a seat. "Congratulations on the chancellorship."

"I think you owe me a thank-you, at the very least." She smiled wryly. "It cost me the better part of my wealth."

Hiro returned the smile, but that was all. A faint awkwardness hung in the air between them—or perhaps it would have been more accurate to say Rosa was

struggling to broach the matter of their long time apart.

Eventually, she sighed. “Forgive me. I am not usually so stiff, least of all with you.”

It was hard to blame her. She likely had a great many questions for him. Anger, sorrow, joy, and more were no doubt swirling in her chest. It was a wonder that she wasn’t hurling abuse at him. In the end, however, all she said was...

“I’m glad to see you are safe.”

For a second, he thought she had forgiven him, but no—this was a calculated move. Her face bore the resolute expression of a stateswoman. Perhaps he should have known. She was not the kind of person to throw childish tantrums; all of her actions were guided by practical consideration for the future. She had a liking for cornering others like a cat with a mouse. It was disconcerting to think that she was up to something, and a shiver crept up his spine as he wondered what it might be.

“More has happened in your absence than I could relate,” Rosa continued, “but I should tell you this: as far as the country knows, I am raising our child in secret.”

In truth, of course, no such child existed, but continuing the deception must have been necessary in order for her to claim the chancellorship. It was certainly the kind of move she would make. Nonetheless, unease still prickled at him.

“That makes sense, I suppose. If our child really did exist, a lot of people would be out for their life—”

Rosa cut him off with an impish grin. “The truth will come out sooner or later, but now that I’m chancellor, it shouldn’t be too damaging. I have control of the central and western territories, and most of the administration is under my thumb.”

“I’m glad—”

“As am I. I already have enough to worry about as it is.” Again, Rosa interrupted him. She seemed set on not letting him get a word in edgeways.

“Anyway, seeing as you’re still alive and breathing, I do believe you owe me. I trust you won’t object?”

Her eyes flashed, and her voice took on a forceful edge. Here it was—she had cornered her prey. A drop of sweat trickled down Hiro’s cheek beneath his mask. He could have chosen to push back, but that would damage their relationship irreparably, which could become inconvenient in the future. Still, if he admitted wrongdoing now, Rosa would hold it over him for the rest of his life.

She snorted, seeing that he was intent on staying silent. “Well, as you like. But I will have my due.”

Her expression relaxed into something resembling compassion, although that was perhaps most terrifying of all. Still, there was little Hiro could say in his defense. It was, after all, true that he had betrayed her trust.

“On top of which,” she continued, “you owe me for today. Don’t think I’ll forget about that either.”

She was referring to the peace negotiations. Rosa had pulled out all the stops to ensure the talks went smoothly as mediator. Skadi believed she hadn’t noticed, but she had simply played the fool. Her reward had been putting Hiro in her debt—an account she now had called him here to settle.

“Ah, that’s right.” She paused, changing the subject. “I received a letter not long ago from High Consul Skadi.”

“What did it say?”

“That she means to implement the measures we agreed upon as soon as she returns to Steissen. Frankly, I was a little surprised she would take the time to tell me. You didn’t happen to have a hand in that, did you?”

“We talked a little, that’s all. I helped smooth out some of her concerns.” Hiro didn’t doubt that his evasiveness would inflame Rosa’s curiosity, but she only had two coins to trade: his debt and his betrayal. She would know better than to use either on something so minor. He smiled wryly. “So? What was it you wanted to talk about?”

Their conversation so far had been nothing more than a preamble—a ploy on

Rosa's part to situate herself on top. Her remark about Skadi had been an additional aside, thrown in to catch Hiro off guard and encourage him to relax his defenses. Perhaps she had hoped for him to reveal some vulnerability, but he wasn't kindhearted enough to make that kind of concession.

"Before we get to that," she said, "won't you take that mask off?"

Hiro did as he was bidden. His mask lowered, baring his gentle features. He hadn't changed a day from the way he had looked two years prior, save for his right eye. Rosa lowered her gaze sadly, perhaps taking note of that difference, but although she thought for a moment to say something, she bit it back and shook her head.

"I'd rather talk like this," she said finally. "You feel so distant with it on."



She smiled reassuringly, trying to lighten the mood, and crossed her arms, emphasizing her chest. It was the motion of an instinctive temptress. No doubt she knew her wiles were unlikely to work on him, but she still weaponized her body to its fullest extent.

“Well,” she said, “to the point. There’s a matter I want your help with.”

“What kind of matter?”

“I want you to assist in the recapture of Faerzen.”

Hiro fell silent for a moment, thinking. “And what’s in it for me, exactly?”

If he were willing to let sentiment guide his decisions, there would be nothing stopping him joining the Faerzen offensive, but there was no benefit to be found there for Baum. It was first and foremost a battle to reclaim the empire’s pride. Besides, Baum had no ambition to expand its territory. It would have no use for a share of another nation’s territory, especially one as distant as Faerzen.

Well, that’s not entirely true. I do have a more personal interest in visiting...

Still, Rosa could not possibly have known about that. She must have been looking to spend one of her two coins—or so Hiro thought, anyway, but his expectations were misplaced.

“I’m prepared to offer trustworthy labor,” she said. “You’re building something outside of Natua, aren’t you? As soon as you volunteered to take in those dwarves from Steissen, everything clicked into place.”

Her eyes took on a predatory gleam, and he wordlessly motioned for her to continue.

“You’ve borrowed mines from Lichtein too, I hear. You profited rather handsomely from Steissen’s civil war. I felt sorry for you at first, being called in to mediate for little gain, but the more I looked into it, the more I realized Baum was the greatest beneficiary of all.”

“I should have known. There’s no fooling you, is there?” It would have been easy, if undignified, to play dumb, but that would have meant abandoning their negotiations. He spread his arms proudly, his smile widening. “If you’ve worked

out that much, there's no point hiding it. Yes, I'm in need of workers and craftsmen—or rather, I was until today, but I've solved that problem now. I don't need the empire's help any longer."

Rosa gave an amused chuckle. "We both know that by all rights, you ought to be the one coming to me. There's no need to play these games. Why don't you come clean?"

There was no telling exactly how much she knew, but it seemed she at least had a good grasp of Baum's domestic situation. The past two years had seen an enormous increase in traffic in and out of the country. She must have gotten the intelligence from traveling merchants. Hiro had believed he had screened them carefully, but evidently the process had room for improvement. Still, he couldn't bring himself to blame them. The only person he was angry with was himself for misjudging his opponent.

"Very well. No more bluffing."

Letting that information slip had been a mistake on his behalf—one that required correction. The best way to get his plans back on track would be to let her in on them. Once she was involved, there would be no turning back, but—he glanced at her face—she seemed prepared for that. In that case, there was no harm in making her an accomplice.

"We're low on resources. If you can help us with that and our shortage of manpower, Baum will cooperate with the empire however you see fit. If that includes recapturing Faerzen, so be it. You will have Baum's—no, *my* personal unreserved support." Hiro paused for a moment. The corners of his mouth pulled into a smile. "And if the name of Surtr would help you pacify the north, it's yours to use."

Rose's eyes widened a little, but a wicked smile soon spread across her face. She seemed to have grasped his intent. "Then I think we have a deal. Oh, and I'll see if I can't put a word in with somebody to fast-track those imports from Lebering. They're mostly just tea leaves anyway. Hardly worth taking the time to inspect."

"I'd appreciate that. I'll send you a civil tribune once I have everything written down." Hiro stood up and turned toward the door.

As he made to leave, Rosa spoke again. “My dear,” she said, “I am the chancellor now. The chancellor of the Grantzian Empire. I may not have strength of arm, but I do have rank. I understand that you could not rely on me two years ago, but I am no longer the person I once was. You need not carry your burdens alone.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.” With a small nod, Hiro put his mask back in place.

“Liz would say the same if she were here. She has become much more beautiful in these past two years, and much more courageous. Indeed...” Rosa took a deep breath, pausing as though about to make a momentous declaration. “I would dare to say she has grown stronger than you.”

The words hung in the air. There was no telling what Rosa had seen in him today that had led her to that conclusion, but she seemed to believe it.

Hiro opened his mouth, looked up at the ceiling for a moment, then lowered his eyes to the floor. “As she should. I’m glad to hear it.”

“Pay her a visit while you’re in Faerzen. You’ll be pleasantly surprised.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

Rosa pursed her lips, seemingly put out by his lack of enthusiasm. She sank back into her chair, eyes fixed on his back, but as he made to walk away again, her face lit up with devilish inspiration.

“Well?” she asked. “Do you mean to stay the night?”

“I... What?” Hiro looked back, for once caught off guard.

Rosa grinned like a child who had just pulled off a prank. “My offer has not yet expired.”

“Not tonight. There will be watchful eyes on us.” Hiro gestured to the eyeholes of his mask.

Rosa expelled a disappointed sigh. “The archpriestess. Of course. Well, I have no interest in entertaining voyeurs. I suppose this pleasure must be saved for another day.”

“Thank you for understanding. Now, I should be going. I don’t want anyone getting suspicious of my absence.”

“Of course. Until we meet again.” There was a note of kindness in Rosa’s voice.

Hiro stepped outside the room and shut the door behind him. The corridor was lit by a candlestand, burning valiantly even if it could not fully dispel the gloom, yet there was one place where its light did not fall. Hiro turned toward that roiling patch of darkness.

“You’re still here, I see.”

The darkness swirled in answer. After a moment, a familiar woman emerged: the archpriestess. She bowed her head, her expression grave. “I have decided to delay my departure until tomorrow, Lord Surtr. There was something I wished to discuss with you.”

“Should we speak in my chambers?” Seeing her wary demeanor, he scanned the vicinity for signs of others. He sensed nothing out of the ordinary, but the archpriestess was more skilled at detecting such things.

“I do not believe that would be necessary. Nobody is listening now. More to the point, I do not have much time to spare.”

He had little choice but to believe her. Certainly, time was scarce, and besides, he trusted her eyes more than his own misgivings. He leaned against the wall and regarded her. “All right, then. Let’s hear it.”

The archpriestess straightened up. “Lady Celia Estrella is showing signs of awakening,” she said, audibly choosing her words with care. “I do not believe it will be long.”

“Nor do I. That’s nothing to worry about, though. If anything, we should be pleased.”

“I saw that you intend to ride to Faerzen, my lord. Perhaps you ought to take the chance to meet with her and ascertain her condition for yourself.”

So she had indeed been spying on his meeting with Rosa. She admitted it so readily that it was hard to chide her. If anything, she seemed not to regret her actions whatsoever, which Hiro had to admit he found pleasantly honest.

He shook his head with a wry smile. “I don’t need to check up on every little

thing.” He was curious as to what exactly she would inherit, but there was no need to ascertain that for himself. The last of his concerns had already been dispelled. “At least I know one thing for certain now,” he added.

“And what is that?”

“That she has the blood of von Grantz. She’s Artheus’s rightful heir.” Hiro eased himself off the wall, his smile widening. His mantle fluttered as he turned away. “I suppose it’s time for me to leave for Faerzen. I place matters in your care while I’m gone.”

The archpriestess bowed deep as he began to stride away. “As you command, my lord. May you wield your might as you see fit.”

Her voice trailed with concern, apprehension, and exhaustion, but she did not try to stop him. She understood that he would not be halted by delicately worded persuasions. Besides, he already knew what worried her so—for better or for worse, there were people in Faerzen whom he cared for deeply.

“Of course,” he said. “I have a debt to repay.”

* * * * *

The fourth day of the ninth month of Imperial Year 1026

Summer was coming to an end, but the sun remained as strong as during the season’s height. The west was said to be cooler in clime than the central territories, but the difference was so scant that only a handful could feel it. Summer was summer, winter was winter, and a small variance in temperature meant little to a brow full of sweat. The bigger difference between the regions was industry. While the central territories were an agricultural breadbasket, the west made its living from the production of cotton and sesame. It also reared fine horses, and many of the stagecoaches on the empire’s roads were western-made.

There was one other significant difference between the west and the central territories: the west maintained a border with other nations, with no natural barriers to act as a defense. Skirmishes were common. Accordingly, a number of forts had been erected along the border, with great citadels serving as vigilant guardians of the nation’s soil. Delshia Citadel was one such location. The

formidable structure stood on the border with Faerzen, acting as a linchpin of the empire's defensive line. At present, it served as a critical location in the coming Faerzen offensive.

It was on the fourth day of the month that Liz arrived at the citadel's gates. The townsfolk gave her a hero's welcome, and nobles lined up to give her their regards. A festive atmosphere hung over the city. In the war room, however, the mood was far more somber.

"Aura, Scáthach, it's good to see you again. How have you been?" Liz flashed the pair a smile as she entered the room. Her arrival swept away the despondent air, turning it into something far more relaxed. "Have you grown, Aura?"

Aura pouted. "Not an inch."

As she said, her stature had not changed at all in the past two years. One might have suspected she had dwarven blood. It was hard to believe she was older than Liz. Her uniform was too large for her, even though it was supposedly fitted for a woman, leaving her sleeves flopping over her hands. Naturally, the jackets did not come in children's sizes, but while the idea had been floated that she could specially commission one, she claimed to prefer the one she had. She wanted sleeves with some breathing room, she said, as she was sure to grow into them eventually.

Smiling a little at the glimpse of Aura's childish side, Liz turned to Scáthach. "Are you all right? You look a little unwell."

A shadow seemed to hang over the woman—a gloom that set her apart from those around her. "Not to my knowledge," she said. "Why do you ask?" She feigned a laugh and forced a weak smile, doubtless trying to convince Liz there was nothing to worry about.

Liz was on the point of pressing further, but then she noticed Aura staring at her curiously. Her eyes must have been acting up again. She shook her head to clear her mind and smiled back. "Not to worry. I must be imagining things."

Scáthach gave a harsh chuckle. "My family's restoration is at last on the horizon, lest you forget. This is no time to feel sorry for myself. If anything, I have never been in higher spirits."

The words came out just a little too quickly; evidently, something was preying on her mind. The others didn't seem to have cottoned on, but it was clear to Liz that she was hiding something. Then she moved to conceal it, and with a slight shift the abnormality was gone, leaving Liz wondering if it had ever been there at all.

"I'm sure you are. You're on the verge of seeing your dream fulfilled."

Scáthach looked down, away from Liz's searching gaze, and folded her arms. "Well, I cannot say I have *no* reservations."

Whatever she was hiding, she was doing her utmost to prevent Liz from sensing it. Knowing her stubborn temperament, probing any deeper could be dangerous. It might even risk her closing off her heart entirely.

This, Liz decided, would be better discussed when they were alone. She switched gears and returned her attention to Aura. "Have you found our way into Faerzen?"

"Not yet. It's challenging. Six Kingdoms is shipping more resources east than ever."

Six Kingdoms had previously focused its efforts on the west of Faerzen, but in recent weeks, it had begun transporting resources to the east, clamping down on criminal activity, and rebuilding destroyed townships. Its efforts were steadily accumulating support from the people.

"Still, there might be a way around." Aura turned and walked over to a nearby table, where several aides were already standing at attention.

Liz split off from Aura and walked to the head of the table. As she reached her chair, she turned and swept her gaze over the aides. They bowed stiffly, anxiety clear on their faces. Liz returned the bow and took her seat.

Once everybody was seated, Aura leaned over the map in the middle and pointed out Senan, a region under the control of the kingdom of Tigris. "Tigris is ruled exclusively by álfar," she said. "They dislike humans the most out of any of the kingdoms. That's true in Faerzen too. They're arrogant rulers, and popular resistance has been particularly strong in their territories." Aura's voice was as impassive as ever as she outlined the situation. "Six Kingdoms has tried to

resolve the problem by bringing in a new commander from Anguis, but it isn't going well. The chain of command is in disarray."

"Which gives us an opportunity," Liz mused. "Have the people of Senan reached out to us?"

"To the Faerzen Resistance. That's enough to give us just cause. We'll advance through Canan and into the rest of Faerzen." Aura placed a new pawn on the map and turned back to Liz. "I've given the thirty thousand men of the first army to High General von Cain. He's begun the assault with the help of the Faerzen Resistance. A report came last night. He's already liberated three forts and two towns."

A concern arose in Liz's mind as she listened. She ran her gaze across the map, looking for an answer. "When did General von Cain depart?"

"Six days ago."

And in those six days, he had taken three forts and two towns, equivalent to half of Senan. That was astonishingly fast, even for a high general.

"Did he encounter no resistance?"

Aura shook her head. "The enemy ran at the sight of the first army. He ordered a cautious advance in case they had left any traps behind, but he hasn't encountered anything yet."

It wasn't uncommon for a commander to offer their enemy easy victories in order to inflate their confidence. Such strategies existed. It meant allowing the foe to gain momentum, but it also made them careless, potentially inducing errors. Even a high general would struggle to recover if they were caught off guard in that way. Perhaps it would be better to stop the advance and scout ahead.

At that point, Aura's words from earlier passed through Liz's mind. "They don't want to fight for humans, do they?" she asked.

Senan was very far from Tigris. The kingdom would not have developed an attachment to it in two years. What was more, the commander of their forces was a replacement from Anguis; the proud álfar would be unlikely to give their lives in combat when the order came from a human. Even if their disdain did

not go that far, the extended chaos in the chain of command still lent credence to Liz's theory.

Aura nodded, looking oddly satisfied. "Correct. There's no trap. The first army doesn't need to worry about its rear, so I've ordered them to engage the Tigris forces as they encounter them. I'll dispatch the second army today and the third in two days' time. In a month, we'll capture Skye, the old capital. With the east under our control, we can set our sights on the west." She placed pawn after pawn on the map as she spoke. "We're racing against time, so I've reorganized our supply lines to optimize distance. The old roads will come in useful to bait the enemy."

As Aura's explanation concluded, Liz ran the plan through her mind to check for flaws.

Aura watched, looking faintly proud. "I expect them to abandon the east," she said.

The eastern half of Faerzen had always been the more disorderly and less stable. If it threatened to become a burden, Six Kingdoms would cut it off like a dead limb, and if they anticipated a drawn-out conflict, they would use it as a buffer zone to hold the empire at bay while they marshaled their forces and readied a counteroffensive.

Liz cast a sympathetic glance at Scáthach before replying. "Probably, yes. From what I've heard, they've left it unattended so far, and it'll be even less appealing now that it's a battlefield. They might have committed resources, but their losses will be small if they cut them now."

In light of that, the empire would have to commit to maintaining order and improving public safety if it intended to rule. The commonfolk would not return to Senan if it became a hive of bandits and brigands, and a popular revolt would undo everything they were working to achieve.

"The people of Faerzen are reaching their breaking point," Aura said. "We have to make this campaign as quick and efficient as possible. Otherwise, it might cause problems for the empire in the future."

Once Aura had finished, Liz turned to Scáthach with a grave expression. "Let me ask you one last time," she said, drawing her words out to give her as much

time as possible to think. “Are you sure you don’t have any second thoughts about our agreement?”

“None. I am committed to my course.” Scáthach gave a firm nod. A rueful smile spread across her face. “I may be the last of the royal line, but I would usher in my family’s killers. Nobody would accept me as a queen. I had intended to yield the throne in any case.”

That was the condition upon which Scáthach had secured the empire’s aid. The lion of Soleil did not wage war for charity. It fed on gold—and if Scáthach did not possess the wealth to fund the offensive, all she had left to pay with was her rank. Accordingly, she had agreed that once the fighting was done, she would renounce the throne and install some distant relative in her place, effectively handing control of Faerzen to the empire. Nothing less would have persuaded the empire’s nobles to lend their assistance.

“Very well,” Liz said. “Then I’ll do everything in my power to restore Faerzen.”

She had to cast aside her sympathy, no matter how bitter it might be. Those who sought the throne of the empire could not allow themselves to be swayed by sentiment.

“You have my thanks,” Scáthach said. “And my unreserved cooperation.”

Liz searched for words as the woman bowed her head, but she found nothing to say.

* * * * *

“So the empire has struck at Tigris? Interesting.” Lucia’s eyes narrowed with amusement as she listened to the report. “The imperials understand one thing, ’twould seem. They must strike at the álfar first.”

“This is no laughing matter, Your Majesty. The east of Faerzen finally looked to have stabilized, and now this.” Despite the admonishment, Seleucus—Lucia’s handsome young retainer—seemed to be finding his own enjoyment in the situation. If she listened carefully, she could make out just a hint of *schadenfreude* in his voice. “The imperial forces have momentum on their side, it seems. It would be fair to say that half of the east is already under their control.”

“Leaving Tigris scattering, no doubt.”

“As you say. Although Tigris’s actions confuse me. Why take control of Senan only to give it up? Surely they have invested no small amount of coin in the east.”

It was understandable that Seleucus might raise an eyebrow, but Lucia saw Tigris’s reasoning. Fleeing might appear cowardly in the short term, but it was the wiser choice in the long term. There was no point wasting soldiers on a battle that could not be won. Better to retreat, even if it meant humiliation, and await a chance at revenge. More to the point, not enough time had passed for them to have put down meaningful roots in Faerzen, and the coin they had invested would hardly bankrupt them. They had weighed lives against gold and found the former more valuable.

“What do we know of the empire’s numbers?” she asked.

“The current offensive consists of four armies: the first, the second, the third, and the core. The first army has thirty thousand soldiers and the second forty thousand, for a total of seventy thousand men. The third army and the core remain in reserve. Their overall numbers are unknown, but we may expect them to exceed a hundred thousand.”

“Quite the force they have assembled.”

The scale of the empire’s lands and population gave it a significant advantage in warfare. Watching them field such numbers a scant two years after suffering crushing losses, it was hard not to feel a little jealous—especially with Six Kingdoms’ own forces in such disarray.

“No doubt they have judged they can afford to give us their full attention now that affairs in Steissen have settled. The eastern territories have supplied the most soldiers, but southern troops make up a close second.”

“The time for watching and waiting has passed, ’twould seem.”

Six Kingdoms could no longer afford to sit on its hands. If nothing was done, every city in Faerzen would soon be flying imperial colors. That said, with the other kingdoms in their current uncoordinated state, Lucia’s forces would easily be isolated and picked off. There was no point in trying to assist Tigris if its

soldiers were still on the run. She would be sending her men to pointless deaths, and she could ill afford that. No, Anguis would have to hold back until Tigris sent a request for reinforcements, but that was unlikely to come—they were rival kingdoms, for one thing, but more pressingly, the proud álfar would be loath to turn to humans for aid. Even in a crisis, the divisions between their peoples seemed to supersede common sense, a fact that caused her endless frustration.

“’Tis vexing, but we have no choice but to wait. Dispatch a messenger to Tigris, at least.”

“I will see it done, Your Majesty. Also, while information is scarce, you may be interested to know that the king of Baum has been seen making for the empire’s western border.”

“Oh?” A face flashed across Lucia’s mind: the face of the fourth prince who had eluded her two years ago. The timing of his feigned death coincided almost precisely with the rise of Baum’s mysterious new king. Most likely, the two were one and the same.

“If he means to join the war effort, and his movements suggest he does, that may pose trouble for us. Anybody who impresses him will earn the favor of the archpriestess. No doubt the empire’s nobles will be tripping over themselves at the chance to better their fortunes...and the other nations of Soleil will be cursing their luck.”

Baum was a country blessed by the Spirit King. Interfering in its affairs would mean incurring a Lord’s wrath, and it possessed great influence in Soleil. No nation would be so foolish as to think to invade it—or the empire, now that the two were working together—in the ongoing chaos. For the time being, the rest of Soleil would have to wait and see how events played out.

“I also ought to mention,” Seleucus continued, “the empire has fielded the Knights of the Golden Lion, the Knights of the Royal Black, and the Knights of the Rose. They appear to have fully committed to retaking Faerzen.”

“Indeed.”

That was a great deal of military might to bring to bear for the sake of a war-torn wasteland. True, Faerzen would be a profitable land to hold once restored

to its former glory, but that would take decades, not years. The empire might have had a righteous claim to it, but Lucia could not for the life of her see why they had levied so many men just to take it back.

“Is something the matter, Your Majesty?”

“Not as such. I wonder only what the empire truly intends.”

“To retake Faerzen, surely?”

“No, there must be more.”

Lucia tapped her fan against the map, stroking her chin. She imagined herself in the empire’s position, the better to understand its intent. Over and over she placed pawns on the map, checking their locations against her stack of reports, before removing them again and starting from scratch. Seleucus watched, wide-eyed, as she worked.

At last, she halted, brushed all of the pawns to the floor, and settled back into her chair. “’Tis an invasion they plan. They hope their momentum will carry them into Six Kingdoms.”

“Surely not, Your Majesty. Faerzen alone would leave them with a veritable mountain of administrative tasks, to make no mention of how far they would have to stretch their supply lines.”

“They have assembled over a hundred thousand soldiers, taken their finest troops into the fray, and even brought the king of Baum in tow. I am quite certain. Faerzen alone would not satisfy them.”

Seleucus gulped apprehensively. He looked at the map, unable or unwilling to believe. If what Lucia was saying was true, Six Kingdoms had been lured into an extremely perilous position.

“They do not mean to lay waste to all of Six Kingdoms, of course,” Lucia continued. “Greif, for instance, is shielded by the Travant Mountains. No, if I were them, I would occupy Esel and make it my shield while I consolidated control of Faerzen.”

“And if Six Kingdoms were to lose Esel...”

“Quite. It would be split down the middle. Greif and Anguis would be

stranded, alone in the north.”

Six Kingdoms’ federated nature was its greatest strength. The kingdoms would be far weaker if they could not work as one. None had the resources to face the empire alone.

“Now that I think about it,” Lucia mused, “’tis perhaps only because we were shielded by Faerzen that we have lasted as long as we have.”

“Your Majesty...” Seleucus seemed to have finally grasped the full implications of the situation. He stared at the map, his usual irreverent smile nowhere to be seen. “Am I correct in thinking this bodes ill?”

Lucia could not help but laugh. “Indeed it does. If we leave it untended.”

In the worst case, Tigris might choose to abandon Faerzen entirely. The álfar were mercurial, but decisive when they chose to act, and they would not want to sully the purity of their blood by mingling with barbarians. That alone would be enough to convince them to withdraw, and if that happened, other kingdoms would likely follow. Only Greif, which hosted the High King, and Esel, which bordered Faerzen, were guaranteed to remain, and the fall of Esel would foretell poor things for Anguis.

“Anguis’s, Greif’s, and Esel’s forces combined would hardly make fifty thousand, and even then, they are scattered across Faerzen.”

If the empire were to learn how vulnerable Six Kingdoms truly was, they would press the attack all the harder. Indeed, perhaps they already knew. That might very well be the reason for the current onslaught.

“There can only be one reason the empire has brought more than a hundred thousand to bear,” she said conclusively. “They mean to defeat us once and for all.”

“Even so, we will have little chance of victory if we try to face them by ourselves,” Seleucus cautioned.

“Oh, no doubt. Not without a plan, in any case.”

Lucia fell silent, thinking. Several schemes were already swirling around her brain. What she needed now was a way to ensure the survival of Six Kingdoms

—or more specifically, she corrected herself, a way to convince the álfar infesting it to take the current threat seriously. All the better if it left her with the upper hand. This was a chance to ingratiate herself with the High King, and she could not afford to waste it. She pored over all of the information she had on hand, turning it over as if untangling a knot, until at last it came undone and she had her answer.

“Two plans present themselves,” she said briskly, tapping her fan on the table. “First, I shall buy us time while we write to Nameless for reinforcements.”

“I shall dispatch a messenger forthwith,” Seleucus said. “But if I may, how do you mean to buy time? I doubt Tigris, Scorpius, or Vulpes will be eager to lend their aid.”

All three kingdoms were ruled by álfar. Most of their territories lay in the east of Faerzen, and they had uniformly opted to abandon them without resistance. If Lucia commanded them to stand and fight, they would simply ignore her. Regardless, she intended to turn the situation to her advantage as much as she was able.

“If the empire is so eager for Faerzen’s soil, I say we let them claim as far as Skye.”

Tigris, Scorpius, and Vulpes could only flee so far. That limit was Skye, Faerzen’s old capital and the gateway to its western half. At present, the best course was to let them fall back there, hopefully drawing in the imperial forces in the process.

“Once that is done, we shall move to waylay their armies.” Lucia gestured to Anguis’s territory with her fan.

An amused smile spread across Seleucus’s face; he seemed to have guessed her intent. “You mean to use the people of Faerzen.”

“Indeed. Spread word among the commonfolk that the empire is repeating its old atrocities. Our armies are useless without a casus belli, and the people will not follow us unless we are on the side of righteousness.”

“I presume we shall gather our forces while the enemy is delayed?”

“But of course. Faerzen is wide, after all. The empire’s momentum avails them

now, but the moment they slow, a myriad of annoyances will sap their strength.”

“Understood, Your Majesty. I will see to it at once.” Seleucus nodded, apparently satisfied, but then a thought seemed to strike him and he cocked his head. “You said you had two plans, Your Majesty?”

“Ah, yes, the other. A fail-safe, nothing more.” Lucia looked not at Seleucus as she spoke, but up at the ceiling. Her lips curled, giving her a sultry look—a challenge, perhaps, to someone who was not there.

Seleucus sighed. He was used to Lucia’s tendencies by now. “A fail-safe, Your Majesty?”

Lucia gave a throaty chuckle. With her eyes lidded, she looked for all the world like a snake that had caught sight of a mouse. The sight was almost as intimidating to her allies as it would have been to her enemies, and Seleucus shivered with a sudden chill as she lowered her gaze to him once more.

“Do you recall that new assistant? Mary, I believe her name was.”

“Ah, the capable one. I believe so.”

“Is she with you today?”

“I had her serving food today. Do you have some need of her?”

“Tell her she is to come by my chambers this evening.” Lucia’s tongue snaked out to wet her lips. There was no need to ask what she intended. Only prey could have earned this kind of fascination.

“I will pass the message on at once.”

“Ha ha ha... Oh, what fun we shall have together.” Lucia’s chuckle swelled into shameless gales of belly-clutching laughter. “Ha ha ha ha, ha ha ha... How delicious her fear shall be!”

Her voice rang free and unopposed through the halls, vulgar, cruel, and dark.

* * * * *

The cloak of night lay over the world. A thick blanket of clouds obscured both the moon and the stars. It would rain tomorrow, Huginn thought as she arrived

at the mansion.

“Evenin’, Miss Mary,” said the sentry at the door, using the name she had assumed while undercover. “What brings you here so late?”

Huginn jumped and turned to face him. She had not expected to be stopped on her way in. “I-I’ve been called in by the mistress,” she stammered. “Weren’t you told?”

“Oh, just pullin’ your leg, miss. I’ve heard all about it. You’re free to go in.”

“Erm...would you mind opening the door?”

Typically, the sentry would have opened it for her, but today, he simply stood there, regarding her with an unpleasant leer. The hairs prickled on the back of her neck. It was like he was undressing her with his eyes.

“Of course. Beggin’ your pardon. The mistress will see you now.”

There was something oddly affected about the way he was acting, as if he knew something she didn’t. Huginn stepped through the door, frowning. As she did, something grasped her buttocks.

“Eek!” She spun around with a shriek.

“Whoops. Sorry, miss.” The sentry was looking at her lecherously, cheeks reddened, practically drooling. “Went to close the door and, well...my hand must have slipped.”

Huginn was of half a mind to punch him squarely in his slack-jawed face, but she just barely restrained herself. “Oh, you! Be more careful next time, okay?”

A vein throbbed on her forehead as she spoke, but she managed to force a smile before continuing inside the building.

“That little rat. If I ever meet him on the field, I’ll put an arrow right between his rotten eyes.” She stormed along the corridor, the torches on the walls sending deep shadows dancing across her face. “And what’s with this stupid getup?! How could anyone work with all this lace hanging off ’em?!”

A look down at her frilly uniform prompted an exaggerated pout. She made her way down the corridor, pulling at the frills so hard they might tear free at any moment. Eventually, footsteps ahead prompted her to straighten up. There

were guards ahead on patrol. She drew to the side and smiled as they passed.

“Good evening! Good luck on patrol!” Her professional voice was so sickly sweet, it was all she could do not to gag.

“Evenin’, miss,” one said. “Workin’ late again tonight, I see.”

“The empire’s crossed the border, I hear,” the other added. “You’d be better off heading home while you can. Although I s’pose nowhere’s safe in Faerzen...”

The pair continued down the hall. Huginn had gotten to know a great many soldiers while undercover in Anguis, and she privately hoped she wouldn’t have to face them on the battlefield. She had no intention of showing her enemies any mercy, but while being forced to kill acquaintances wasn’t unusual in her line of work, that didn’t make it any more pleasant or easier to get used to. Now, again, once her work here was done she would go to war, as likely as not against the men she had just passed.

“Always best to move on before you can get too attached...but no such luck this time, seems like.”

She had been in Anguis too long already. On top of that, in her capacity as Queen Lucia’s assistant, she had grown familiar with most of the mansion’s retainers.

“What should I do? His Lordship said to get out if I think I’m in danger, but I’m not about to go back empty-handed...”

No doubt Hiro would welcome her warmly whether or not she came back with results, but she didn’t want to return to Baum without bringing him something he could use. Such intelligence was not easy to come by, however—getting hold of it would require taking the kinds of risks that he would certainly not approve of. The result was that her mission was dragging on with no end in sight, and it was driving her to distraction.

She was still wrestling with her thoughts when she arrived at her destination. “I don’t like dealing with her,” she muttered. “Not one bit. Wonder if she’d mind if I didn’t show...”

From the moment they had first met, everything about Lucia had rubbed Huginn the wrong way. Her eyes glinted with a wicked light, something cold and

reptilian, and her smile never quite reached them. For a time, Huginn had worried that her cover was blown, but it seemed not; Lucia simply did not truly smile for anyone, friend or foe.

“Let’s get this over with,” she grumbled.

She knocked three times. There was no reply from within. Nonetheless, the doors swung silently open.

“Erm...Mistress Lucia? Are you there?”

Huginn peered inside, but the room was dark. The wavering light of the candle on the desk seemed especially bright in the gloom. A chill ran up her spine as she stepped hesitantly inside.

“Hello? Mistress Lucia?”

Something felt immediately wrong. She broke out in a cold sweat. A shivering fit overtook her, so strong that she couldn’t move a single step. It felt like she was a mouse caught in the glare of a snake, but there was nobody else in the room to exert that kind of pressure. She felt her throat grow dry and loosened her collar to relieve some of the warmth building up inside.

At that moment, there was a loud noise behind her.

“Eek!”

She spun around with a genuine scream. The door had slammed shut, although there was no wind inside the mansion. The feeling of wrongness intensified. Anybody else might have lost their wits and descended into hysterics, but Huginn took a deep breath to regain her composure. She had to leave immediately, summons be damned. She sensed that she was now fighting for survival. An instant’s hesitation could end her life.

Reality, however, was not always so kind as to provide an escape.

“My, my.” The voice issued from somewhere behind her ear. “What combat instincts my handmaiden has.”

“Wha—”

She reacted quickly, hiking up her skirt and reaching for the blade stowed beneath. She drew as she spun, unleashing a slash at lightning speed. The

attack was almost too fast to see, but it was not enough.

“How...?”

The dagger’s blade lodged in the floorboards, shorn clean from the hilt. As Huginn stared at it in shock, a crushing force closed around her throat, squeezing down on her windpipe. Before she knew what was happening, she was pinned to the wall, the bewitching features of Lucia du Anguis looming in front of her.



“Now,” Lucia said, “I have a question for you. ’Twould be wise to answer truthfully.”

“Wh-Who told you...? Ngh!” A disconcerting noise issued from Huginn’s chin. The bone had begun to creak, as if it had been trapped in a vise. The pain was agonizing, but Lucia’s grip left her powerless to do any more than groan.

“Who was it that sent you? The empire, perhaps? Or was it Baum?”

“You’ll...get nothing...out of me!”

“Well, well. A spy with some spine. Perhaps losing an arm might loosen your tongue?” Lucia lifted Huginn up by the jaw and drove her against the wall. “I do have a fondness for spirited maidens, ’tis true, but they ought not to test my patience.”

She released Huginn’s neck, only to grasp her uniform collar and smash her into the floor. Air exploded from Huginn’s lungs. She stared back at Lucia, red-faced and gasping for breath, but her will was unbroken.

“You’re made of sterner stuff than most, ’twould seem.” Lucia brought her heel down on Huginn’s stomach as she flicked open her fan. The smile slid from her face, and she looked down with cold, hard eyes. “But fear not. Your resilience shall not go unpunished. You shall entertain my soldiers until you are more willing to talk.”

Huginn squirmed, trying to free herself, but Lucia’s foot did not move an inch.

“You shall be my entertainment for this evening. Do try not to break too easily.”

* * * * *

The seventeenth day of the ninth month of Imperial Year 1026

The province of Faerzen had once been a nation powerful enough to stand shoulder to shoulder with the empire. With the bountiful Sea of Infini in the north fuelling a thriving seafood trade, Six Kingdoms to the west, and the Grantzian Empire to the east, it was a veritable crossroads between the two halves of Soleil that had once prospered through trade with both. Its defeat at the empire’s hands, however, had caused a breakdown in public order. Now,

merchants tended to avoid it, and the fires of war had ravaged both its fertile lands and its people's hearts. The onetime melting pot of languages and the bustling markets were no more. Its rolling plains had withered and died, leaving no trace of its former glory.

The fighting had been fiercest in Senan, where Faerzen bordered the empire. Again and again, war's embers had scarred it, reducing the city of Nex to an ashen ruin. Once, it had been known as the gateway to Faerzen, rivaling the royal capital for glory. Now, its streets were deserted.

The city had fallen under the control of the imperial forces in recent days. Tents sprawled as far as the eye could see—the buildings made for poor shelter, as they were liable to collapse at any moment. At the nexus of the streets stood a mansion that had once belonged to the local lord. Two flags fluttered above it: the banner of the empire and the crimson lily of the sixth princess.

A short distance away rose a small hill overlooking the mansion. Before the city fell, it had been a park constructed for the pleasure of the nobility. The lord of Nex had reputedly been partial to the view of his house and its environs. After he fell in battle with the empire, his surviving family had been executed by House Krone upon that same rise, leading the commonfolk to dub it the Hill of Tears. None of the imperial troops had been willing to make camp on such an ill-omened spot, but the Crow Legion of Baum had been just daring enough—or just mad enough—not to object.

"Rest easy now. You have been revenged upon House Krone." A chill night breeze brushed the back of Hiro's neck as he laid a flower on the earth.

Luka approached from behind, her empty sleeve flapping in the wind. "Have you heard from Huginn?" she asked.

The torch in her hand pushed back the darkness enough to reveal her face. Her eyes were looking toward Hiro, but they seemed to be staring clean through him, fixed on something far away.

"Not yet. I've been holding off on contacting her for a little while. I was going to send word soon."

Luka had been pressing him to contact Huginn almost every day since they had arrived in Faerzen. She seemed to have gotten it into her head that Huginn

was her brother Igel reborn. How she had reached that conclusion, he could only speculate, but the attachment it bred was very real.

“And what if she is harmed in the meantime? You must send a messenger at once.”

“I’ve told her to maintain her cover unless absolutely necessary. She won’t have gotten into trouble.”

Muninn had a tendency to wander off and investigate on his own initiative, but Huginn followed orders to the letter. She would not have ignored such a direct instruction.

“She is in Lucia’s service, is she not?”

“What about it?”

“If that shrew harms a single hair on Huginn’s head, I will split her from tip to tail.”

Hiro smiled wryly but said nothing.

“What is so funny? Do you not fear for her?”

“Of course I do. For her, and Muninn, and all the rest. They’re out risking their lives for me. Not a day goes by when I don’t worry about them.”

Once a spy’s true identity was uncovered, their life was a candle in the wind. With the nations of Soleil constantly vying for supremacy, all were suspicious of the rest. Paranoid rulers would execute their most loyal subjects given half a reason. It was not difficult to imagine what treatment they might reserve for an agent of the enemy.

“She is the only one I worry for.” Luka stepped closer, casting her torch away as she grasped Hiro’s arm. “The rest can burn for all I care. I would not shed a tear.”

She glared up at him with eyes so fierce, it sent a chill down his spine. His arm creaked in her grip. She had always been unusually attached to Huginn, but he hadn’t realized she had become so dependent as to grow unbalanced. That was all the more reason not to confess the truth, but if he told her nothing, she might well venture off to Anguis’s territories by herself.

“All right.” There was a note of admonishment in his tone. “If you’re really that concerned, I’ll send a messenger as soon as I get the chance.”

Luka’s grip gently relaxed, but her eyes remained full of suspicion. “Give me your word.”

“I promise.” He gave a reassuring nod, smiling all the while.

She peered at him mistrustfully for a moment but finally relented, evidently reasoning the conversation would go nowhere if they simply glared at one another. “So?” she asked, changing the subject. “What brings you here?”

She hardly needed to ask. Below the hill sprawled the imperial encampment, arranged around the mansion where Liz had taken up temporary residence.

She followed his gaze and nodded in understanding. “The red-haired brat. I hear much of her even in Baum. In peacetime she would have been a beauty to lay kingdoms low, they say. I wonder how much truth there is to the tales.”

“You shouldn’t believe everything you hear,” Hiro said. “But in her case, they might be right.”

Whether Liz had grown as gallant as Artheus or as fiery as her mother, there was little question that the rumors were on the mark.

“I look forward to seeing for myself,” he continued, “although I’m more interested in how she’s grown inside than out.”

“You could see well enough if you cared to attend a strategy meeting.”

Not once had Hiro met Liz face-to-face since meeting up with the imperial forces in Faerzen. He had dispatched the commander of the Crow Legion to attend in his place, insisting that he was unwell.

“Why bother? Baum has already played its part. Now we’ll just let them assign us to some unit or other and take up the rear for a few weeks.”

That was not the only reason, of course. Hiro’s presence would likely cause discord in the imperial ranks. Many of the empire’s various generals and nobles regarded Baum with reverence, but more than a few viewed its interference as unwelcome. If he attended a meeting, someone would eventually ask his opinion, splitting the room into those who agreed and those who refused to

acknowledge him. The campaign could do without that sort of conflict.

“I would prefer to stay back and watch—”

He cut himself off mid-sentence. A figure had just emerged from the mansion’s doors, her hair shimmering crimson in the torchlight. Only one woman in the empire bore that distinctive hue: Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz, sixth princess of the empire and empress regent.

Luka’s eyes immediately snapped to her. She had seen her too. “Well, who’d have thought it? She’s grown almost too beautiful for words.”

Even her sharp tongue seemed to have lost its edge. It was rare to hear her utter such straightforward praise. Not that it was hard to see why: Liz’s beauty exceeded what she could ever have imagined.

“Is she truly human? From the way she carries herself, I would have thought her an álf.”

All of a sudden, Hiro’s eyes narrowed in the darkness. “Why...?”

“Hm?” She turned to look at him. “Is something amiss?”

He clapped a hand over his mouth, falling silent again. If she struck now, he would have no chance of survival—he was so distracted that she could easily take his life. Yet it was not Liz’s growth that seemed to have occupied his attention. His eyes had opened wide, as if confronted by a reality he did not want to face. It reminded Luka of herself in the moment she had watched her brother die.

“What is she doing here?” he whispered.

“Should she not be? Is she not whom you came to see?”

“No, that’s not... That’s not what I mean,” he muttered under his breath, but that was the extent of his answer.

His eyes took on a new intensity as he stared at Liz, his expression unreadable. That only lasted for so long, however. Liz turned her gaze up to the top of the hill. In a sudden fit of panic, Luka wrapped her arms around his head and pulled him down.

Almost immediately, the woman scowled at her own actions. “What is the use

of hiding? I am being ridiculous. Surely she cannot see us, and what would I have to fear if she did?”

She moved to rise, only to stop as she caught a glimpse of Hiro’s face.

“No,” he said. “With her eyes, I’m sure she can see us quite well.”

“And what do you mean by that?”

“No normal person could pick out a human being on a moonless night. But her...”

Luka’s torch was lying where she had dropped it, snuffed out by the mud. The only other light source was the Crow Legion’s camp, but it was too far away to catch them in its glow. What was more, the moon lay behind a thick layer of cloud. By all rights, Hiro and Luka should have been ghosts, but Liz had spotted them without any difficulty.

“There’s no mistake.” Hiro whispered. “She’s finally coming into her own.”

* * * * *

“What’s wrong?” Aura asked.

“I thought I sensed something outside.”

“A spy?”

“Just the wind in the grass, it turned out.” Liz turned back to face her friend, smiling bashfully.

“An impressive enough thing to sense on its own,” Scáthach remarked as she stepped outside. She cast a glance at the Hill of Tears, nodded to herself in seeming comprehension, and turned to Liz with a searching look in her eyes.

Liz looked away, feeling as if she was being probed. She herself was not certain what had compelled her to leave her seat so suddenly, but it was better to hide how deeply the incident had shaken her. Allowing her unease to show would only make Scáthach suspicious.

“Anyway,” she said, redirecting the conversation before it could go anywhere uncomfortable, “about what we were discussing before... Are you certain this is what you want?”

Scáthach would accompany the Crow Legion for the foreseeable future. The decision had come at her request; she had specifically asked to be allowed to part ways with the main force. Liz could more or less guess why. She and Aura were about to march to Skye, the former capital of Faerzen, which their spies reported had fared little better than Nex in the fighting. If anything, Liz had breathed a sigh of relief when Scáthach had asked to join Baum rather than come with them to the forlorn ruins of her old home.

“I am,” Scáthach replied. “Skye broke my heart when I saw it last, and the two years since have not been kind.”

With no king, no army, and no inhabitants, bandits and other common criminals had descended on the city. It was little surprise that Six Kingdoms had abandoned it. Designating a new capital was far less effort than repairing the burned-out buildings, restoring the looted palace, and recalling the townsfolk from wherever they had fled.

“To my shame,” she continued, “I would not trust myself to maintain my composure.”

Liz nodded but kept her silence. She had no right to offer her thoughts. The current state of Faerzen was, ultimately, the fault of the empire. Words of comfort would mean nothing coming from a member of its royal family. If she truly meant to make amends—both to Scáthach and to Faerzen—her attitude would speak louder than her voice, and her actions louder still.

“I’ll see you again,” she said, “once Faerzen is free.”

Their plans had changed since the early stages of the conflict. With the first and second armies making faster progress than expected, the empire would now advance through Faerzen on two fronts. The first and second armies would continue on to Skye, where Liz would meet them with the core, while the third army and the forces of Baum would circle around to the south and hem Anguis’s forces in. Once Liz and her forces had captured Skye, they would advance south, trapping Anguis in a vise. In theory, that would wipe them out, chasing Six Kingdoms from Faerzen entirely.

“Thank you for accompanying me this far,” Scáthach replied. “Rest assured that I will spare no effort to see this through.”

“Baum seems happy enough to have you, but you’ll still be in an unfamiliar environment. Take care not to push yourself.”

“I appreciate your concern, but the same goes for you. You and Aura do not know these lands as I do. Do not neglect to take care of yourselves either.”

As Liz smiled, acknowledging the kindness of the gesture, a question crossed her mind. “If you don’t mind me asking, why Baum?”

Scáthach could easily have joined the third army, but she had chosen to accompany the Crow Legion instead. True, few of the commonfolk would lend her their ears given the current state of Faerzen, particularly those under Anguis’s rule in the west—insults were one thing, but she might easily find herself met with stones. Still, if the vanguard would be too taxing, she could have taken up the third army’s rearguard. That didn’t explain why she had joined the Crow Legion even farther behind.

“There is a matter I wish to discuss with Lord Surtr,” Scáthach said. “I would know what was on his mind two years ago. Well, closer to three now, I suppose.”

Liz had expected her to avoid the question, so the honest answer came as something of a surprise. “Well,” she said, “I hope you find the answers you’re looking for.”

She was curious about what Scáthach intended to discuss, but the woman was unlikely to divulge that much. There was nothing for it but to wish her well and trust she would reveal her secrets when the time was right. That was usually her way.

“But enough of that,” Scáthach said. “You said that your eye felt strange?”

That was right. They had been talking about that before Liz dashed outside, leaving the topic unresolved.

“Oh, yes. I was curious to know what you two thought.” Liz stepped back through the entrance and beckoned the others to follow. “Should we talk inside?”

With one last glance at the Hill of Tears, she closed the door behind her.

The eighteenth day of the ninth month of Imperial Year 1026

Faerzen's port city on the Sea of Infini had not escaped the effects of the imperial assault. The rule of law was nonexistent. For a time, pirate vessels had moored at the docks in broad daylight, ransacking the nearby towns as the desire took them. Now, however, even they had fled out to sea, leaving the streets abandoned. Corpses littered the bloodstained sands by the score—townsfolk who had been too slow to flee, judging by their clothing. The bodies were horribly mutilated, bearing scars suggestive of torture.

A figure walked briskly along the beach, unbothered by the stench of death. With a hood covering her face and a bell staff in her hands, she resembled a wandering pilgrim. Had an observer been present, they might have mistaken her for a clergywoman come to lay the dead to rest. Those more familiar with her would simply have called her Nameless.

She left the beach for firmer ground, where boulders made for treacherous footing. At last, she came to an ominous cavern whose depths lay in darkness. Any normal person might have turned back, but she strode in without hesitation. The inside was colder than a jail cell. A bestial howl echoed along the passage as if to warn away intruders, and the trickle of water down the stone walls only added to the eerie atmosphere. Nameless only smiled faintly beneath her hood. Her steps were so light she might have taken off skipping, like a child stealing away to a secret base.

At last, she came to a halt. A squat platform, like an altar, lay ahead. It was decorated with innumerable candles and strewn with bones, human, animal, and monster alike. Blood lay splattered around, not yet dried. In the middle of what must have been a massacre stood a gray-haired man, shackles clasped around his muscular limbs.

"Urrrgghh..."

A groan issued from his throat. His eyes darted about, unfocused. He strained against his chains but just as quickly fell limp, apparently exhausted. His skin was a deeper violet than any human's could be. Indeed, he was not human—but nor was he a beast, and it would not have been entirely accurate to call him

a monster either.

Nameless stepped forward. A gravelly crunch echoed through the cavern.

“So, you come at last.” The man’s deranged features reassumed an aspect of sanity. His eyes were still clouded as they swiveled to look at her, but reason glimmered in their depths once more.

“How do you feel?” the álf asked.

“Good enough. All the better for my feast.” He cast a glance at the bones strewn across the ground, drool dripping from his half-open mouth.

“I am pleased to hear it. This place was a fine choice, it seems.” Nameless nodded in approval to herself before tilting her head, her smile widening. “I will soon require your assistance. Do you think you’re ready?”

“As ready as I shall ever be. I will not lose myself as I did last time.”

“Splendid. And as luck would have it, I have just the opponent for you to test yourself against.” She struck the base of her staff against the ground. The chime of bells rang through the cavern, rousing a cloud of bats from the roof.

“A name I ought to know?”

“A high general of the Grantzian Empire: General von Cain. The one they call Stoutarm.”

The man expelled a sigh and snorted derisively. “Of the central territories. I recall. A man who thinks of naught but battle.”

“The perfect chance to test your mettle, wouldn’t you agree? And if you succeed, you will face the sixth princess.”

“She must have grown strong.”

“Oh, yes. More than you can imagine.” The certainty in Nameless’s voice left no room for doubt.

The man began to laugh, first quietly, then harder and harder. The chains trailing from his limbs rattled in a wild dance as tears streamed from his eyes. He seemed to have been waiting for this chance. “Aha... Ha ha ha ha ha! I would expect no less from the wielder of the crimson ruin... From the true heir to the

holy blood of von Grantz!”

The joy slid from his face. All at once, he was expressionless once more. His dull eyes began to wander again, and more drool spilled from his mouth.

Nameless’s mouth curled into a grin at the sight. “Death is the only release for our poor cursed princess,” she said, her voice icy cold. “Grant it to her.”

The man fell silent for a moment, but at last he nodded obediently. “I will.”

Nameless drew up alongside him and, although there was nobody to overhear, brought her lips to his ear. “That is your part to play. You understand, I trust?”

“Of course, my dearest. For you, I will seek victory. For you, I will wring their necks, and to you, I will offer up their accursed souls!”

He began to struggle against his bonds. Nameless stepped back and looked up. The ceiling of the cavern was already beginning to crack beneath the weight of his strength. Dust and rocks fell from above in a ceaseless torrent.

“So you shall. Prove your might over the spirits’ curse and you shall ascend to a form truly without peer.”

As the words left her lips, the chains shattered. The man let loose a battle cry, a howl of madness born of fury, sorrow, and joy.

Glee spread across Nameless’s lips, deep, dark, and black. “Avenge us upon the house of von Grantz. Let the whole world know our rage.”

Laughter rang from two throats as the cavern began to crumble.

* * * * *

The new royal capital of Faerzen was the city of San Dinalle in the southwest. The redesignation had been proposed and enacted by Six Kingdoms, but with most of Faerzen’s royal family and aristocracy either missing or dead in battle, none had been left to disagree. The Faerzen Resistance was not strong enough to have any sway, and with Skye long reduced to rubble, the commonfolk had shrugged and agreed with their new conquerors.

San Dinalle was Faerzen’s gateway to Six Kingdoms, and its proximity to the border with Esel had seen it develop at a rapid pace. Its prosperous

surroundings could have belonged to a wholly different nation from the devastation in the east. The mansion of the city's ruler was perpetually bustling with visitors, and the markets were so lively it was hard to believe there was a war not so far beyond the horizon.

The current ruler—and proprietress of the mansion—was Queen Lucia of Anguis, and she was sitting at her desk doing battle with a stack of reports. A nearby aide winced, watching the pile steadily grow as more parchment was carried in.

“I will have that witch's head for this,” she muttered. “What demands her attention so much that she believes she can leave me her paperwork?”

“If I remember correctly,” the aide supplied, “Lady Nameless left to ascertain the security of the north.”

“Indeed she did, and since then, not a peep. One wonders whether she even understands what we face!” Lucia tossed her quill away and collapsed back into her chair. “Enough! Enough for today. I have an impending battle that demands my attention.”

With a wry smile, the aide laid a cup of tea in front of her. She sipped it in silence while the man set about clearing the desk. A glance confirmed that a letter was wedged in the stack of completed reports.

“Leave it,” she commanded. “Seleucus shall tend to that.”

She looked to the side, where a handsome young man was standing against the wall, daintily tending to his own cup of tea. With Seleucus's permanent smile, many thought he never took anything seriously, but he was a competent commander, and there was a good reason he was known as Lucia's right hand.

“You've delegated your duties for quite long enough, don't you think?” Lucia indicated the papers with a thrust of her chin. “Once in a while, you ought to earn your keep.”

Seleucus raised his arms helplessly and sighed. He stepped away from the wall with a shake of his head and clapped the aide on the shoulder. “Get some rest. I'll take care of this.”

“B-But, my lord, I couldn't possibly ask you to—”

“I have to make myself useful sometime, or Her Majesty is liable to demote me.”

Seleucus all but snatched the stack from the aide, scooping it up in both arms. With a meaningful glance at Lucia, he headed for the door. Unfortunately, both of his hands were full. He tried to balance the pile of documents in one hand as he strained to grasp the handle with the other, but they fell to the floor in an avalanche of parchment. As he stared impassively at the carnage, the aide hurriedly set about picking up the mess.

Seleucus shot the man a smile. “A little too ambitious, I admit. Perhaps I could use your help after all.”

“As you command, my lord.”

As the pair restacked the documents, Seleucus stealthily stowed the letter away in his pocket. He stood and opened the door, looking for all the world like nothing was amiss. “We will take our leave now, Your Majesty. If you need anything in our absence, please send for the guards at the entrance.” With the aide in tow, he bowed and shut the door.

Left alone in the chamber, Lucia finished her cup of tea and stood up from her chair, then approached the window.

“How stands the board?”

The voice issued from behind her. She spun around to see Nameless standing by the wall, holding a cup of tea and a saucer.

The álf smiled broadly. “These are fine leaves you have in stock.”

Lucia was quick to recover from her surprise. She snapped open her fan and raised it to eye level. “Must you insist on appearing out of nowhere? One of these days, I might just die of fright.”

“It’s a habit of mine, I’m afraid. One not easily broken.” Nameless ran a loving hand along her bell staff. “My dear Trishula is so very fond of surprises. I have to indulge her from time to time or she will grow tired of me.”

Lucia scowled. “Would that she might.”

“What do you have to fear? Even if I were to catch you by surprise, your

Mandala would keep you safe from harm.”

Lucia snorted. “From death, mayhaps. But I am not so foolish as to believe I would survive unscathed.”

Neither woman had any chance of goading the other into revealing something compromising. Their relationship was too superficial for that, and both knew it. There was no point to this game.

Nameless shook her head and laid her saucer down, evidently judging the conversation to be a waste of time. “As I said, how stands the board?”

“See for yourself.” Lucia moved from her desk to the table by the window, where a map of Faerzen was laid out. Pawns in several different colors stood upon it, mostly concentrated in the center and west. “The imperials have split their forces in two. The first and second armies approach from the north. Their momentum will not be halted, and the core awaits behind them in any case. ’Twould be foolish in the extreme to think to stop them.”

Nameless glanced toward the other side of the map. “And the rest from the south, I presume?”

“Indeed. The third army and Baum. Esel’s valiant resistance has slowed their progress, but, well...’tis only a matter of time.”

If the imperial forces broke through the Esel line, they would have a straight shot at San Dinalle, and if Six Kingdoms lost the new capital, they would have no choice but to hand Faerzen back to the empire. Esel shared a border with Faerzen, so it had the most to lose. Its troops were fighting hard. Nonetheless, theirs was a losing battle. Any fool could see that they would eventually have to fall back to San Dinalle.

“How much time, however, is still in question. And I mean for their stand to continue a little longer.”

“I see,” Nameless said. “Then your attention is focused on the north for the present. What actions have the other kingdoms taken?”

“Tigris is fleeing, as is their wont. Scorpius has deigned to watch and wait. Both seek to avoid losses, I don’t doubt. Vulpes holds the old capital for now, but Skye hardly has walls to withstand a siege. I expect they shall give it up

before long.”

If the kingdoms stood against the empire piecemeal, they could only expect to be swept away. Their soldiers might have been as well trained as the enemy, but they were only a fraction as experienced. The empire had known nothing but victory on the field. An alliance that could not even fight as allies stood no chance.

“Indeed. Well, that shall not do. I will have to see about rectifying the situation.” Nameless did not sound particularly concerned. Evidently, she had expected this turn of events.

Lucia took a long time to answer, raising her fan to cover her mouth as she eyed the álf with suspicion. “’Twould be welcome, to be certain. In any case, as regards our future strategy, once the empire takes Skye, all of Six Kingdoms’ forces shall withdraw to the west.”

“And hand over the east?”

“But of course. ’Twas conceited from the start to presume to occupy all of Faerzen. Far more realistic to split it in two, would you not agree?”

Six Kingdoms’ failed invasion of the empire was still hurting them three years later. They lacked the manpower to hold Faerzen. Perhaps matters would have been different if Luka had not taken half of her soldiers to their graves, but she had, and there was no point lamenting what-ifs. The fact of the matter was that Lucia did not have enough soldiers, and that meant compromises had to be made.

“The east has been a thorn in our side, it’s true. And relinquishing it to the empire would at least relieve the burden on our resources.” Nameless nodded to herself approvingly as she pored over the map.

“Quite.” Lucia gave a little shrug, narrowing her eyes. “I am already at work among the people of the west, turning them against the empire.”

“But it isn’t quite going as you’d hope.”

“Ever the mind reader. But no, I shall not hide it.” Lucia laid a scattering of pawns on the map. “The commonfolk will not be our shield just yet. The Faerzen Resistance is at work among them, urging them to accept the empire as

their new rulers. They have made little progress of their own, but vexingly, they have succeeded in impeding ours.”

With both factions trying to incite them to anger, the people of Faerzen were reaching the end of their tether. Years of warfare had left them jaded. If either side pushed them too far, they would snap violently back, and Faerzen would erupt in flame. Manipulating them had become sensitive work. Then again, if Lucia sat back and did nothing, the imperial lion would soon sink its jaws into the west.

“Permit me to buy you some time,” Nameless said.

Lucia arched an eyebrow. “Pardon?”

“My hound’s training is complete. I will bring him to bear against the first army.”

“How many shall you need?”

“I will make do with the troops of Tigris, Scorpius, and Vulpes.” Nameless’s grin oozed confidence. “Your soldiers would be better used accomplishing your own goals.”

Lucia’s brows knitted irritably. “This newfound modesty makes my skin crawl. What are you plotting?”

“I seek only to serve the High King.”

“Do you presume such platitudes will fool me?”

Nameless’s words could not be trusted. She had never once acted in Six Kingdoms’ interests. Her every decision had ultimately proven to serve the Vanir Triumvirate. The idea of leaving her to her own devices was an alarming one indeed.

“Tell me, what became of that spy I told you about?”

“Her? She entertained me for a little while, but ’twas not long before she grew tiresome.”

“And where is she now?”

It was rare enough for Nameless to take an interest in anyone, let alone an

agent of the enemy. Álfar tended not to view humans as people at all. Lucia found herself considerably surprised, although she took care not to let it show.

“And why, pray tell, would you care to know?”

“No special reason. I suspected she might hold vital intelligence about the empire, that’s all.”

“If she did, she let nothing slip. I fear she was a stubborn one.”

“Is that so? A terrible shame.” Nameless backed down more easily than Lucia had expected. Perhaps she even believed she had been given the truth. She stepped away from the map and looked around. “Unfortunately, I ought to take my leave. Time is pressing.”

With a final word of farewell, she disappeared just as abruptly as she had arrived.

Lucia snapped her fan shut, staring at the spot where the álf had been standing. “And good riddance,” she said.

* * * * *

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

The lands around Skye were dotted with small towns and villages. The region had been an agricultural hub before years of warfare. Now, the remains of what had once been fields stretched to the horizon.

“Hardly the first time I’ve seen a war-torn land,” the man muttered, “but they’re never a pretty sight.”

He cut a striking figure atop his gallant warhorse. Wrinkles crinkled the corners of his eyes as he stroked his voluminous beard. He was muscular for his years, his biceps sprouting from his armor like tree trunks. The colossal spear on his back glinted as it caught the light of the sun.

“Then again, the victors rarely look much better. Victory promises prosperity, but often does it lie. The more a nation fights, the more it bleeds, until it grows weak enough to be devoured by something stronger.”

General von Cain, commander of the first army, looked to the sky as if addressing someone who was not there. No answer was forthcoming, but he

continued nonetheless.

“A fine time you chose to die, von Loeing. There was a time when the five high generals were feared across Soleil. Now, we are but three.”

One had perished at the hands of an invading army, while another had disgraced himself by turning rebel. Now, with the emperor bedridden, no new high generals could be chosen to replace them.

“Fools, the both of you. Ours is to bring prosperity to the empire and guard the seeds of its future. How could you have forgotten your duty?” Von Cain’s hands tightened on the reins, his teeth gritting in chagrin. His bodyguards stepped back, intimidated.

His vice-commander drew his mount alongside with a wry smile. “Von Loeing’s treachery was regrettable, but Vakish von Hass put up a commendable stand, did he not? He may not have prevailed, but after all, he did face one of the Noble Blades.”

High General Vakish von Hass had perished almost three years prior, in the early days of Six Kingdoms’ invasion. After his death, his corpse had been torn limb from limb and placed on display outside the city walls.

“There is nothing commendable about a final stand when retreat is the wiser choice. Vakish ought to have fallen back. He would have stood a far better chance had he allowed his forces to regroup.” Von Cain clenched an enormous fist. “He was young, but he had talent in excess of his years. His Majesty saw that in him. It was what earned him his rank.”

Vakish had claimed the heads of two brigade commanders on his first foray into battle. Von Cain could remember it as if it were yesterday. The man had been unassuming in appearance and better suited to the pen than the sword, but that modesty had disguised a formidable warrior who made seasoned veterans look like babes. Above all else, he had worked hard. Not once had he neglected his training or his studies, and he had been rewarded for his efforts by being made the empire’s youngest-ever high general.

“He was destined to lead us all in von Loeing’s stead. He should have lived, no matter what shame it would have entailed. No matter if he had to crawl through the muck.” A bitter tear trickled down von Cain’s cheek as he gazed up

at the sky. “But now he is dead, and all his work has come to nothing, while the aged yet endure.”

As he lowered his eyes to survey the scene before him, the air erupted with a mighty roar. Battle cries rang loud amid a storm of clashing steel. Red mist sprayed high. Deluges of arrows thundered down from all angles, reaping countless lives on both sides. In an instant, the earth was gory black, and the stench of iron filled the air.

A battlefield was the razor edge between life and death, the yawning mouth of hell, where every soldier dreamed of a tomorrow that they despaired of ever seeing. They forged ahead blindly, thinking only of surviving until the next dawn. If their sword broke, they snatched one from their enemy; if their shield split, they protected themselves with their bare arm. Their armor might cave inward, crushing their organs, but they had no choice but to continue onward. The soldiers of the empire fought single-mindedly for victory.

“It is not the strong who live. It is not the weak who die. Only the lucky survive. The lucky and the tenacious.”

The thirty thousand soldiers of the empire’s first army were fighting a combined twenty thousand troops from Scorpius and Tigris, and the battle was growing fiercer by the second. As von Cain continued his diatribe, he noticed his vice-commander cock his head.

“The enemy seems to have dug in their heels, sir,” the man said.

“A sign they are planning something, perhaps. Remain vigilant.”

“I cannot imagine they are planning to flank us, sir. We have too clear a view of the field.”

Skye was surrounded by flat grasslands that offered a clear view in all directions. There was nowhere for a potential ambusher to hide. Even so, von Cain pulled a sour face.

“The chance may be slim, but the slightest oversight may prove our downfall. The enemy has fled halfway across Faerzen. They would not have turned around now unless they believed this was their best chance of victory.”

Humans were known to challenge impossible odds, pinning their hopes on

miracles. Álfar were not. Their cold eyes surveyed the battlefield with blunt practicality, pushing where they could win and retreating where they would lose. They were eminently logical creatures.

“They’re bound to try something. It’s only a question of when.” Von Cain turned to his vice-commander. “Send word to the reserves. Tell them to be ready to move at a moment’s notice.”

“At once, sir.” The man bowed his head.

At that moment, a trumpet note split the air. It was a beautiful sound—elegant, disciplined, and higher-pitched than any imperial horn—and it pierced loud and clear through the clamor of the field. For a moment, von Cain found himself caught in its spell, but the voice of his vice-commander quickly brought him back to his senses.

“There’s been a change on the front lines, sir!” the man cried. “The enemy is forcing back our center!”

Needless to say, von Cain was already looking, but he stayed silent while the man completed his report. Decades of experience brought his hand to the haft of the spirit weapon on his back. His commander’s instincts told him that soon, he too would have to fight.

“Here they come,” he growled.

Far ahead, a rain of arrows descended on the vanguard, piercing the chaos to strike down imperial soldiers while leaving Six Kingdoms’ troops unharmed.

“I see the álfar’s eyes have not dimmed. They always were skilled with the bow.” Von Cain watched calmly as the vanguard fell apart. “Signal the second cohort to advance. Use the dust cloud to hide the reserves as they flank the enemy core.”

If they didn’t make a play of their own, they would only end up fighting on the enemy’s terms. A good general thought several moves ahead, always trying to take their opponent’s strategy into account. That was how wars were won.

“There is danger in overcommitting to one course, however,” von Cain mused aloud. “One must not forget to stop midway and take stock.”

Even as he sank into thought, his orders were being carried out around him. Standards rose all across the battlefield, and messengers charged fearlessly through the fray. All that remained was to see whether they would be fast enough to strike first.

“Hmph. The álfar are no slouches, I see. The initiative is theirs.”

Von Cain cupped his chin in a burly hand, a touch of admiration in his voice. The first cohort had crumbled faster than expected, and its enemy counterpart was surging into the breach. He gestured to his vice-commander to issue his next directions, although his eyes remained locked on the battlefield.

“Disregard my last orders. Signal the second cohort to stand their ground. The reserves will circle around the right flank and slow the enemy advance.” His eyes narrowed with exhilaration. This thrill, knowing life and death hung in the balance, was what drew him back to the battlefield time and again. “And while they keep them occupied, our core will flank them on the left and skewer them through the heart!”

He drew his spear from behind his back and leveled it at the front line. A kick to his warhorse’s flanks sent him surging forward.

“Charge! And before the day is through, you will see surprise on the face of an álfar corpse!”

His vice-commander watched him speed away with long-suffering fondness. “Good fortune to you, General von Cain! May you show the enemy your wrath!”

Every imperial soldier had once dreamed of becoming a high general—of striding across the battlefield in full glory, mowing down foes like grain before returning in triumph with the enemy commander’s head. Theirs was a high peak that only the noblest of heart could climb. The Grantzian Empire, the lion of Soleil, recognized only five. In the end, most soldiers gave up on their ambitions, accepting that they were not fit. But those who could not make the climb still looked up to those who had, trusting them with the weight of their own unfulfilled hopes.

“You need fight no longer, men! I will end this myself! Let these álfar see the trail a high general blazes!”

Where von Cain rode, inspiration followed. Battle cries rose from the ranks as he passed. Morale soared. With him at the vanguard, the five thousand soldiers of the core raced across the field, trailing a cloud of dust in their wake. But as they skirted the melee...

“Hm?”

A force of two thousand álfar rode out to meet them, a gray-haired man at their head.

“You thought to stop me with so few?!” Von Cain’s muscles bulged to their limit as his grip tightened on his spear. “You will yield the way or I will make you!”

He swung his spirit weapon at the gray-haired man with all his might. No doubt every observer expected the man to be sent flying. Certainly, every imperial soldier thought as much. But reality was very different from what they imagined. Von Cain’s spear, almost as tall as its wielder, ground against steel in a shower of sparks. The high general gritted his teeth, face reddening with rage, and launched a second blow.

“Is that all?” the gray-haired man purred.

His voice was quickly snatched away by the clashing of metal, but it reached von Cain’s ears easily enough. A third strike came, a slash to rend its target in twain—and von Cain’s face flooded with surprise as the gray-haired man knocked it effortlessly aside. He pitched from his horse but stood back up almost immediately, ready to fight.

As he turned to face his foe, a shadow loomed overhead, casting both him and the rest of the imperial troops into semidarkness. The álfen archers arrayed behind their gray-haired leader had loosed arrows. Von Cain’s spear whirled, knocking the shafts aside, but imperial soldiers toppled from their horses behind him as the deluge thundered down. A second rain fell on the survivors kneeling on the ground.

Von Cain could hear the cries of his men dying behind him, but he did not once look back. He sensed that if he averted his eyes from the gray-haired man for even an instant, he would fall into a sleep from which he would never wake.

“Draw your blades.”

An odd quiet hung over the battlefield, a lull deep enough to render the gray-haired man’s order audible. The álfar unsheathed their swords as one. They moved in perfect unison, clearly not foes to be underestimated. The hairs on the back of von Cain’s neck stood on end as they advanced, silent as creeping assassins.

“Grant these humans a merciful death,” the gray-haired man said.

“On your feet, men!” von Cain bellowed. “He does not command you! Draw steel and raise your voices high! Take heart or fall!”

He spun his spear anew at the gray-haired man. Again, its point was easily deflected, but he hauled it back and launched a second blow. As the soldiers watched him, they struggled to their feet, fighting through countless arrows to retrieve their weapons.

“Glory to the empire!” they cried as they met the álfen charge.

Silence met uproar. A great cloud of dust rose as the two forces collided. Von Cain grinned as he wiped the sweat from his chin. Now that his men had regained the will to fight, they had even odds. However, one obstacle remained.

“You’re a strong bastard,” he spat, glancing briefly at his hands before returning his attention to his opponent. Several times now, he had swung at the gray-haired man with all his strength, but to no avail. If anything, the force of his blows was beginning to numb his own grip.

“And you, High General von Cain, are not.”

“We’ll see about that!” Von Cain’s spear streaked through the air, propelled by rage.

“Good. Good. Try to entertain me before the end.” The man let his sword fall to the ground and barreled toward von Cain with madness in his eyes.

Von Cain did not allow himself to be caught off guard. He was well aware that the slightest hesitation could mean his death. He thrust his spear forward with all his might, goring the gray-haired man through the stomach with surprising ease. Feeling the attack strike home, von Cain withdrew his weapon and

unleashed a furious barrage, severing the man's arm, gouging his thigh, splitting open his belly, and finally skewering him through the skull. At last, he stopped, confident that his foe was dead.

"Is that all?" the man smirked. Somehow, he still stood unharmed.

Von Cain was so astonished that for a moment he could not speak—not least because he had gotten close enough to see something familiar in his enemy's face. "It cannot be...!"

"My turn, I think."

An enormous battle-axe materialized in the gray-haired man's hand. He swung it down with astonishing strength.

Realizing he did not have the time to avoid the blow, von Cain raised his weapon to catch it. In the moment the axe struck, lightning speared through him.

"Gaaah!"

A wordless cry tore from his throat as the bolt launched his enormous form through the air. Knocked from his grip, his spirit weapon traced an arc against the sky. He bounced across the ground as if caught in a cresting wave. A lesser man would have lost consciousness. It was only thanks to his decades of training that he withstood the pain to rise to his feet, half conscious, wreathed in dust.

"Ngh... Where...? Where do I know you...?"

He knew what to do when his back was to the wall. A lifetime on the battlefield had scored the knowledge into his flesh. His body moved of its own accord, spurred on by years of experience. At the same time, he had gotten a taste of his foe's true strength. He scowled.

The gray-haired man was evidently just as familiar with battle. He swung again without a moment's hesitation, affording his opponent no quarter. Von Cain picked up Stovell's dropped sword and raised it to block, but the blade fell to the ground, severed at the hilt.

"Die."

Again, lightning cracked the sky. In the instant it descended, von Cain finally caught hold of the memory hovering at the edge of his mind.

“You wield Mjöltnir!”

As the words left his mouth, raw levin crashed through him. A charred stench swept outward. His flesh blackened, his sweat boiled, his blood splattered far and wide. Even so, he refused to fall, his high general’s pride propping him upright.

“To fall...on such a field...”

His own blood soaked his armor. White smoke billowed from beneath. Nonetheless, his eyes remained fixed straight ahead. His vision flickered, but he kept himself upright through will alone.

“Ha ha... Ha ha ha ha...”

A rueful smile spread across his face as memories played out behind his eyes. His youth had truly been a golden age. With equals aplenty surrounding him, his strength had grown day by day. He and von Loeing had braved battlefields side by side—at times in accord, at times bickering over strategy—until wordlessly they had acknowledged each other as rivals. When at last they were made high generals together, they had shed tears of joy as they embraced one another. The memory was as vivid now as when it was made. Although they had grown distant over time, preoccupied by their various duties, von Cain had never doubted that their hearts were one. He had dreamed of the day they would retire from their duties to trade old stories over flagons of ale.

“Who could have known that you would stray at the last...?”

He knew what von Loeing had sought. Now that age had come for him too, he felt the same pull himself. Even so, he could not help but think von Loeing had chosen wrong in his final days. The man had sworn his loyalty to the wrong master and died without once trying to correct his mistake. That he had died at the hands of the royal family was a small mercy, but von Cain had no sympathy for traitors—including the one before him.

Barely an inch of him was left unbloodied, but he forced himself to stand firm. Fury carried a roar up from the very pit of his stomach. “Your life ought to have

ended long ago, Stovell!”

The gray-haired man made no reply, but his lips curled into a cruel smile as he approached.

Von Cain retrieved his fallen spear. “Your head will be well worth taking! And take it I shall!” He hurled the weapon with all his might before taking up a sword and surging forward with incredible speed.

“When you greet von Loeing,” Stovell drawled, “tell him how mighty I have become.”

He gave a dismissive wave. With a thunderous *boom*, lightning split the space between them. A fierce wind began to rage, drawing the crackling arcs into a whirlwind that lifted every loose object into the air. The storm sucked friend and foe alike into its maw as it ravaged the field.

Von Cain leveled his sword at the whirlwind as he ran, but his eyes remained locked on Stovell. “I will not yield. I cannot.”

“And why is that?” Stovell gestured again. Several more whirlwinds sprouted from the ground, each as fearsome as the last. They converged on von Cain as if to smother him, but he did not slow for a moment. After all...

“A high general leads by example, or he is nothing!”

That was why he had no sympathy for traitors who turned against their motherland. That was why he could not retreat: to prove that a high general fought to their last breath, not to his enemies, but to the soldiers behind him. Their dreams were his to shoulder, and their trust was his to honor.

“Retreat!” he bellowed to his men. “Flee this field and keep your lives!”

“High General?! What are you—”

“Forgive an old man the time he could not buy you!”

Von Cain retrieved his spear and set off once more, charging with all his strength into the maelstrom. Sharp-edged winds licked at his flesh, slicing his iron body to pieces. Red blood sprayed from every inch of bare skin. Still, he forged ahead, undaunted. He knew that he was going to his death, but it would shame the high generals who went before him not to spit in his enemy’s eye

before the end.

“Stovell!” he roared. “Traitor prince! Prepare yourself!”

He burst free from the whirlwind, focusing every ounce of his being into his spear as he hurled it with all his might. At the same instant, a lightning bolt descended from the sky, piercing him and cracking the ground beneath. As he struggled through the dust and smoke, a crushing impact tore into his chest.

“It was ever thus. The scrawniest curs always did bark the loudest.”

Those were the last words High General von Cain ever heard.

* * * * *

The sun sank below the horizon, and the moon and its court of stars rose to take its place. The stars soothed the hearts of the people below, their tender gaze staving off the solitude of night. Yet upon the earth was an enclave of light that burned just as bright. The third army had made camp on their march through the south of Faerzen. Wind whistled between the tents, sending the rows of regularly spaced torches flickering wildly. Lookouts huddled against the freezing wind as they made their rounds.

Among the tents were those of the Crow Legion of Baum, at the center of which stood the larger tent of King Surtr.

“The imperial commanders are at their wits’ end, I hear,” Hiro remarked as he lifted his fork to his mouth.

“After four days of waiting, I am not surprised,” Scáthach said. “They must act soon if we are to regroup with Liz’s forces.”

The third army’s plans had been proceeding more or less apace, making steady progress despite resistance from Six Kingdoms. Four days ago, however, they had encountered an unexpected obstruction: the people of Faerzen. The residents of Anguis’s territories around the new capital had blocked the roads, protesting that they would not accept imperial rule.

“We could try going around,” Hiro mused, “but if the protestors got ahead of us, we’d only end up wasting even more time.”

The longer the standoff dragged on, the more likely it would become that the

imperial troops' frustrations would erupt in violence. No doubt the third army's commanders were racking their brains to find a solution.

Scáthach heaved a frustrated sigh. "Removing them by force would only grant Six Kingdoms the moral high ground."

Hiro nodded in agreement. "And while we're stranded here, Anguis is recalling its troops from across Faerzen and shoring up its defenses." His plate now clear, he clasped his hands behind his head and rolled back onto the floor, staring up at the lamp hanging from the roof of the tent. "We've given our enemy a lot of options."

He produced a letter from his pocket. Scáthach looked at it with curiosity, but he spoke before she could ask about it.

"How are you feeling?"

"I have suffered worse."

Her smile didn't quite seem to tell the whole story. Hiro watched her in silence. She scratched her head awkwardly, growing uncomfortable under his gaze.

"I will last for now. You have bought me time. You and Gáe Bolg."

"I'm glad to hear that."

The oath Hiro had sworn with Scáthach—the bond they shared—gave him a unique understanding of her plight. He had first become cognizant of her condition when they had parted two years prior. It had clearly grown worse since then, but she remained as stoic as ever, letting slip not a word of complaint to ensure her suffering stayed hidden. It was that very tenacity that had brought her here now. She had devoted herself utterly to completing her mission.

"I would tell you not to push your limits, but I'm sure you don't need the warning."

"I accept it regardless. Your concern is more appreciated than you know." Scáthach gazed at her own hand as she flexed her fingers, extending and contracting them as if testing some sensation. For a moment, she seemed to

forget Hiro was there, but her taut expression dissolved into a forced smile as she noticed his concern. “But enough of that. You may be interested to know that Liz has complained of something amiss with her eyes.”

If she was hoping to distract him, that was the topic to choose. He was certainly interested, and while her condition was definitely a concern, she did not seem to want him probing any further. Indeed, the change of subject was probably a warning in that regard.

He sat up with a defeated sigh, letting the matter go. “Something amiss? Did she mention any details?”

“She said her vision felt...enhanced in some sense. That distant objects appeared close and close objects appeared distant. She struggled to fully explain it.”

“I see... I suspected as much.” Hiro cupped his chin with a hand. “Did she say anything else?”

“Only that about the same time as she developed this abnormality, she became plagued by strange dreams. I suggested that Lævateinn might have been showing her visions of another wielder, but...”

Hiro waited in silence for her next words. If Scáthach had been inclined to look closely, she might have seen his breath catch.

“But it appears these dreams are of a woman.”

Hiro was silent for a long moment. “I see,” he said finally, leaning back to gaze up at the roof of the tent.

Scáthach cocked her head dubiously but continued without comment. “Lævateinn’s only other wielder was the first emperor. No such woman could appear in its domain save as a figment of his memories, in which case he would have been present.”

As she finished her sentence, she noticed that he had lowered his eyes, one hand cupping his chin thoughtfully. Unwilling to interrupt while he was deep in contemplation, she glanced to the side. A blanket-wrapped shape lay in the corner of the tent, twitching like a turtle. She scowled. A face emerged from the cloth, dull eyes laden with heavy bags and staring at nothing. Its lips trembled,

and if Scáthach strained her ears, she could hear it whispering.

“Igel, Igel, Huginn, Igel, Igel, Huginn, Igel, Huginn, Igel, Igel...”

“If I may, Lord Hiro,” she said, turning back. “Forgive me, *Lord Surtr*, I should say.”

“Yes?”

With an apology for interrupting his thoughts, Scáthach pointed at the shape. “Who or what is that?”

“That’s Luka.”

“Those are names she is chanting, are they not? Was Huginn not the name of one of your retainers?”

“She was spying on Anguis’s forces for us, but we recently lost contact. Luka has something of a soft spot for her, so the moment she heard... Well, you can see for yourself.”

Her condition had worsened to the point that she was neglecting to eat. At this rate, she would be unable to perform on the battlefield. Distracted by thoughts of Huginn, she might even prove a hindrance. Whatever had happened was serious enough that she no longer even cared about taking Hiro’s life. It would be wiser not to count on her help.

“So I do have a personal stake in breaking this stalemate,” Hiro said. “If we want to look for Huginn, we’ll have to get to Anguis’s territories first.”

“Troublesome indeed,” Scáthach said. “Would that a solution would present itself. I must say, however, you seem remarkably unconcerned.”

“Do you think so?”

“Am I wrong?”

“Well, suffice to say I’ve laid what plans I can. All that’s left is to put them into motion.”

“Hm?” Scáthach cocked her head, puzzled.

“This was always going to resolve itself sooner or later, but I’ve tried to speed things up a little.” Hiro’s voice was level as he spoke. “I’m in more of a hurry

than I look.”

Silently, steadily, darkness closed in.

Chapter 4: Grim Resolve

“You return, child.” The voice sounded surprised by her audacity.

Liz opened her eyes to a presence, overwhelmingly immense. It emanated from the figure before her.

She stood in a world of pure white. Before her rose a chair decorated with gold, silver, and jewels gathered from all across Aletia—a throne of singular opulence that spoke of a bloodsoaked history. A figure sat upon it, but as ever, she could not tell who he was. Despite the blinding light of his surroundings, his face remained shrouded in shadow.

“What would you ask?” he intoned. “What do you seek of me?”

The voice hung oddly in the air, rich with both the depth of the onset of old age and the vigor of an adult in his prime. Its curious timbre lingered in the memory. His slender frame radiated both the gallantry of a proven youth and the green freshness of a plucky young boy. Liz knew at a glance that this was no ordinary man, but she had seen him many times by now—enough that she was no longer intimidated or overawed.

“I want the truth,” she said.

The entity’s gaze seemed to spear her clean through the heart. “You are not ready.”

She grunted. His refusal fell upon her like a physical weight.

“You are too hasty, child. Who are you to seek the truth when you know not yet the world’s vastness?”

The weight pressed down like a giant’s foot, trying to force her down, but she struck the ground with a fist and it fell away.

“Oh? You would resist my eyes?” There was more than a note of surprise in the man’s voice. “You have grown, child.”

Wiping the sweat from her brow, Liz shouted in the loudest voice she could

muster, “Three years may seem like nothing to you, but it’s been a long, long time for me!”

She had run as fast as she could to keep pace with Hiro, chasing him breathlessly. Never again would she be left behind.

“But I’m not there yet!”

It was not a matter of strength or of talent or of experience. A distance remained that no amount of effort could close. She knew what it was, and she had tried her hardest to surmount it, but no matter what understanding she displayed, it refused to narrow. There was a gulf between them that was too wide to breach.

After all, she did not truly know who Hiro was.

“So tell me,” she said, “who is he, really?”

She knew that Hiro was Mars, the War God.

She knew that Hiro was the Hero King of Twinned Black.

She knew that Hiro was the Black Prince.

She knew that Hiro was the Desperation.

She knew that Hiro was the One-Eyed Dragon.

She knew that Hiro was Surtr, the Black-Winged Lord.

“Born to rule the battlefield, a strategist to transcend the world of men, the wearer of the mask, the arbiter of victory...” She counted them off on her fingers one by one. “I know so many different sides of him. I can barely open a history book without stumbling across one of his names. Aura and I have been scouring the records for three years, and Lævateinn has shown me things I could never have found on my own.” She bit her lip in shame. “But I still don’t know who he really is.”

She knew only who he had become after being dubbed the War God. Everything before that point was still a mystery to her. She clenched her fist and struck it against the ground once more, lamenting her own foolishness.

“He... Hiro appeared out of nowhere, didn’t he? Why?”

The mysterious man had been content to listen while she vented her frustrations, but now he spoke. "His arrival was fated. But I will tell you this: it was not a fate to be mourned."

For the first time, his solemn demeanor seemed to crack.

"You know him better than you believe," he said, his voice soft as if soothing a babe. A gentle smile spread across his face. "I know the answers, of course, but why tell you what you already know?"

He stepped down from the throne. As he grew closer, he reached out and roughly tousled her hair.

"You told me once that you glimpsed his past, and it broke your heart. Do you remember?"

"I do."

Hiro's face had been painted with grief, his expression a desperate attempt to hold back tears. The thought of it made her heart hurt.

"Hold those feelings dear, and they will lead you to the truth." The man raised a finger. "My hopes live on in you. Thus have I entrusted you with everything I have to give."

"Everything?"

"Nurture a strong heart, and keep it close. I asked that of you, did I not?"

He raised his finger to the sky. Liz looked up to see a great gate yawning above them. Despite its enormous size, it was bare of decoration, the intricate engravings on its surface the only trace of ornamentation. In a word, it was modest, a round wooden portal without a hint of artifice. Yet the power it exuded was as awe-inspiring as nature's most sublime wonders. Unlike Liz's previous visits, it now stood slightly open.

"The future does not promise joy. Uncertainties and sorrows aplenty await you. But I will tell you this: do not despair. Your path will reveal itself beneath your feet." The shadowed man spread his arms wide, and a reassuring smile spread across his face. "I look forward to our next meeting, child."

The sudden farewell prompted Liz to look up, but the gate did not move.

“With apologies to her, this time you shall take a different way out.”

“What do you—”

As she looked back down, blinding light consumed her, so fierce she had to squeeze her eyes shut. Its brilliance felt like it was piercing her retinas, scorching her optic nerves, and setting her brain aflame.

“Aaagh!”

She grasped at her neck. It felt like her head was being wrenched from her shoulders. Her throat dried out, leaving her unable to breathe, and as her eyes welled up with tears...

“Gah!”

All at once, a pressure weighed down on her, as if she were rising from the bottom of the ocean. Agony forced her eyes open—and she was met with the familiar sight of her tent.

She looked around, gasping for air. White canvas lay all around. A lantern hung from the ceiling. The tent walls shook with the wind from outside.

“Ngh...”

The faceless man might at least have given her some warning, she thought. She could easily have been killed.

“Need...water...”

Her throat was so dry, it was excruciating. She reached for the carafe of water on her bedside table and gulped it down, not even pausing to pour it into the nearby goblet. In the palace, a retainer might have chided her for being improper, but there was no one to scold her here. Water spilled from her lips to trickle over her collarbone and down between her breasts, but she didn’t care. Only when the carafe was empty did she finally lay it back on the table.

With a sigh, she collapsed into a chair. “Next time I see you,” she growled at the ceiling, “you’re getting a punch in the jaw.”

At that moment, a flurry of footsteps approached from outside. “Liz,” a familiar voice said. “I have news.” It was as inflectionless as ever, but its slight lisp was endearing nonetheless.

“Come in.”

“Excuse me.”

A petite woman entered the tent, stiffly formal. A valedictorian graduate of the Imperial Training Academy and the youngest aide to ever join an imperial legion’s camp, Aura von Bunadala now served as one of Liz’s retainers and the chief strategist for the empire’s campaign to liberate Faerzen. Third Prince Brutahl had once dubbed her Aphrodite, the Warmaiden, and recently “the Silver-Haired Faerie” had joined her list of monikers.

She looked at Liz with a frown. “Before we talk, I want you to do something.”

Liz tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

Aura thrust out an accusing finger. “Put on some clothes. We can’t talk like that.”

“Really?” Liz looked down to see that she was in her underwear, but that surely wasn’t a problem. Aura was the only other one there.

Aura’s eyes nonetheless urged her to put something on. “What if a soldier walked in on us?”

“My handmaidens are in the next tent over. They’ll tell us if there’s an emergency. And if a man did come in without permission...” Liz’s eyes hardened. “Well, Lævateinn would soon deal with that.”

Aura’s shoulders slumped in dismay. “Please put something on. I don’t want anyone getting killed. You’re not who you were three years ago. You’re too much for women now, never mind men.”

Liz was about to ask exactly who she was supposed to have been three years ago, but Aura was already rummaging through her belongings. A balled-up cloak large enough to cover her came flying her way.

“Put it on.”

“All right, all right...” With a half-hearted reply, Liz shrugged the cloak on and sat back down in the chair. “Anyway, what’s this news you had for me?”

“The first army has been routed.” Aura’s grave tone spoke to the severity of the situation.

Liz's face turned serious, and she waited for her to continue.

"It happened three days ago. I've just sent a messenger to the second army. I want them to hold position until we catch up."

"Good thinking. Have them organize a task force to retrieve the wounded. We'll dispatch some men from our forces to watch their perimeter." Liz waited for Aura to nod before continuing. "How bad are the first army's losses?"

"Bad. Ten thousand dead, at least five thousand seriously wounded. A messenger managed to escape and made his way back. He said High General von Cain was slain by a gray-haired man wielding some kind of sorcery."

"A gray-haired man...wielding sorcery..."

The description triggered a memory: her last sight of Stovell. If he still looked the same, he was almost certainly the one who had cut down High General von Cain. Still, what was he doing in Faerzen? She pinched the skin between her eyebrows with an exhausted sigh. It was a relief that Scáthach had left when she had. The woman was already in a volatile state; if she had learned Stovell was on the field, there was no telling what she might have done.

"At least Scáthach isn't here," Liz said. "If she knew about this, she'd probably go charging in all by herself."

"Do you really think it's Stovell?" Aura asked.

"It's likely. There aren't many people who could kill a high general, and how many have gray hair and skin like a zlosta's? It's him, I'm certain of it."

Two of the Spiritblade Sovereigns—Gandiva the Gale Sovereign and Mjöltnir the Thunder Sovereign—remained in Stovell's possession. Even a high general would be hard-pressed to triumph against that, spirit weapon or no. What was more, Stovell was now a Fallen. While each of the empire's high generals was said to be able to hold their own against overwhelming odds, they would stand little chance against such a foe.

"Send the survivors back to the empire," Liz said. "We'll reorganize the second army once we catch up. As soon as we're done, we'll be crossing blades with Tigris and Scorpius."

Aura nodded. "All right. I'll consider how to best put them to use."

"Has there been any word from the third army?"

"They say the people of Faerzen are blocking their way. They've had to stop and negotiate a way through."

"Let's try to stay in closer contact from here on out. We'll need to coordinate with them to chase Six Kingdoms out of Faerzen. And warn them not to harm any of the commonfolk."

"I'll make sure they know."

"All right. Sorry to ask out of nowhere, but could you call the rest of the aides to the command tent?"

"Of course."

"I'll head there myself once I've gotten dressed."

"I'll be waiting." With a nod, Aura trotted out of the tent.

Liz picked up her uniform, put her arm through the sleeve, and deftly shrugged it on. Back in the palace, her ladies-in-waiting would have dressed her, but outside its walls, she preferred not to rely on others for such things. Rosa had chided her not to deny her subjects their jobs, which she had tried to bear in mind, but she still preferred to put her own clothes on.

Once she was dressed, she donned her cape and left the tent, picking up Lævateinn from where it leaned against the desk and thrusting it through her belt. A starry sky spread out above her. The stars felt especially close tonight.

She set out for the command tent. From all around, regardless of the late hour, came the noises of tens of thousands of soldiers. She had allowed the men a small amount of drink, and laughter echoed on all sides. The news of the first army's rout didn't seem to have proliferated through the ranks yet, but even if it did, it would make little difference to morale; the Knights of the Golden Lion, the Knights of the Royal Black, and the Knights of the Rose all rode with them, and with the empire's elite troops on their side, no one imagined they could lose. What was more, they were led by the sixth princess. After her meteoric rise, the soldiers had no more doubts as to her capabilities as a

commander, only ever greater expectations.

Just before Liz reached the command tent, she halted and turned to a dark spot outside the light of the bonfires. "Show yourself," she commanded.

"Dear me. When did you notice I was here?" Stones crunched underfoot as a hooded figure stepped out of the darkness.

"I watched you come in. I have to say, it takes guts to walk straight into our camp."

The intruder blinked for a second, seeming genuinely caught off guard, but soon smoothed it over with a smile. "Impressive. I see your eyes are just as remarkable as mine."

Liz's eyes narrowed. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, nothing. Thoughtless ramblings, nothing more. Pay them no mind." With a shake of their head, the hooded figure bent into a bow. "Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz of the Grantzian Empire. A pleasure to meet you, I'm sure. You may call me Nameless."

Liz faintly recalled the name. It had recently been making a stir in Soleil. More to the point, it was also the name of First Prince Stovell's álfen advisor who had disappeared after his failed rebellion.

"We meet at last, I suppose. What do you want with me?" She did not quite reach for Lævateinn, but she regarded Nameless with intense suspicion.

"You have grown quickly, haven't you? Why, a mere two years ago, you were but a whimpering babe who was no use to anyone."

Liz did not rise to the taunt. "Two years is long enough for anyone to grow up."

"Truer words were never spoken."

"Well? Have you come all this way just to trade barbs?"

"Not at all. I came to deliver a warning."

"Then be quick about it. I'm a busy woman nowadays."

Liz was remarkably composed for someone confronting an unexpected

intruder, and it seemed to make Nameless wary. “Beware Lord Surtr of Baum, Your Highness.” The álf spoke with audible care. “I have reason to believe he plots to overthrow the empi—”

Without warning, the ground beneath Nameless’s feet exploded in flame. The camp turned bright as day as a plume of crimson fire erupted from the earth.

“Two years ago, I swore a vow. And part of it was not to let people like you turn me against him.”

Liz directed her words not at the pillar of flame but off to the side, where Nameless was now standing.

“And you have no reservations at all?” the álf asked.

“I promised I’d believe in him, no matter what. So watch what you say.” Blue flames coiled around Liz’s fist. She grinned, beautiful and dauntless. “Next time, I’ll kill you where you stand.”

The kind sixth princess of two years ago would not have been so ready to issue a death sentence. Nameless stepped back, a little intimidated, before realizing what had occurred and regarding Liz anew, now a little rattled.

“You have grown strong indeed, haven’t you?”

The álf looked around. The fire had attracted attention, and alarm was spreading. The crunch of boots echoed loud in the night air, closing around them like a net. Raised voices converged on their location.

“I daresay it is time for me to take my leave.” Nameless bowed politely. “Until we meet again.”

Liz flashed a grin. “Next time, I won’t hold back. I hope you’re ready.”

As the álf melted soundlessly into the night, Liz set off in the direction of the command tent. She arrived to find Aura’s head peeking out from the entrance.

“What was that noise?” the girl asked, her eyebrows furrowing in suspicion.

Liz looked away awkwardly, putting a finger to her chin. “Um... My mistake. Could you tell the men it was just Lævateinn getting up to mischief?”

“Pardon?”

An indignant little flame sprouted from Lævateinn as Aura cocked her head.

* * * * *

“So that is Lævateinn, the Blade of the End... Majestic, I must say.”

The flame had faded away like the setting sun, but its warmth still lingered in the air. Ludurr Freyr von Ingunar stared into the darkness, the spectacle seared into his eyeballs only serving to stoke his ambition.

“What unexpected fortune to witness it here and now. It was well worth joining this campaign in person.”

A young retainer of House Muzuk, he had a curiously ephemeral quality, as if he were only half there. One might have suspected it was because of his slight build, but the more likely culprit was the sickly pallor of his skin. He looked around. Panicked soldiers were emerging from their tents, seemingly at a loss for what to do. Sooner or later, messengers would issue from the command tent, but until then, it seemed, the camp would be in chaos.

“I can guess what might have happened, but even so...you have made quite the scene, Your Highness.”

It was unwise to induce panic in the ranks at such a critical juncture for the empire. That said, from another point of view, the confusion had its benefits. It was perhaps the fastest way to learn which officers could respond effectively to a crisis. Some would issue levelheaded commands, while others would only contribute to the hysteria. Some might even injure their own subordinates in their inability to restore order. This was a precious opportunity to discover which was which.

“I’m glad I had the foresight to bring unseasoned soldiers.”

Opportunities like this campaign did not come around often. It would force the troops to grow, preparing them for the severity of war and acclimating them to the bloody air of the battlefield. Real combat was a far better instructor than the training ground.

“I can only hope some will prove themselves future leaders.”

There would be no point to this war otherwise. Ludurr cast one last expectant

glance at the command tent before returning to his own. He sat down at his desk and crossed his arms, turning to a dark corner of the tent that lay beyond the reach of the candlelight.

“Now,” he said, “may I ask why you announced your presence so readily?”

A humanoid form condensed from the darkness, slinking forward as if pulling itself free from the gloom. “Forgive me. I thought it might be to our mutual benefit.” The hood made the álf’s expression impossible to discern.

Ludurr showed no particular alarm or wariness at the appearance of the mysterious newcomer. “If anybody were to learn I was meeting with you, Nameless, my head would roll.”

“Then it is fortunate that any prying eyes are presently distracted, is it not?” Nameless stepped closer and laid a sheet of paper on the table.

Ludurr picked the paper up and read through the contents before looking up at Nameless with suspicion. “And you truly expect me to believe you can do such a thing? You cannot be in your right mind.”

“It will be difficult, but not impossible. And I believe you stand to gain.”

“True enough. Still, you will forgive me if I don’t take you at your word.”

“Trust me or don’t, the choice is yours. As far as I am concerned, you are simply another pawn. Your loss would hardly break my heart.”

With that, Nameless turned from the desk and stepped back into the darkness. In moments, the álf was wholly gone.

Ludurr stared into the dark for a while. Eventually, he tore his gaze away and touched Nameless’s letter to the candle flame.

“Ever the enigma. What is it you truly want, I wonder?”

Holding the burning paper in his palm, he sank into thought. The stench of burning flesh filled the tent, but he did not so much as grimace, closing his eyes and taking shallow breaths. At last, he opened his eyes again.

“Are you there, Lord Hydra?”

A disembodied voice echoed through the tent. “What would you ask?”

“Tell our Father that I have need of what he promised.”

“It will be done.”

The voice did not ask his reasons. Once its reply was given, it simply faded away. Ludurr crushed the blackened paper in his fist. Ash sprayed from the gaps between his fingers and danced through the air.

“All I do, Lord Beto, I do for the glory of House Muzuk.”

With an apology to his absent lord, he bowed his head, staring all the while at the burned skin of his palm.

* * * * *

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

The new capital of Faerzen, established under the control of Anguis, was surrounded by a number of smaller cities. The commonfolk dwelling in the lands around one such settlement had fled to the safety of its walls in fear of imperial attack. The city, however, refused to let them in, concerned imperial spies could be hidden among their number. A checkpoint was erected at the gate for soldiers to conduct baggage inspections, but too few hands and too many refugees led to a great many commonfolk sleeping outside the walls. Some had tents to set up, but others slept on the road with their own packs for pillows. Either way, with the roads blocked, merchants could not enter the city. The local economy ground to a standstill.

Other problems arose too. Public order began to break down, with ne’er-dowells appearing to ravage the fields, steal valuables, and even snatch unfortunate victims away. Six Kingdoms moved to address them as best it could, opening its granaries to the refugees, setting up campsites to serve as temporary accommodation, and assigning units of sentries to patrol the area. Nonetheless, with more commonfolk arriving by the day, the city’s storehouses grew steadily emptier. Conflict broke out between the townsfolk and the refugees. Guards were found to be aiding the people-smugglers, the people grew enraged, and the situation devolved into a vicious cycle with no resolution in sight.

“Sun’s down,” an exhausted Anguis soldier announced. “We’ve let in all we

can today. The rest of you'll have to come back tomorrow."

A villager clung to him, pleading. "You can do one more, can't you? Just one more? Please, it's only the one of me!"

Unfortunately, soldiers who might be swayed by emotional appeals were not assigned to the checkpoints. "No more. The gate shuts when it shuts or I get an earful from the higher-ups."

"You'll only let me in tomorrow anyway!" The villager was begging for all he was worth. "What does it matter if I'm a day early?!"

The soldier waved the man away. "You've been in line a fair few days already. It's only one more night."

"The imperials are coming as we speak! They'll take everything we have! Don't you know what they've done to the east?!" The villager rounded on the soldier, more desperate than ever.

"Keep your head on. The empire hasn't gotten this far yet. You'll be safe in the camp tonight, and then you can come back tomorrow."

"Bugger that! I waited in line all day for this?!"

"What am I to do about it? Can't control the sun." The soldier, perhaps unsurprisingly, was starting to run out of patience. "Spies might be lurking anywhere. I can't hold the gate for one man."

At length, the dispute attracted the attention of other soldiers, as well as discontented refugees.

"Begone with you, human." An álfen soldier from Tigris raised a bow at the protesting villager. "The checkpoint is closed. Return after sunrise."

The soldier from Anguis stared at the álf goggle-eyed. "Put that down, you fool! If Queen Lucia hears of this, these refugees will be the least of your concerns."

"I do not answer to her." The sneer was audible in the álf's words. "Soldiers of Tigris take no orders from the queen of Anguis, nor from any human."

The Anguis soldier's eyes narrowed in anger. "Are you mocking Her Majesty?"

“Was that how it sounded? Humans do have a way of finding the least charitable —” Abruptly, the álf staggered sideways. He recovered his footing and spun around, eyes flashing. “Who was that?! Which of you ingrates pushed me?!”

He looked around, but nobody met his eyes. The nearby soldiers were all staring fixedly to the side. An ominous silence had fallen. He turned to follow their gaze, wondering what could have captured all of their attention.

“Argh! You bloody went and did it!”

The villager lay on the ground, an arrow through his shoulder. He glared hatefully up at the álf as he writhed in pain.

As the álf stared in wide-eyed shock, the Anguis soldier grasped him by the shoulder and relieved him of his bow. “Look what you’ve done, you idiot!”

The accusation shook the álf back to his senses. He paled, shaking his head furiously. “It wasn’t me! Somebody pushed me!”

“Save your excuses! Call a physician!”

Fear began to spread through the gatefront crowd at the sight of the villager’s blood. The rest of the soldiers tried to calm them, but to little avail. And at that moment, more fuel fell upon the fire.

“The camp’s burning!” a shout went up. “The empire’s come for us!”

For an instant, all was silent. Heads turned to look at the camp, where black smoke was rising. And then, as one, the refugees surged toward the closing gate.

“Calm yourselves! Someone’s knocked over a cookfire, that’s all! There’d be ten times the smoke if we were truly under attack! Don’t be misled!”

The plume of smoke was far too small to indicate a real threat, but it did not matter. All of the refugees’ accumulated terror erupted at once, turning the crowd into an unstoppable avalanche. Now that they had descended into panic, they would not listen to reason. The soldiers had no choice but to respond with force. Yet that only made matters worse. A mob did not quail before threats; it only grew angrier. Chaos engulfed the gatefront, and as the crowd spilled into the city, the townsfolk joined the confusion. Suddenly confronted by hundreds

—if not thousands—of angry faces, anyone would take leave of their wits.

“I see smoke rising,” Scáthach remarked as she surveyed the horizon. “Here and elsewhere.”

“Our agents’ work. People don’t think rationally when they’re under pressure. To someone who’s spent weeks looking over their shoulder, the tiniest fire looks like a raging inferno.” Hiro pushed his mask back into place as he watched the uproar spread through the town. “And more importantly, it helps to broadcast the city’s fall.”

Now that the dam had broken, there was no going back. The ensuing flood would swallow all it touched.

“We moved against six cities. I would have been happy with two successes. This is more than I dared to hope for.”

Hiro raised his eyes to the heavens. The sun had gone down. Darkness was closing in. The sky was cloudless—a perfect night.

The air was humid, with no sign of rain. On an ordinary night, the stars would have shone. On an ordinary night, the world would have been silent. Yet this was no ordinary night. Plumes of smoke rose to smother the stars. Beneath a somber sky, the land burned red with pitiless flame.

Screams and cries pierced the night, calling out in rage and grief, begging for deliverance. The stench of blood rose skyward on a storm of clashing steel. An unstoppable tide of malice surged through the streets, cutting down innocent lives in its path. It was brutal. The work of fiends. But it was reality, and reality would not be denied.

“Hope comes only to those who know despair,” Hiro murmured as he watched the town burn.

His voice was level, far too calm for the frightful spectacle before him. His words carried no inflection. No emotion lay within. An effect lent by the mask obscuring his expression, perhaps—or perhaps not.

“Hate me all you like. I won’t ask for your forgiveness.”

His right hand rose to touch his mask as he seared the sight into his memory.

The night wind set his mantle billowing even as he dismissed the air he wore.

“It’s finally time for this stalemate to end.”

Cries for help reached his ears. He lifted a hand, thinking for a moment to answer them—and let it fall.

“No. I won’t pretend to be a savior.”

Casting aside every last shred of compassion, he turned and spread his arms wide.

“Let us go to war!”



* * * * *

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

A plain near Skye, the former capital of Faerzen

The empire's banners covered the field. Fifty thousand soldiers awaited the signal to charge. The scent of battle hung in the air, a heady mix of tension and exhilaration. Yet most noticeable of all was the silence—an uneasy tranquility lying over the ground like a carpet, the calm before the storm. The morning dew slid from the leaves, heavy with the quiet.

The empire had fielded fifty thousand. Across the field awaited Six Kingdoms' troops, a force of thirty thousand drawn from Tigris and Scorpius. By a twist of fate, this was the same plain where High General von Cain and many of his generals had fallen. Unrecovered corpses glared up at both sides' combatants with resentment in their eyes. The stench of blood and death lay undisturbed by the wind, haunting the field like a curse.

The sixth princess stood on the vanguard, her expression stern as she surveyed the battlefield. Her eyes narrowed as she caught sight of the man at the head of the enemy troops.

"Stovell... It really is you."

The reports had been correct, it seemed. The gray-haired man was none other than First Prince Rein Hardt Stovell von Grantz. Arrogant and cruel, he had once been the heir apparent to the throne before he had rebelled against the empire, slain his father, and vanished.

"Look what you've become."

Once, he had been a strapping young man, fair of hair and blue of eye. Nothing of that gallant figure remained in him now. His skin was violet and his hair was gray. He had already been chosen by Mjölnir, but he had sought even greater power by becoming Fallen, and this hideous form was the result.

Liz looked back, casting her newly sharpened eyes over her own camp. With Aura there to take command, she was free to lead the charge herself. Aura had demanded she stay with the core, but that would mean letting soldiers die

needlessly; as formidable as the empire's troops were, only Liz could meet Stovell on equal terms. In the end, Aura had been unable to persuade her, and after much indecision, she had given Liz her blessing to take the vanguard.

Liz was thankful for that. She could not have abided waiting on the back lines as she had in Steissen. She looked up at the sky and smiled, feeling no fear. Her most faithful retainers were watching over her this day, and she would show them nothing less than her best.

She slid Lævateinn from its sheath and raised it high. Behind her, fifty thousand soldiers stood with bated breath, awaiting her command. Fire welled up within her, stoked by their fervor.

"I dedicate this glorious victory to the Twelve Divines."

She looked to the fore as she leveled Lævateinn at the enemy. At that moment, the rays of the sun spilled down upon her. An awestruck sigh escaped some unwitting throat. Cast in sunlight, she looked as fantastical as a painting, the fluttering imperial banners in the background imbuing her with something sacred. She was a supernatural being, composed as only a lion could be, and her inhuman beauty captured the hearts of onlookers as surely as the aspect of a goddess. There could be no question that she was their next empress. The Crimson Princess was Artheus reborn, her might beyond reproach. A goddess fought alongside them, and she promised them victory.

"Now, ride with me."

Pretty words were not needed to vanquish the enemy. Gilded phrases were not needed to fly across the field. All she asked, all she dreamed, all she wanted to say was clear from a single glance at her back.

"Charge!"

The air behind her erupted with zeal. Horns blared. Drums beat. A bestial roar arose from the battlefield, soul-shaking in its magnitude, and lion banners went up as far as the eye could see. The flag of monarchs was at her back, and her soldiers would follow it to the ends of the earth.

"Victory to the Crimson Princess!"

With a cry, the Knights of the Rose thundered after her. A moment later, a

rain of arrows darkened the sky above them.

“Shields!” Liz cried.

They obeyed, and then the deluge was upon them. Several riders fell from their horses, pierced by stray shafts, and more than a few more were wounded, but their momentum would not be halted.

Before them, their goddess led them still. The rain of arrows could not touch her. Gouts of flame from Lævateinn burned them to ashes mid-flight. Polished by the razor edge between life and death, her beauty shone all the brighter. The knights fixed their eyes forward. Their wounds were of no import. All they wanted was to follow, to see what heights she would lead them to. Their spirits swelled, and their eyes shone as they watched her forge ahead. Proud cries tore from their throats.

“Victory to our Crimson Princess!”

She had been called a beauty for the ages, and that was no lie. To look upon her was to fall under her spell. Seasoned veterans charged gladly into carnage, unable to resist her allure. They would have chosen honorable death in an instant had their goddess bidden it. What was this but a femme fatale? It was all too easy to imagine what the rest of the imperial troops felt to see their comrades charge fearlessly into the fray, and their momentum slowed the judgment of the normally levelheaded álfar.

“Here they come,” the enemy commander remarked as the imperial charge bore down on them. “Archers, retreat. Send the heavies to the front. Raise a shield wa— Argh!”

“Too slow!”

His last sight in this world was the goddess plunging into the front line, and then hellfire consumed him. The Flame Sovereign slaughtered its foes with blinding speed. Six Kingdoms soldiers stood all around her, but in the face of her monstrous skill, hesitation filled their eyes. Even as they faltered, the Knights of the Rose bore down on them.

“Death has come for you! Lay down your lives for the Crimson Princess!”

For a fleeting moment, all was still, and then the armies collided. A cacophony

rose skyward, born of screams, roars, shrieks—every conceivable noise a human throat could produce. Bones shattered, flesh tore, blood sprayed. Hooves crashed through chinks in the line to crush foes underfoot. The front line descended into disarray as the Knights of the Rose tore a ragged hole through its center, and twenty thousand soldiers of the first imperial cohort poured into the breach.

“Hah!”

“Urgh!”

Corpses piled higher and higher before Liz. The edges of their wounds were reddened and charred, and their faces were contorted in agony.

“Who’s next?” she cried.

Neither skill nor numbers could prevail against her—or at least, so her strength made it seem. Her enemies’ hesitation turned to terror, and the álfar wasted no time in retreating.

“You’ve grown strong, sister.” An enormous battle-axe clove through the blood mist wreathing the field.

Liz coldly batted the blow aside. “I have. Stronger than you.”

She bounded back, readying Lævateinn. Her feet had scarcely touched the ground before a barrage of mutilated corpses flew toward her. Through the chunks of flesh, she glimpsed Stovell, laughing alone amid a rain of blood. Sparks burst in the air around him—a series of unpleasant *cracks* like exploding firecrackers. The lightning surging from his body was striking the dust in the air.

“How long it has been, sister mine.” He thrust Mjöltnir into the ground and spread his arms wide. It almost looked like he was inviting her to embrace him, but it would have been the first time he had ever shown her a shred of brotherly love.

Liz snorted. “You disgust me.”

“Oh, don’t be so stubborn. Your dear brother seeks only to free you from your curse.”

She laughed, gazing back dispassionately. “Does he now? Then I hope he

won't mind if I save him from yours."

In a split second, Stovell vanished. Liz, unhurried, slid one leg back and braced her left hand against Lævateinn's blade. A massive impact crashed into her guard. The ground cratered beneath her feet.

"Impressive!"

"I see you."

Stovell swung his axe with gleeful abandon, but Liz would not be pushed back. Their Spiritblades clashed once, twice, three times, four. Shock waves blasted outward with every impact. The gusts of wind sent soldiers tumbling across the ground, and even those who managed to stay upright tripped and stumbled on the broken earth. The fighting temporarily ground to a halt as the storm of violence consumed friend and foe alike. In time, both sides' soldiers drew away from the unearthly spectacle for fear of being swallowed up.

"Curse you..."

Lightning fizzled out as it clashed with flame. Gales dispersed as they met searing heat. Stovell grew steadily angrier with every attack she nullified.

Liz brushed back a strand of hair and smiled. "Your life ends here."

Her counterattack came slowly at first. Lævateinn's blade slashed vertically, slow as a caress. Stovell blocked it easily, but his brow furrowed with suspicion.

"Oh? Am I not worthy of your full strength?!"

Reddening with rage, he lashed out with Mjöltnir. Liz turned Lævateinn level, then shifted to angle the blade diagonally just before impact. Mjöltnir skittered along its length. As Stovell lurched off-balance, Liz unleashed a lightning-fast slash.

"Ngh!"

Surprise blossomed across Stovell's face at her sudden increase in speed. He managed to deflect the blow, but Liz took his motion in stride, harnessing his momentum to bring Lævateinn round again. Up, down, left, right—her sword traced a crimson web that grew steadily denser. Countless blade trails blazed with searing fury, toying with him like a cat with a mouse even as they flayed

him open. Their speed fluctuated unpredictably, leaving him at the mercy of an arrhythmic assault.

E'er did flowing water cleave hard stone.

Hiro had fought stronger opponents in much the same way. She had watched enough to learn. From the moment they had first met to now, she had seared his battles into her memory, adapting his techniques to suit her own strengths as she practiced day by day. All to catch up to him—and surpass him.

“I won’t lose, Stovell. Not to a man who abandoned his potential.”

They fought with the same school, but their styles had grown apart. A weapon took on the weight of its wielder’s steps. The path they had walked—whether one of sorrow or joy or even anger—hardened them and spurred them onward. Convictions made people strong, raising them up beyond their limits to the highest heavens.

“Liz... You...”

The Crimson Princess had walked a thorny road, and her convictions were weighty indeed.

She had overcome sorrow.

She had walked with anger.

She had held fast to joy.

And now her bladework was a thing of beauty.

It was delicate as a priestess’s dance, soft enough to part the flow of time, yet fearsome too. She lacked experience. Her edges were rough. Her failings would have brought a sigh of disappointment to her predecessors’ lips. Yet that very immaturity compelled devotion from friend and foe alike. All who saw her loved her—her retainers, her people, her soldiers, even her enemies. That was her gift, her proof of royalty—a *regalía* of her own.

“So it’s true!”

Stovell charged, roaring denial. Liz met him head-on. The clashing of their might gouged great furrows in the earth. A furious blast connected with ground that looked like it had been carpet-bombed. The earth below bucked, and a

whirling gale lifted it aloft, showering stones across the battlefield like rain. Stovell cleared the tempest with a swipe of his arm, his face twisted hideously with rage as he bore down on Liz.

“You stole my birthright!”

All at once, Stovell seemed to sag. Liz could make no sense of his words. He glared at her with loathing in his eyes, but whence it sprang, she could not tell. She had plenty of cause to hate him, but none to be hated in turn. For a while she peered at him, trying to divine the truth, but that could only last for so long. This was a chance she could not waste.

She thrust Mjölhnir away with all her might and raised her blade level.

“Bloom in splendor, Lævateinn.”

Flame spewed from Lævateinn’s blade, painting the world crimson. Here was the Spiritblade’s inviolable domain, impervious to gods, let alone men.

“Now,” Liz said, thrusting out a hand, “can you survive this?”

Stovell readied his guard. A wave of heat rolled out across the field, but that was all. He looked behind him, cocking his head. Confusion was written plain on his face.

“You think to stop me with a breeze—”

All at once, the field lit up. It was truly the work of an instant. Where the searing wind had passed, pillars of flame sprang from the earth to pierce the sky. Stovell looked down to find half of his body blasted clean away.

“What...? How...?”

His wounds would have been fatal to a mortal man, but Stovell had transcended both mortality and humanity. His missing flesh regenerated within seconds. Nonetheless, the impact struck him to his core. He sank to one knee, chest heaving. Sweat poured from his forehead, trickled down from his cheeks, and soaked into the earth.

“I am not yet done, sister!”

A roar burst from his throat. Mjölhnir materialized in his right hand and Gandiva in his left. As his passions ran wild, a gale blew in answer, catching the

crackling lightning and sweeping it up into a tornado. The tempest drew nearby soldiers indiscriminately into its orbit, hurling them up into the air. Liz scowled at the carnage and brandished Lævateinn. A fiery serpent sprang forth, coiling around the tornado and swallowing it whole.

“Nobody likes a pushy man.”

“Silence, brat!”

Razor winds skimmed Liz’s cheek. Lightning crackled overhead. The force of their clash reverberated through the earth. Her eardrums thrummed with a piercing echo as a Spiritblade’s screams resounded across the battlefield. Desperate pleas came to her on the wind. Gandiva, bent forcibly to Stovell’s will, was crying for release.

“Enough!” she cried.

Impacts rang loud as crimson sword clashed with battle-axe, their blades repulsing rather than biting. Stovell tried to leverage his colossal reach to aim for Liz’s neck, but she slapped his weapon away one-handed and stepped in. Forging steadily ahead, weathering the storm of violence, she closed the distance. Lævateinn licked out with a horizontal slash, seeking to reap its enemy’s life, and only a timely retreat saved Stovell from worse than a flesh wound.

With her opponent on the back foot, Liz took the offensive. She launched a punch, twisted to drive a heel into his flank, blinded him with a burst of flame as he moved to retaliate, then closed in and rammed an elbow into his sternum at point-blank range. His bulk rocked on its foundations. She followed up with a front kick to his stomach, then transitioned her momentum into a barrage of slashes. The air screamed as wind swirled around her blade, drawn in its wake as it sheared his flesh away.

Stovell’s cheek hung open. Blood poured from his wounds. His flesh was ragged and torn, and his guts spilled from within. Even so, he kept fighting, howling with rage as he sprang after Liz. His injuries healed within seconds. It seemed their battle might be fated to continue forever. Liz, however, did not falter; if anything, she attacked with redoubled force, devoting everything she had to eradicating her foe. Until every cell of Stovell’s body was annihilated and

his regeneration quashed, until nigh-eternal torment sapped his will to fight, until his very soul shattered to pieces, she would put her full strength behind every swing.

This was a battle in which mere mortals had no place. In the center of the field rampaged transcendent beings like unto gods. To stand in their presence was to know fear, to face death, to feel compelled to flee. Six Kingdoms' front line crumbled, its ranks falling into disarray as the álfar of the first and second cohorts sounded the retreat. The imperial troops, on the other hand, were less afraid. They kept their distance so as not to get in Liz's way, but none turned to run—instead, they pressed forward, fighting valiantly to aid their princess.

One of Stovell's tornadoes bore down on the imperial line. Lævateinn's fire reared up to swallow it whole. Still, while the Flame Sovereign was powerful, it was not invincible. Stovell wielded both Mjölhnir and Gandiva. In terms of power, in terms of numbers, he ought to have had the upper hand; if that was untrue in practice, the wielder was to blame.

“Gah!”

All at once, the battle reached its end. Stovell's body began to fall apart. Liz leaped back and looked him over. The power of the Spiritblades was raging within his body, coursing like poison through his flesh—or no, perhaps it was his curse that was transforming him. That was to be expected, in a sense. He had never been able to fully control it.

His skin melted and his flesh putrefied, revealing stark white bone. Even so, life burned in his eyes, fixing Liz with a fierce will. He could barely walk, but his will to fight blazed as strong as it ever had.

Liz's nose wrinkled at the stench. “Tell me, Stovell. What was worth becoming that?”

“Power, sister. Power beyond question. I needed the strength to cast my shadow over all, to hold the world in my grasp...”

There was an unpleasant squelch, and something white dripped from his eye socket. His eyeball had melted like candle wax.

“Urrrgh... RAAAAAAAAAAGGGHHH!!!”

He roared; one might have wondered if he was capable of anything else. It was hard to call him human anymore. He no longer even looked humanoid. With his skin hideously burned, sloughing from his bones like melted candy, he was more of a mud golem than a man.

“I will not fall here... I cannot... Not yet...” He rounded on Liz, howling like a beast, but he was pitifully slow.

“I’ll put you out of your misery.”

Liz raised her right hand high, and a fireball swelled into being. She let her arm fall. The fiery orb traced an unerring arc toward Stovell...and disappeared just before it made contact.

“That will do for today, I think.”

Nameless stood before Stovell as if shielding him from harm. The first prince lay slumped on the ground, spent, little more than a crude mass of bubbling clay. It was hard to tell if he was even still alive. Nonetheless, nothing good was likely to come of letting him escape.

“Do you think I’d let you get away?” Liz brandished Lævateinn coldly. The ground beneath the pair erupted in flame, sending up a plume of dirt. “But I remember. You don’t like attacking from the front. You much prefer...here!” She spun around, unleashing a fierce punch.

“It makes it so much easier to stick the knife in. But I fear I must retreat for now.” Nameless’s hood fluttered as Liz’s fist sailed past, but that was all. “If you would excuse me...”

The álf waved a bell staff, setting the air tinkling with its chime. Space distorted and Stovell disappeared, still barely clinging to human form. At that moment, a rent appeared in the air where he had lain. A foul miasma belched forth, like smoke from an open window, and spiraled skyward.

“So, you would intervene...” There was more than a note of surprise in Nameless’s voice. The álf turned back to Liz, lips curling in a smile beneath the cowl. “Still, he is beyond your reach now.”

“So it seems.”

Liz bounded forward, swinging, but Nameless blurred and disappeared, reappearing a short distance away. A trail of fire slithered across the ground like a snake in pursuit, but its fangs failed to bite. It still managed to coil around its prey, but the álf reappeared elsewhere, only to be consumed again by fire. Still, Liz was skeptical that her attack had landed. She looked around. Sure enough, Nameless stood off to the side, unharmed.

Liz was the first to tire of the game. “Enough!” she exclaimed, driving a fist into the ground. A tremor shook the soil. Fissures crisscrossed the earth, from which pillars of flame blasted high. Yet even in the bowels of hell, Nameless remained unscathed.

“Oh, impressive. How the Flame Sovereign bends to your will.” The álf’s bell staff struck the ground. “But you are still no match for me, I fear.”

The álf vanished, leaving Liz alone in a desolate world. The flames receded, and the clamor of steel reasserted itself over the silence. There was no time to regret letting Stovell slip away. The fighting was still going on. She had to end this battle with minimal casualties. It was enough for now that the greatest threat had fled the field. She breathed a heavy sigh, forced back her anger, and lifted Lævateinn high.

“Rout them!”

She set off once more across the field, rousing her allies’ spirits. For today, she would think only of victory and try her best to quash the misgivings welling in her breast.

Chapter 5: Gáe Bolg

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

The third army had resumed its march. Several of San Dinalle's satellite cities had succumbed to rioting, and the imperial forces took advantage of the chaos to progress their campaign. Secure in having the moral high ground once more, they had made steady progress. Seeing the tides turn, Anguis had recalled its forces from their positions across its territories and set up camp on a plain. They had fifty thousand men to field. The empire had only twelve thousand—ten from the third army and two from the Crow Legion—and the difference was stark.

"Well, nobody would say we have the numerical advantage," Hiro remarked. "We let our enemy prepare, and now they've come in force."

He was in the center of the Crow Legion's camp, near the rear of the third army. His chair faced a simple desk, upon which lay a map. He reached for a nearby sheet of paper and cast his eyes over it.

"The reports say Esel has fielded the most soldiers."

The Crow Legion didn't have the advantage of a hilltop position for this battle, so he was reliant on imperial messengers for information. Scáthach sat beside him. She, too, was staring at the map, but unlike him, she had a slight frown on her face.

"Reinforcements from their homeland, perhaps," she said.

Hiro would have liked to pick Luka's brains about that, but while she was there in body, she was less present in mind. She pawed at the ground, humming to herself. It didn't look like he could expect a coherent answer. If possible, he would have preferred not to bring her to the battle at all, but as usual, she had refused to leave his side.

"Could you take care of her once the fighting starts?" he asked Scáthach.

"As you command."

Scáthach would remain at the ready in the camp. That was both what she desired and the most her body would allow. He glanced at her. Her jaw was set and her face tense as she gazed at Six Kingdoms' lines. There was no need to ask why. Hiro understood her feelings well.

"I'll take it from here."

With the numbers so overwhelmingly in the enemy's favor, the Crow Legion was bound to have to fight, and it would be a grueling battle. Six Kingdoms might even push through as far as their encampment. The Crow Legion was granted the privilege to conduct raids on their own initiative, but that was all the more reason to take this battle seriously—they had to make a good account of themselves, both to inspire the imperial troops and to impress upon Six Kingdoms that Baum was an enemy to be feared.

"Time to repay a two-year-old debt."

Hiro turned his gaze to the Anguis lines, where Lucia was no doubt waiting. She would want to end this battle in short order. The last thing she could afford was to let the rest of the imperial forces circle around from the north and catch her from behind. Exploiting her impatience would be the best way to overturn the difference in numbers.

"They have one day left, maybe two. Scáthach, do you know how close Liz's troops are?"

"As of three days ago, they have defeated the forces of Tigris and Scorpius and set about assaulting Skye. They may secure the city as early as today."

Skye was essentially a ruin. In a monetary sense, there was little value in conquering it. Its strategic importance, however, was great: located squarely in the center of Faerzen, it provided a commanding view of the entire nation. Six Kingdoms would defend it fiercely, even if only for the sake of buying time. With the remnants of Tigris's and Scorpius's forces joining the city's existing Vulpes garrison, Hiro anticipated heavy resistance. Even Aura would need several days to capture it. In short, it would be a few days yet before the rest of the imperial forces arrived on the field.

"I suppose we'll just have to pray that the third army has a skilled commander."

Their priority right now was to delay, but the enemy was unlikely to allow that. They would attack swiftly and fiercely to bring the battle to a quick close. That meant uncertain elements—lots of them. If the third army buckled early, it would be extremely hard-pressed to regain its footing. One could only hope its commander understood that.

“Here we go,” Hiro said with some apprehension.

Music from both lines signaled the start of combat. Horns blared loud. The beating of drums filled the air. Battle cries rose from both sides as they sought to intimidate their opponents. A plume of dust rose to the fore as one or both sides initiated a charge. At length, a storm of ringing steel added to the clamor. The imperial third army had engaged Esel’s first cohort.

“Judging by that dust cloud, they’re coming out swinging. Maybe they’re planning something...or maybe they just want to see what we can do.”

The imperial forces were moving sluggishly in comparison to their foes. Even from the back lines, Hiro could tell as much. The commander seemed to have adopted a passive approach. They would dig their heels in and hold out until their allies arrived, faithfully following their marching orders. It smacked of a general of earnest and forthright character, and if the two armies had been closer in size, it might even have been a good strategy. As it was, making it so obvious the imperial troops were hoping to stall only exposed their vulnerability. It was as good as inviting Six Kingdoms to come and attack.

“It looks like we’d better help.” Hiro signaled the commander of the Crow Legion.

“What do you need of me, my lord?” The man stood rigidly at attention, waiting for orders.

With a wry smile, Hiro gestured to the left hand side of the field. “Could you circle around the left flank and harry their second cohort? If they come after you, all the better. If they don’t, try to do some damage to their ranks.”

Hiro was about to ask how many soldiers that would take, but the man did not give him the time. “Five hundred will suffice, my lord,” he said, turning his back. “Your will be done.”

“Garda’s education at work,” Hiro mused. The man had turned out a little stiff, but it was good that he could think on his feet. All the better that he had understood what Hiro wanted without needing to be told.

“Well, then. What now?”

The Crow Legion was left with fifteen hundred men. Hiro sank into thought. Even if the battle proceeded as he hoped, the third army would only have a small number of cards to play. Maintaining morale was essential if they were to hold out without undue losses, but the commander’s current passive strategy would undoubtedly be having a negative effect. Ideally, the man would fight in such a way as to avoid both his allies and his foes realizing how low spirits really were in the ranks, but he did not seem to be capable of that kind of finesse. Some display of valor would be required to raise morale. Unfortunately, that was unlikely to be forthcoming from the imperial troops, which left the Crow Legion. How much they could accomplish with only two thousand men remained to be seen, but anything was better than not trying.

“I’ll leave five hundred here with you,” he said to Scáthach. “If anything goes wrong—”

“I will join you,” Luka interrupted.

Hiro turned to her, surprised. “Are you sure?”

“The sooner we end this battle, the sooner we can look for Huginn.”

He didn’t relish the prospect of taking her with him. She was in such a volatile state that there was no telling what she might do. If she remained capable of responding to commands, that would be one thing, but if she retreated back into herself again, it would put her life in danger. Still, if he rejected her request, she might simply lose control then and there.

His shoulders slumped in defeat. “All right. We’ll take a thousand men. Let’s see if we can’t do something about that first cohort.”

* * * * *

About half an hour had passed since Six Kingdoms had engaged the imperial forces. The Anguis camp was awash with harried aides. Lucia watched them dash about for a moment before taking a bite of fruit and returning her gaze to

the map.

“I sense little urgency on the empire’s part. They seek to prolong the fighting, ’twould seem.”

“Was it truly wise to commit our full strength, Your Majesty?” Her aide looked worried. No doubt he was apprehensive about the empire’s capabilities. The memory of Six Kingdoms’ defeat two years prior was still fresh in many minds.

Lucia adopted a confident tone, the better to soothe his concerns. “Wise? Why, ’tis necessary. We shall strike terror into them with our numbers so that their full attention is on us.”

Her plan was to strike fast and hard from the first, then to slowly lessen the assault, hopefully while the empire was too stunned to notice. That would help to conserve her strength, which was important in itself, but crucially...

“We shall trap them front and back and crush them in our jaws.”

Executing the pincer attack would require waiting for the three thousand or so soldiers who had been slow to arrive on the field. They had been redirected to close on the imperial forces from behind. If Lucia was to meet the rest of the imperial army at full strength, she had to end this battle with minimal losses. As such, the most important question now was which side’s reinforcements would arrive first.

“How fares Skye?” she asked.

“It still stands, Your Majesty,” the aide replied. “Tigris’s, Scorpius’s, and Vulpes’s forces continue to hold out.”

“The álfar shall run as soon as they judge it expedient, I don’t doubt.”

In fairness, it was unlikely they could keep the empire at bay for long, no matter how fiercely they had resisted. The continent had been abuzz with rumors of the sixth princess for the past two years. If even the most credible were true, Skye’s fall was all but guaranteed.

“We have five days, perhaps, before the bulk of the empire’s forces arrive.”

“That should be more than enough time, Your Majesty. Our soldiers are estimated to arrive in three.”

“Wonderful. Then we shall have all the time in the world to enjoy ourselves...shall we not, Lord Surtr?”

Lucia cast a glance out at the battlefield, where the Crow Legion was harrying Six Kingdoms’ second cohort. Their interference could hardly even be called an annoyance. Nonetheless...

“We must keep our men entertained. Send one of the reserve units to swat those gnats.”

“As you command, Your Majesty.”

“Now, what strategies shall our enemies employ? Any ape can face the enemy and brandish a sword. Let us hope they have something more interesting to offer.”

Baum and the imperial third were surely not without plans of their own. They were just as keen to stall for time. They would try something—it was only a question of when.

“Two days I shall give you to scheme as you please.”

“Our own plans proceed apace, I trust?” came a voice.

Lucia turned to see Nameless. She flicked open her fan and raised it to cover her mouth. “Well, well. Who should come calling but the defeated commander. All that confidence and yet your vaunted hound proved no better than a common mutt.”

“I miscalculated, I won’t deny it. The sixth princess proved stronger than I anticipated.”

“Did she now?” Lucia narrowed her eyes. It was unusual for Nameless to praise her enemies so readily. The álf must have been hard-pressed indeed.

“Perhaps we ought to revise our plans.”

“Are you suggesting that I will lose this battle?”

“Oh, not in the least. I daresay your prudence has been the salvation of us all. I ought to have known that a half-hearted effort would never stave her off. We must bring our full strength to bear.”

“She must be strong indeed to coax such words from your lips.”

“Indeed she is. Perhaps I will have to take this battle seriously.”

Nameless’s voice remained composed to the last, but it left just a trace of amusement in the air as it faded away. The álf was, in her own way, a seasoned warrior. No doubt she too was looking forward to the pleasures of the battlefield—the exhilaration, the terror, the despair.

“First, we shall dispose of the Crow Legion,” she announced. “This Surtr will no doubt pose the greatest threat to our plans if left unchecked. It would behoove us to cut him down here.”

Lucia loosed a bark of laughter. “’Twould be a welcome diversion indeed.”

Her eyes sparkled with amusement, insisting that she was delighted, but there was no smile behind her fan. Her lips pressed into a flat line. The schemes she had spun inside her mind, the walls that guarded her approach to the High King’s throne, were weakening. After the life she had lived, after the shame she had endured, that was no laughing matter—especially when a long-sought opportunity was within her grasp.

The time is close at hand...but not quite yet. Not quite yet...

She stared at Nameless, her eyes narrowing like a snake’s.

* * * * *

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

Beneath a clear blue sky sprawled a vast ruin—all that remained of the old capital of Skye, once called the most beautiful city in Faerzen. Corpses littered plazas that had once been places of rest. Dried blood grew steadily blacker in avenues that had once been thriving markets. All the city’s grandeur had been reduced to rubble, leaving not a trace of what had once been. Crows wheeled overhead, starving dogs prowled the streets, and rats scurried from gaps in the rubble.

Aura walked along the central avenue, her footing made treacherous by the city’s decay.

“Her Highness is nowhere to be found, my lady,” came an anxious voice.

She turned to the aide walking beside her. “Nowhere?”

The imperial forces were hurriedly reorganizing themselves after capturing Skye the previous day. Six Kingdoms had put up its fiercest fight yet, and the empire had not escaped unscathed, losing close to ten thousand soldiers. Six Kingdoms, for its part, had lost over thirty thousand. Seeing the battle was lost, the enemy had flung open the gates and sallied forth in one last charge—a courageous maneuver, but a futile one considering they had been surrounded. The fighting had ended as anyone would have predicted. After the dust settled, however, almost all of the dead proved to be human, with only a handful of álfen corpses. It seemed the álfar had thrown their comrades to the wolves to cover their own escape.

The empire had approached the remaining defenders with a demand to surrender, partially out of sympathy after seeing them so illused. The soldiers had thrown down their weapons with little resistance. They had long lost the will to fight. The empire had taken the ten thousand or so survivors prisoner, but treating the many wounded would take time, significantly delaying the reorganization of their troops. As a result, the plan to pincer Anguis’s forces with the third army was on the verge of being abandoned.

Aura, naturally, was feeling hurried, but she could not let it show. That would only give the soldiers cause for concern. Liz, too, had been trying to attend to her duties as calmly as she could. Unfortunately, she seemed to have disappeared.

“She could have gone back to the palace,” Aura said.

“I can only hope so.” The aide sounded skeptical.

The pair made their way up the hill to the palace of Faerzen, where the imperial forces had set up a command center. The ruin had once been the dwelling place of Faerzen’s royal family. Now the stench of blood and fat hung in the air, and only glimpses of its former beauty remained amid the wreckage. So thoroughly had it been destroyed that it would be easier to clear the rubble and build anew.

Aura entered the command center and flagged someone down. “Have you seen Lady Celia Estrella?”

“Not today, I fear, my lady.”

Aura laid a frustrated hand on her forehead and shook her head. Historically, the heir to the throne going missing was hardly an unknown occurrence. Every generation of the imperial family had had its free spirits, not least of which was the first emperor himself. Still, precedent was no excuse. Rubbing her temple, she jabbed a finger at the soldier by her side.

“Send out a search party. There might still be enemy troops around. We can’t afford to be lax.”

The man looked a little paler than he had several minutes ago, but he nodded. “At once, my lady!”

Once he was out of sight, Aura crossed her arms and cocked her head, grumbling thoughtfully. Liz was missing. By all rights, the empire should be turning over every stone in search, but Liz was strong enough that there was little to fear. Even so, someone who intended to be empress someday should know better than to act so thoughtlessly.

“Hm?” Aura’s brow creased as a possibility crossed her mind. “Surely not. Not alone...”

One person could not change the tide of a battle, no matter how mighty. They might be able to boost morale, but they would have little effect on the state of the field. Still, it was hard to discount the possibility completely.

Aura breathed another sigh, just as heavy as the last. “Tell me something,” she said, turning to an aide—the man in charge of reorganizing the imperial forces.

“What is it, my lady?”

“How many men could we field right now if we needed to?”

He fell silent for a moment. “Ten thousand, perhaps.”

“Form an advance guard. Send them to meet up with the third army.”

“Are you suggesting that we split our forces, my lady?”

“We don’t have a choice. We need to move fast.”

They would need to play all the cards they had. And, most importantly, Aura would need to give Liz a *very* thorough talking-to once all this was over.

“I’m going to kill her,” she muttered. “I’ll really do it this time.”

The aide blinked in surprise.

“I bring word!” a voice cried. “Word for Lady Aura!”

“What now?” Aura spun around, glaring at the newcomer with uncharacteristic annoyance.

The man skidded to a halt. He was Lawrence Alfred von Spitz—Aura’s onetime retainer, now assigned to the Knights of the Royal Black. “Her Highness requested I give you this,” he said, holding out a letter.

Aura took it and read it through. Her frown deepened as she read, and she turned back to the aide. “Ignore what I just ordered.”

“Excuse me, my lady? Are you certain?”

“I am. There’s no need. Let her do what she wants.”

* * * * *

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

The battle between the third army and Six Kingdoms had dragged on for multiple days. On the first day, Six Kingdoms had fought with all its might, but as of the second, its movements had grown slow. Now, on the third, the imperial forces were once more being pushed back by a forceful assault. The battlefield had receded so far that it had almost reached the Crow Legion’s camp on the back lines.

With vision obscured by blood mist, the fighting had descended into chaos. Armored boots trampled lives into the dirt as cries and bellows rang all around. Soldiers from both sides leaped on any foe they saw like wild beasts, casting aside any semblance of dignity or honor, wielding their swords in desperate defense of their own lives.

“This isn’t looking good,” Hiro remarked as he watched from the Crow Legion’s encampment.

The imperials were making a poor showing of themselves, and it was hard to contain his disappointment. Their numerical disadvantage was always going to be an obstacle, but they had let Six Kingdoms' willingness to drag the battle out make them overconfident in their own strength, and now that the enemy had attacked in force, they had no idea how to respond. A battlefield was an ever-changing environment. No day was guaranteed to be the same as the last. The commanding officers had grown careless, letting their seeming success against a larger force inflate their egos. Now, they were paying the price.

"Never let your guard down in war. You should have known better." There was no other way to put it—the commander was incompetent. Hiro rose from his chair. "Scáthach, can you take command while I'm away?"

"With pleasure." Scáthach's voice was firm as she raised Gáe Bolg in answer. "Fear not for us. Show them the fullness of your strength."

Hiro's smile was just a little stiff. "Then you're in charge. Make sure... Make sure you fight a battle you can be proud of."

"Of course. You have my gratitude." She saw him off with a smile.

He looked at Luka as he strode away. "We're headed for the front line. Are you ready?"

"I can fight whenever you require."

He mounted his swiftdrake, leading the way through the lines. A brigade commander fell in alongside him as he rode.

"All is ready, Your Majesty," the man said. "We await your command."

"Good. Let's push the enemy back, shall we?"

A thousand formidable soldiers stood in orderly ranks. Hiro took position at their head. With a good view of the field, he could easily make out the ragged hole in the middle of the imperial line. Six Kingdoms' troops had broken through. Now, they were tearing the imperial ranks apart from the inside.

Hiro drew Dáinsleif from his belt. "Raise the flags."

Two sets of banners went up: the scales of Baum and the black dragon of Schwartz. He leveled his blade at the enemy and drew a deep breath.

“Today, we show them our all. Charge!”

He thundered toward the fray at the head of a thousand Crow Legion cavalry. They overtook the disarrayed third cohort and tore through the routed second. As Hiro plowed clean into the annihilated first, he leaped from his swiftdrake’s back and into the midst of Six Kingdoms’ troops.

“What in the—?!”

He cleaved one stunned soldier open from shoulder to hip, grasped the head of a second and skewered him through the throat, then lopped off the head of a third closing in from behind. Three jets of blood painted the world red. The remaining soldiers fell back, goggle-eyed. Hiro set upon them without mercy.

“Well, well. Where did all that confidence go?”

Corpse after corpse fell to the ground, their blood seeping out to dye the earth red before multiple sets of boots churned it into black mud. His show of might would have stricken fear into any man of sane mind. This might have been war, but no one wanted to die. His enemies could not ignore him, but neither did they want to face him. Defeating an opponent of monstrous strength would require someone equally monstrous.

“Well, well. How long it has been.”

The voice reached Hiro’s ears from beyond the ring of soldiers. The men fell aside like a parting wave, and two figures stepped through.

“’Tis ‘Surtr’ you go by nowadays, I believe?” The first was Lucia Levia du Anguis, queen of Anguis.

“So, we meet again. How fortuitous.” The second was Nameless, chancellor of Greif.

“I’m here to repay you both a debt,” Hiro said.

Lucia looked around. “And yet the field looks much the same now as it did then.”

The Crow Legion had engaged Six Kingdoms’ troops, but they were still a long way behind. The battlefield did indeed very much resemble the one on which Hiro had feigned his death.

“Not exactly the same,” he said. “I’m not going to hold back this time.”

“Indeed. Unfortunate, then, that victory will be mine.”

Lucia gestured with her fan. Far to the rear, far past even the Crow Legion’s camp, there was noise where there should have been silence. A plume of dust was closing aggressively. Battle cries drifted on the wind, and the thunder of hooves carried on the air.

Hiro pushed his mask back into place, not so much as glancing back. “Not so fast. Look behind your own lines.”

“Hm?”

A similar cloud of dust was rising behind Anguis’s camp.

“You and the empire were both focusing on the same thing. Drawing out the battle until reinforcements arrived.” Hiro grinned—a smile of genuine enjoyment. “So I got up to a little mischief.”

As the Crow Legion had harried Anguis’s second cohort over the past three days, they had slowly split off and retreated from the battlefield, piece by piece. Those pieces had reconvened elsewhere and circled around behind Six Kingdoms’ lines.

“Now isn’t this more interesting?”

Lucia snorted. “So you plotted the same as we did.”

“That’s not all. Look to your flank.” Hiro gestured to the right. “The cavalry’s here.”

Lucia and Nameless turned to look. A profusion of imperial standards lined the horizon.

“Their banners are, but are there men beneath them?”

Lucia immediately recognized the child’s trick for what it was. She held Hiro in her gaze, eminently composed. Even under pressure, she was calm and rational, keeping her focus on her real foe. An enemy she might have been, but it was hard not to be impressed.

“Well reasoned.” Hiro clapped derisively, but the true value of his ploy was

yet to reveal itself. “And if all your soldiers were so astute, this would achieve nothing. But it doesn’t matter if you see through it. Your men will be at least a little shocked, don’t you think?”

Lucia might have seen what he was planning, but he had her pinned down here. She could shout orders, but only those in the immediate vicinity would hear her, and if she was misheard, she might spook her troops further. There was nothing so delicate as a skittish army.

“Yet more precocious tricks.” Lucia clicked her tongue in annoyance. She appeared to have understood what he meant. Nonetheless, her self-assured expression remained. “But allow me a question,” she said, fanning herself with a provocative smile. “I found the most suspicious girl among my handmaidens. Would I be correct in thinking she was an agent of yours?”

As the words left her mouth, bloodlust blossomed through the air—not from Hiro, but from the woman a short way behind him. For an instant, all was still, and an enormous impact turned the ground where Lucia had been standing into a crater.

Luka emerged from the haze, sweeping the dust cloud aside with her arm. “What have you done to Huginn?” she demanded, glaring with a demonic expression at where Lucia now stood.

Lucia smiled lasciviously as she brushed dirt from her clothing. “Imagine, if you will, a girl of royal blood becoming a noble plaything. A tale with which you’re quite familiar, I believe?”

“I’ll kill you!” Luka closed on Lucia with bestial swiftness, all rational thought far behind.

As Hiro watched their battle unfold, Nameless appeared before him. “I am to be your opponent, it seems. I trust you don’t object?” The álf’s bell staff struck the ground, filling the air with a clear chime.

Hiro raised Dáinsleif, his eyes on the staff. “Not at all. I’d be happy to face you.”

“How wonderful. That said...are you not worried, Lord Surtr?”

Hiro’s eyes narrowed. The álf sounded too relaxed for his liking, as though

they were simply having a pleasant conversation. “About what?”

“Why, about the troops who have appeared behind your line. That is where your Crow Legion has made camp, if I am not mistaken?”

“I’m not worried. They’re in good hands.”

Nameless’s mouth curled into a crescent smile. “Are you not interested to know which commander they face?”

“No.” That said, knowing Nameless, he was no doubt about to learn regardless.

“Your Crow Legion is under attack by the forces of Vulpes...under the command of one First Prince Stovell.”

Nameless’s taste for theatricality seemed to know no bounds. Supplying tidbit by tidbit, milking the moment for all it was worth before dropping an almighty bombshell at the last second... The álf truly was as self-satisfied as they came.

“I take it back. Perhaps I am a little interested after all.”

“I am delighted, I’m sure.”

“By way of thanks, I’ll play with you awhile.” Resting Dáinsleif on his shoulder, Hiro raised his hand and beckoned mockingly.

* * * * *

New enemy forces had appeared to the rear, and Scáthach had led the remaining Crow Legion out to meet them. The battle had already begun around her. She, however, remained rooted to the spot. The moment she caught sight of the enemy’s gray-haired commander, every thought had fled her mind.

Through trembling lips, she forced herself to speak. “At last!” she cried with fury in her eyes. “I have waited a long time for this day, Stovell!”

The prince waved off her zeal with an annoyed hand. “Still you bark about vengeance? I slew the emperor for you, did I not?”

“But you yet live!”

“Be warned, girl, I will show you no quarter. I made a poor account of myself last time, but I will not do so again.”

He raised his right hand and Mjöltnir materialized in his grip. Wind swirled around his left hand—Gandiva, Scáthach supposed.

“I would ask for nothing less! I will lay your head at my parents’ grave!”

Stovell snorted. “Your family’s graves are dust and ashes.”

Scáthach loosed a wordless cry. The ground beneath her buckled as her fury exploded. “Gáe Bolg! The hour has come to fulfill our heart’s desire!”

A glacial chill answered her call, freezing the air and sheathing the world in frost. White mist rose around her as if giving shape to her bloodlust. Ice encroached on the grasses and flowers growing on the plain.

“Make your peace, Stovell.”

“Come, then. Show me this strength you so vaunt, and I shall cleave it asunder.”

Spear clashed with axe. Cuts and gashes sprouted across both combatants’ skin, little worse than scrapes but painful even so. Stovell’s injuries healed in an instant, but Scáthach’s multiplied by the second. Blood sprayed from her wounds every time their Spiritblades clashed.

Seeing her grimace, Stovell frowned. “You are losing Gáe Bolg’s blessing, girl. If indeed you have not already lost it.”

Scáthach ground her teeth. She had hoped that would escape his notice.

“And that is not all, is it? Your leg is weak. The wound I dealt you has not healed.”

The last time she had fought Stovell, he had left her on death’s door.

“Enough,” she growled. “That is not your concern.”

Everything he had said was true. Her wounds had never fully healed, leaving her unable to fulfill the terms of her contract with Gáe Bolg, and now she was losing her Graal. Her Spiritblade only remained at her side out of devotion—a temporary concession until her vengeance was complete.

“What a sorry sight. Your Gáe Bolg is hardly better off than my Gandiva.”

“They are nothing alike! We share a bond!”

Stovell glared at her with contempt. “To take the spirits’ curse upon your bare flesh must cause you pain beyond imagining. Do you truly believe you can defeat me in that state?”

“I can and I will.” Scáthach broke into a sprint. “You will die this day, even if it costs me my life!”

Stovell looked on with utter confidence. A smile played on his lips. “And you think foolish bravado will be enough?”

He snorted in disdain. Scáthach’s strikes were sharp, but they lacked a decisive edge. Now that she had lost her Spiritblade’s blessing, she was no stronger than any other mortal human, albeit one with exceptional martial skill. For most opponents, that might have been enough, but it was barely enough to keep Stovell entertained.

“Howl all you want, girl, but you are weaker than the last time we fought.”

“Silence!”

Scáthach’s outrage cracked the earth. Her spear traced a circle as she spun it about, adding rotational momentum to make up for what she lacked in strength of arm. Every strike promised death, her prowess with her weapon turning every swing toward both offense and defense. Gáe Bolg’s tip sheared chunks of flesh from Stovell’s body even as its haft deflected his blows. Still, his injuries closed in a heartbeat, and hers only grew in number. Blood trickled down her armor. Her strength bled away by the second. Without Gáe Bolg’s blessing, even the slightest attack was enough to wound her. Nonetheless, she forged on, fighting for the memory of her fallen family.

“A futile effort. Your spear cannot touch me.”

Bolts of lightning and blades of wind fell on her with fury. Wounds opened up all across her body, leaving her covered in blood, but no matter how beaten or battered she grew, she refused to fall.

“I am not yet done,” she growled, panting. “I have nothing else left.”

She had lost her nation. She had lost her family. Soon, the Spiritblade that had been her constant companion would also leave her side. In the end, she would be left with nothing—but that was all the more reason that she could not die

while her nemesis still lived.

“Death holds no fear for me. Better the grave than a life regretting that I failed to bring you to justice!” Marshaling all her might, drawing every last drop of power from Gáe Bolg, she charged toward her foe. “Father! Mother! My brothers and sisters! Lend me your strength!”

* * * * *

“Quite the fight they’re having,” Nameless said, gazing at the embattled Crow Legion.

“Maybe you should pay more attention to ours.”

Hiro closed the distance in a flash. A single stroke cut the álf in half. Yet the results were disappointing: no blood burst out, and no viscera spilled forth. The body vanished before it hit the ground, and not a heartbeat later, Nameless was standing before him again, unharmed.

“Another miss,” Hiro murmured, turning to sweep his eyes over his surroundings. He counted ten Namelesses.

Needless to say, he was not seeing things. He recognized the curious sight as the product of his opponent’s bell staff. It had the ability to create near-perfect illusions—a power that seemed positively designed to confound and frustrate.

“That’s a nice trick,” he said.

“Isn’t it just? I do so enjoy toying with my enemies before I finish them off.”

“You say that like you think I’m at your mercy.” Hiro cut down another cloaked figure, but again, it was only an illusion.

Nameless appeared alongside him, leaning on his shoulder. “Oh, I don’t flatter myself quite that much.”

The álf produced a kitchen knife—like a housewife might have used to prepare dinner—and drove it into his side, but the blade ground to a halt, stopped by the Black Camellia.

“See? Your life is well guarded.” Nameless looked from the knife’s broken tip to the Black Camellia. “A *regalía*, perchance? Dare I say, a relic of the Lord of Eld?”

“You’ve heard of it?”

“I’ve heard stories, nothing more.”

Hiro cut down perhaps a dozen more cloaked figures as they traded words, but to no effect. If anything, there were more Namelesses on the battlefield now than before. He lowered his sword and let slip a yawn before leveling his gaze on the enemy.

“Then perhaps I’ll show you what I can really do.”

His right eye radiated august splendor beyond mortal ken. His left eye pierced his foe with cold fury, glints of golden light swirling like a storm in the depths of the abyss. An uncanny smile spread beneath his mask as he raised a hand to the sky.

“What do you know of despair?”

The heavens swirled at his words. The earth shuddered and groaned as if crying out in pain. A vast torrent of power burst forth, striking dumb friend and foe alike.

“Weep for spirits broken. Shed tears for hope lost. Wear with pride futures undone.”

Darkness rolled across the earth. Countless cracks spread through the air, as if space itself had been ravaged by a sudden wind. Despair spread across the field as the abyss voiced its birthing cry.

“Dáinsleif, their misery is yours to devour.”

All sound vanished from the world, as though the very concept of it had never existed at all. Silence fell like rain upon the battlefield. All was consumed by awe.

“I am Surtr, the Black-Winged Lord.”

His presence swelled, and an inexplicable weight settled over the world around him. There was no escaping the tyranny of the silence he brought. As all who watched began to quake in fear, he raised Dáinsleif and held it flat, staring down his foe.

“He who beckons all lives equally to nothingness.”

He unleashed Muspell—Mortal Terror. Time stood still but for a thumping heartbeat that resounded across the field. All who lived surrendered their place in time's flow. None were exempt—all froze where they stood, beckoned equally to the void beyond mortality.

“Now, dance for me upon death's stage.”

Hiro pressed a hand to his mask as he spoke, like a god of death pronouncing judgment upon the condemned.

Thence came Schwartzwald—Deathly Stillness.

A pitch-black maw descended from above, falling shut upon the world like a deluge of curses. The darkness spread across the ground like a living thing. There was no escape, no possibility of resistance. The blackness swallowed up Nameless's illusions, snarling their feet and pulling them in. Soon, the field was bare but for the battle going on all around. Nameless was nowhere to be seen.

“Did you manage to get away? No... I'm guessing you were never really here at all.”

He turned around to see a woman tumbling across the ground—Luka, whom he had left to face Lucia. She bounced across the earth as if caught in a storm surge. As he watched, she sprang back to her feet, blood dripping from her mouth.

“Curse you... Curse you!”

With one arm missing and her mind in tatters, she was hard-pressed against Lucia, even with one of the Dharmic Blades in her possession. Indeed, her adversary did not appear to have been injured at all.

“Is that all you have?” Lucia flicked open her fan with a haughty smile.

“Far from it,” Luka spat. “Now, tell me where you are keeping Huginn.”

Lucia regarded her adversary with pity, shaking her head with mock sadness. “I fear I could not say. Even I am not inhuman. A fellow woman, even. I could hardly bear to see the state she was in. Who knows to whom she has been sold or to what fiends she has fallen prey?”

“I'll kill you!” Luka screamed, but as she exploded with anger, Hiro moved to

stand in her way. “Move!” she barked.

Hiro put a finger to his lips, his face coldly composed. “Enough, Luka.”

She flinched back with fear in her eyes, so intimidating was his expression. Lucia, who could only see the back of his head from where she was standing, cocked her head in puzzlement.

Hiro laid a hand on Luka’s shoulder. “I’ll handle this. Is that clear?”

Luka nodded silently, and he turned back around to Lucia, a broad grin spreading across his face.

“I’ll thank you not to speak like that about one of my lieutenants.”

“Or what will you do, pray tell?”

“I think you’ve spoken enough.”

His white mantle danced on the wind as he twisted his torso around, swinging his black blade with all his might.

“Ngh!” Lucia grunted as she took the blow, but she managed to intercept it with her fan. Nonetheless...

“Yah!”

The blade licked out again with razor precision, sweeping in for what would have been a mortal blow. Lucia just about managed to dodge out of the way with millimeters to spare, but it still nicked her skin, staining her with blood. Before she could retaliate, another furious slash was bearing down on her.

“Hah!”

“Ngh!”

The erratic tempo of Hiro’s strikes delayed her reaction by a crucial instant. She deflected the slash by a hair’s breadth, although it still laid her cheek open, but her momentary hesitation had opened a gap between them that she could no longer close. She was all too aware of the discrepancy, but powerless to do anything about it. A moment’s distraction and her head would roll. Nonetheless, even as countless wounds opened across her body, she spread her iron fan wide.

“Shield me, Mandala.”

Nothing seemed to happen. Hiro brought Dáinsleif down uninterrupted. Smiling, Lucia spread her arms wide to meet the blow, but strangely, the black blade appeared to do her no harm.

“Oh?” Hiro raised a surprised eyebrow.

Lucia grinned. “That you did not expect, I’ll wager.”

Hiro grunted as a savage kick caught him in the cheek. Even as it landed, however, he grasped Lucia’s lapel and flung her to the ground, neutralizing its momentum—a commendably quick riposte. Nonetheless, Lucia seemed unscathed. She got to her feet and leaped back, putting some distance between her and Hiro.

“Impressive, truly. Still, you shall not harm me.” Lucia’s surprise was as good as any praise. She pushed her sweat-slicked hair from her eyes with an irritable flourish.

“That fan is one of the Dharmic Blades, I’m guessing?” Hiro looked down at his hands, cocking his head in puzzlement. He had felt Dáinsleif strike home, but not only had Lucia been unharmed, she had immediately retaliated.

She chuckled. “Indeed. Mandala, ’tis named. One of the Faerie King’s five gifts.”

“Is that so? It’s certainly annoying, whatever its Graal is.”

Hiro vanished in a blur of speed. Lucia simply raised her guard, but she otherwise ceded no ground.

“Let’s see if I can’t find a way around it.”

No more were Hiro’s attacks the languid swings of earlier. Now he unleashed an assault at blinding speed. A blistering array of slashes bore down on Lucia.

She snorted. “Try if you must.”

She met each and every attack head-on. Hiro wielded Dáinsleif with the full intention of taking her head. Its passing laid open her arteries. Its tip pierced her heart, scoring deep wounds into her short frame. There was no contest to be found here, only one-sided slaughter—or at least, so it would have been had

any of its blows struck home.

Hiro slowed to a stop, feeling as if he were cutting air. The battle had an echo of his previous duel with Nameless. Lucia did not seem to be employing the same illusory sorceries as the álf, but the end result was similar.

“Come, come! This is no time for thinking.”

The end of the closed fan struck him square in the breastbone. Agony exploded inside his rib cage as a tremendous impact blasted through him. An involuntary grunt left his lips. It had been so long since he had last felt pain, the sensation was almost novel. He sank to his knees, gazing up at Lucia.

She looked down on him in turn, a sultry smile playing on her lips. “Well? Did that wake you up?”

“It did. In more ways than one.” The words were barely out of his mouth when Dáinsleif flashed.

“Ngh!”

Lucia got away with only a slash across the cheek, but Hiro turned his blade about and swung a second time. She ducked the swipe, but several strands of hair danced high.

“Now I see. So that’s how it works.”

“You dare—”

As Lucia moved to flick her fan open, Hiro kicked her hand up. She managed to hold on to the weapon, but the move still stunned her, and he stepped into the opening to drive the heel of his palm into her stomach. Her face twisted in pain, but that did not stop him from launching an equally merciless follow-up.

“Your fan only protects you while it’s open, doesn’t it?”

“How did you—?!” Lucia glared back at him, gritting her teeth as her fan grated against Dáinsleif. She thrust the blade away and swung her fan at his cheek, but her weapon had none of its earlier force.

“Offense and defense. Or perhaps repulsion and defense, I should say.”

Lucia’s behavior had always been peculiar—in particular, she had a habit of

opening and closing her fan incessantly, no matter the situation. The gesture could almost have been a nervous tic, were it not impossible to imagine her being that nervous...in which case, it was far more likely connected to the powers of her Dharmic Blade.

“To divine its capabilities so quickly... I am impressed, truly.”

“I’ve survived battlefields you couldn’t imagine.” Hiro’s attacks fluctuated wildly in both strength and speed, leaving Lucia constantly on the back foot.

“No doubt, but I shall not roll over and die.” She moved to open her fan again.

“Let’s end this charade.”

Hiro grasped her by the collar and swung her to the ground. She tried to rise, but Dáinsleif plunged into the ground next to her head, skimming her cheek. Although decisively pinned, she still tried to struggle, but Hiro’s uncommon strength would not budge an inch.

“A part of me wonders why you’d give your powers away so easily...but first things first. Seeing as you’re not planning to take this fight seriously anyway, perhaps you’d care to explain this.”

Hiro produced a letter from his pocket—one that had arrived on the road while the imperial forces had been waylaid.

“May I take this as a sign of your interest?” Lucia asked.

“That depends on what you’re offering. But before that...”

A shadow fell over them. Hiro looked up. Luka was staring down at them with blood-crazed eyes, Vajra in hand.

“What is taking you so long?” she asked. “Why is she not dead?”

“Hold.” There was a note of surprise in Lucia’s voice. “Did you tell Luka nothing?”

Hiro shook his head. “She tends to let her heart rule her head. And I couldn’t risk her revealing anything to prying eyes.”

“Wise enough, I concede. Still, a fine mess—”

“Why are you bandying words with the likes of her?” Luka hefted Vajra. “If

you will not end her, I will gladly crush her skull.”

Hiro raised a hand to hold her off. “She’s in no shape to fight anymore. I just want to talk.”

He moved back from Lucia and stood up, looking around. The battle was still going on. The imperial forces had been pushed out of view, and only Six Kingdoms troops surrounded them now. Yet curiously, the soldiers did not seem to register their presence. He could only assume that Lucia’s Mandala was the cause.

“I’ll hear you out. As long as you aren’t going to waste my time.”

Lucia got to her feet, brushing the dirt from her clothing. “’Twill be worth your while, I promise you. But first, a show of good faith.” She snapped her fingers and a rent opened in space, disgorging a woman bound with ropes.

“Huginn!”

Luka was the first to realize who it was. She hurried to Huginn’s side and lifted her upper body off the ground, checking if she was breathing.

“She’s alive! She’s alive!” She turned back to Hiro, her face filled with joy.

Hiro left her to cradle the unconscious Huginn and turned his attention back to Lucia.

The woman shrugged, idly fanning herself. “I was a mite rough in restraining her, perhaps, but I believe she should be unharmed.”

“You knew this would happen, I take it?”

“I am no fool, no matter what you may think. There were several doors before me, and she seemed the way to keep this one propped open.”

If Lucia was telling the truth, she must have orchestrated events meticulously to bring this conversation about. Hiro had expected Huginn would be more valuable alive than dead even if her identity was exposed, but to save her for this juncture... Audacious hardly began to describe it. Still, that audacity had bought her a chance for negotiation, so it was hard to call it foolish. She was bolder than Hiro had given her credit for, it seemed.

“All right, then. Let’s hear what you have to say.”

Lowering his weapon, Hiro looked away from Lucia to the Crow Legion's encampment.

* * * * *

"It's a marvel that you have not given up," Stovell said, his voice filled with disdain.

Before him stood Scáthach, bruised and bloodied but still standing. Her left arm dangled uselessly from her shoulder. Her hair had come loose and hung in disarray around her shoulders, its silken turquoise matted with blood and dirt. Yet her eyes were very much alive, burning with the flame of vengeance.

"I cannot die. Not until I take your head." She closed on Stovell, dragging her right leg behind her.

Stovell snorted, scowling. "You have not grown a day since two years ago. Have you not learned that your efforts are useless?" He stifled a yawn, as if to say she was not even worth his time.

"I won't know that..." Scáthach tensed, then leaped. "Until I try!"

Stovell's gaze followed her as she soared high.

"Into this strike, I put my all. Take it if you can!"

She raised Gáe Bolg with the haft behind her back. Power swelled around her, reverberating through the air—and she unleashed Sainglend, the Graal of the Boreal Sovereign.

Gáe Bolg vanished from her grip. In the same instant, the water vapor in the air around her condensed into spears of ice.

Stovell's face filled with delight. "Wonderful! Come, entertain me again!"

Using her Spiritblade's Graal without its blessing demanded a heavy price. By all rights, she ought to have passed out from the agony. Only her thirst for revenge kept her conscious.

The host of spears rained from the sky. Crackling levin and razor winds rose to strike them down. The impacts of their clash tore the earth asunder, sending dust and dirt flying up into the sky. Thunderous booms shook the air.

At last, Scáthach alighted on the ground again. There was a hint of desperation in her eyes as she stared into the dust.

“Curse you...”

A gust of wind swept the haze away, and she bit her lip in chagrin at the dreadful sight it revealed.

“You fought well, girl,” Stovell growled. “But in the end, you failed to amuse.”

His foot tensed against the earth, and then he vanished. Scáthach watched wordlessly through a half-conscious haze as his bulk reappeared before her.

“You have committed the sin of wasting my time, and for that you will not die easily.”

A mighty fist drove into her stomach. With no means of defending herself, she was easily sent flying. She bounced limply across the ground, too exhausted even to slow her momentum, until he dove ahead of her and kicked her with full force. A bone-shaking crunch reverberated through her body. Blood sprayed from her mouth as she sailed skyward. She was powerless to resist, being toyed with like a cat with a mouse. It was hard to tell if she was even alive or dead.

Stovell’s assault continued without pause. A noise like cracking rock issued from her jaw as his fist struck her in the face. Her mouth fell open and several bloodstained teeth flew out, bouncing away across the ground. Another blow bent her body nigh in half, and she heard a crunch from her side. Each new snap of bone sounded like a scream. Still, she did not weep, she did not cry out, and she did not fight back. Eventually, even Stovell could find no more enjoyment in the fight.

“Did that finish you off?”

She made for a pitiful sight by the end. Stovell cast her to the ground, where she lay unmoving in a slowly spreading pool of blood. He kicked her, but she only lolled over onto her back without so much as a grunt.

He grasped a fistful of blood-matted hair and lifted her upright. Her limbs hung limp, and her face was bruised and lifeless. She dangled there like a marionette with cut strings. Nonetheless, by some miracle, she was still alive. Her lips moved almost imperceptibly. Intrigued, Stovell moved his head closer.

“Last...I...”

“What was that, girl?”

Still unable to make out what she said, he moved closer still. As he did, her right hand closed fast around his arm.

“Impressive strength for a walking corpse.” Stovell grinned as he saw the sword in her other hand. “But you will not pierce me with a needle such as that.”

Only then did he register the smile on her face. As a frown creased his brow, her sword moved—but it did not strike for him.

She turned it on herself.

Locks of silken turquoise swirled up on the wind. She had shorn off her own hair. Stovell did not know what to make of what she had done, and his thoughts froze for a crucial second.

“I said...at last, I have you.”

Scáthach slumped over him, laying a hand against his chest, and smiled triumphantly. She had used up every last drop of power. Her strength was all but spent. Her broken bones screamed in agony. Yet she still had one more thing to give: her life.

“There is nothing...in this world...you cannot sunder...”

To this one last strike, she would offer up her soul. Her steadfast companion would see the rest through. Freezing temperatures coalesced rapidly in the palm of her hand. This moment was all or nothing, and the price of the bet was her life.

“Farewell...Gáe Bolg...my dear friend.”

Thence came Macha—Godpiercer. A spear of ice as swift as striking lightning drove into Stovell’s chest at point-blank range.

“Wha—” By the time Stovell’s surprise had registered on his face, he was already skewered through.

“Never...let your guard down...on the battlefield,” she whispered.

Stovell had indeed done exactly that. He had believed he could play with Scáthach like a predator toying with its prey, but her helplessness had not been born of resignation. All the while, she had kept her eyes on him, waiting for an opening—watching like a hawk for the moment to seize victory.

“At last...it’s over...”

A serene smile spread across her face as she watched Stovell writhe in pain. She sank to the ground and fell motionless into a pool of blood. The winds of battle caressed her as she fell into a deep, deep sleep.



“Gaaaaaah!”

Stovell clutched wildly at his chest. Strength bled from his wound even as it froze over.

“No! No! I will not fall here! Not to a worm such as you!”

He advanced on Scáthach’s body, face twisted in fury, Mjöltnir lifted high to crush her to dust. But as the Spiritblade descended...

“It’s over, Stovell.”

A crimson-haired woman caught it, her scarlet blade shuddering beneath its weight.

“Liz... Why...? How...?”

Stovell’s eyes widened in shock. Behind her, uncaring of his surprise, thousands of cavalry were butchering the Vulpes troops. He did not recognize the newcomers, but they were clearly not imperials.

“Who...?”

Dressed in the light garb of bandits, they steered their steeds expertly as they loosed arrows from horseback, raising joyful battle cries all the while. The Vulpes soldiers quickly fell to their assault. Most striking of all was a wild-haired woman who laughed as she cut down her foes, visibly reveling in the sport of war. The corners of her mouth pulled back in singularly savage glee.

“Leave this one to us, princess!” she cried, slaughtering Six Kingdoms’ troops with overwhelming strength and fearsome might. She fought like a tiger, launching brutal kicks and scoring faces with her claws before leaping on the next foe. “The glory’s ours today!”

None could stand in her way. Bodies piled high in her wake. Soldiers quailed to face her, and it was hard to blame them. Who would willingly fight a warrior who laughed as she tore through human beings like parchment?

“Steissen,” Stovell growled.

“That’s right,” Liz said. “We had an arrangement.”

“Did you indeed...?” Stovell tottered on his feet as the ice spread over his

skin. His flesh was still trying to regenerate, but it was clear to anyone's eyes that its healing was not as potent as it had once been.

"Scáthach won. She beat you. You underestimated her strength, and it cost you." Liz smiled as she readied Lævateinn. "Tell me... What do you know of fate?"

With those words, a sun was made manifest upon the earth. A wind blew, calm and gentle. A torrent of power poured forth, soaring high into the sky, racing out across the ground.

"Weep for love discovered. Shed tears for hope found. Take pride in joy fulfilled."

Flowers spread across the ground. A sweet scent filled the air. Spring had come. There was no conflict, no strife, only the serenity of nature in fresh bloom. Light flooded all, and from the whiteness, a new world took shape.

"Let's end this, Stovell." Liz's voice was solemn.

Her power weighed heavier and heavier in the air. Authority danced in her lyrical tones, a song of impeccable virtue matched only by the divine majesty in her face.

"Bloom in splendor, Lævateinn."

The Flame Sovereign vanished from her hands, and the world was crimson and azure. Flames consumed the flowers. Tyrannical heat spread outward, leaving no trace of tranquility or gentleness.

Ragnarök—Thousand Blossoms.

The world transformed, but for the one woman permitted to rule it. All who lived surrendered their hearts to the newborn sun. Friends, foes, beasts, insects, flora—all looked on in awe.

"I'll put you out of your misery."

Stovell had been watching in stunned silence, but as the flame coiled protectively around her, he broke into a charge. "Curse you, sister!"

His howl vanished into the air of the otherworld. He could not fight the flames. His regeneration could not keep pace. His flesh fell apart, and his body,

granted immortality by imbibing the power of the gods, began to putrefy.

“You dare... You dare!”

“Enough.”

Liz struck the ground with her fist, and just like that, Stovell was surrounded by flames. The blaze coiled like a snake, reforming into a majestic lion that pounced on Stovell with great jaws yawning. It bit deep and shook its head furiously.

The prince gritted his teeth against the pain, beating his fists against the fangs sinking into his flesh, but it was no use. He glared at Liz with tears of blood streaming from his eyes. “This is not the end! I will have my vengeance—”

It happened in an instant. A dark blotch dropped from the sky, consuming both the lion and Stovell. Both dissipated into nothingness, leaving not even ashes behind. The last memory of their presence blew away on the wind. All that remained was Stovell’s two Spiritblades and the fallen figure of Scáthach.

As Liz stepped closer, one last oddity occurred. Mjölnir and Gandiva vanished, as did Gáe Bolg.

She turned to gaze into the distance. There was no surprise in her face, only resignation. “We will meet again,” she murmured, and then she moved to tend to her fallen friend.

Epilogue

Smoke rose from the plain, a black smear across the sky that rendered its waters too polluted for clouds to swim. The wind carried a foul stench far afield like a horrid messenger.

Beneath the smoke lay countless corpses. Many emotions—resentment, despair, sorrow—were painted on their faces, but chief among them was fear. The number who had died with tears on their cheeks, reaching in vain for their homes, defied imagination. Crows wheeled in the sky above, come in search of carrion. They descended to peck at the bodies before moving on in search of the next morsel.

“It’s over,” Hiro said.

A large cloud of dust moved slowly away from the field. Steissen’s intervention had put the battle back on imperial footing. Word was that Six Kingdoms’ commander had been wounded and forced to retreat.

“Now we just have to trust that she can do her part...although I’m sure she’ll have no problem with that.”

He turned. Nearby, Luka was looking around guardedly, Huginn cradled in her arms. The black-clad troops of the Crow Legion also stood nearby. At last, he looked down at his feet, where three Spiritblades protruded from the earth. He felt a fiery zeal from each of them. All three burned with a fierce will.

“I’ve kept my word, Scáthach.”

With a wave of his hand, the Spiritblades vanished, gone from the world without a trace. He rose to his feet and turned to the imperial troops.

“All will be one, Liz.”

He turned his back and strode away. Where his path led, there was no telling, but it had been a long one indeed. A fall breeze caressed his cheek, setting his mantle beating at the air.

“Now only Lævateinn remains.”

Afterword

Thank you for picking up this copy of volume 9 of *The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles*. To all my returning readers, Happy New Year! 'Tis the season, as they say (for getting money from your relatives). That said, I'm writing this in 2017, but this book won't be in your hands until 2018, so the new year hasn't actually come for me yet. It feels weird sending season's greetings ahead of time. Why do I feel like I've suddenly aged a year, I wonder...

That aside, the new year is exciting, don't you think? You just can't stop coming up with new goals. Maybe you could do something you didn't get to do last year, or try something new... It's fun to wonder how many of them you'll actually manage to complete before the year's up. Maybe you'll spend the year rushed off your feet, or maybe you'll spend it with your feet up. I like to take my time and enjoy life as it comes, but the funny thing about life is that you never know what's in store... Did that sound profound? What I'm trying to say is, here's to another year!

Now, to the usual—have you all looked at the front cover yet? I doubt I even need to say it, but Scáthach looks gorgeous. Is there anything as beautiful as the profile of a woman with eyes full of resolve? Her chest might be encased in armor, but if you use your imagination—if you squint hard, breathe heavily, and read real closely—maybe, just maybe, you'll be able to see through it.

I have a lot—a *lot*—that I want to say about Hiro too, but I'm running down my word count here, so I'd better get to the thank-yous.

To Miyuki Ruria-sama, your wonderful illustrations are the coal that fuels my chuuni soul. They're what awakens me to new powers.

To my editor, I-sama, thank you for putting up with me. I know I only get worse each year, and I'm sure you're tired of me, but I hope you'll continue to lend me your expertise.

To everyone in the editing department, the proofreaders, the designers, and everybody else who helped make this book a reality, thank you very much.

And last but not least, it's thanks to you, my readers, that we've made it as far as volume 9. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

I'm going to keep the chuuni rays on full blast over here, so I hope you'll keep supporting me.

Until we meet again, I'll be waiting.

奉 (Tatematsuri)

Bonus Short Stories

The Warmaiden's Rival

Blood-mist hung thick enough to blind. Stagnant air pricked at Aura's nostrils, overwhelming her sense of smell. Where there had once been roars, there were now screams, a hopeless chorus rising to the sky in an unending lament. Yet for all the horror around her, she felt no fear. Despair had no hold on her. She walked straight ahead, forging on undeterred.

"Send two hundred reserves to reinforce the right flank," she said to the aide at her side. "Don't let a single soldier escape."

She drew the spirit weapon at her belt. The blade gleamed in the sunlight, ripples of light traversing its length as if to extol its sharpness.

"Now they're surrounded."

She nodded to herself, satisfied that the battle had taken the course she had planned. Her aides, arrayed around her in an honor guard, looked at her with pride. She almost scolded them for letting their smooth progress go to their heads, but thought better of it. They would doubtless take her warning to heart, but it would make them self-conscious, and that would be counterproductive. They had to reach these realizations for themselves if they were to grow. If possible, she would have liked them to experience defeat rather than glory, but it would be better to avoid letting them embarrass themselves against bandits. She looked around for a way to get them to shape up.

They were in Senan province in the east of Faerzen, a region that had become prey for marauding brigands, proliferating monsters, and deserters banding together to loot and burn. The empire's scouts had noted the problems in the area, but its forces were too preoccupied with the war against Six Kingdoms to attend to every stray group of ne'er-do-wells.

"The empire caused this," Aura murmured. "The least we can do is cull the ones we can."

Exterminating the bandits would not absolve them of their crimes. It was unlikely to earn them a single drop of forgiveness from the people of Faerzen. If anything, the people might resent the aid of the nation that had slaughtered their rulers and taken their families. Still, nothing would improve unless somebody made an effort. The only way forward was to demonstrate that her conviction was genuine and hope that, in time, her sincerity would soften hardened hearts. No doubt there were many hardships yet to come, but this was the empire's doing and its responsibility.

As she reminded herself why she was there, an aide approached. "My lady, I believe we ought to refrain from further bloodshed."

Aura stopped and looked back at the man, frowning. "Why?"

"We must limit our losses. The bandits know they face execution, so they will fight to the last breath. We cannot afford for imperial blood to be spilled needlessly on foreign soil—"

Steel flashed, and all of a sudden, Aura's spirit weapon lay at his throat. Whatever other nonsense he had been about to spew died on his lips.

She narrowed her eyes. "And is that what you want me to tell the people of Faerzen? 'We'd rather let your blood flow before we'd spill our own, but we promise we're here to help you, so please listen to everything we say?'"

She spoke more quickly than usual, and there was anger in her voice. The aide blanched as he realized how severely he had misspoken. She opened her mouth to continue, but at that moment, a roar arose from behind them. She spun back to the battlefield. A great hole had been torn in the circle and the bandits were pouring through, striking back against the imperial forces.

"Why...?"

Her encirclement had been perfect. Trained imperial soldiers should have easily been able to dispose of common bandits once they had them surrounded. Why, then, was this happening? She frowned, thinking, and as she did, an oddity struck her.

"Where are those reserves?"

The aide's face was pale. "I have not yet sent the order." He clearly realized

he had made an irreversible mistake. He looked on the brink of passing out.

Aura spared him only a glance before exhaling an irritable sigh. “I’ll deal with you later. First, I need to fix this mess—”

She trailed off before she could issue any commands. Before her eyes, a black dragon banner danced on the wind. A dark blotch trailed a cloud of dust across the battlefield, dispatching the bandits with peerless horsemanship. The hole closed and the circle snapped shut. They had cut off their enemy with astonishing discipline, enthralling coordination and, above all, overwhelming force. That they matched the movements of the imperial troops despite never having trained together only made it all the more impressive.

“Incredible,” Aura murmured.

She and her soldiers had unquestionably been saved from disaster, but rather than relief, she felt jealousy. The ingenuity to turn a crisis into an opportunity, the precision to seize the perfect moment and, most of all, the skill to shape the battlefield to his will... All were things Aura coveted herself.

“I still have a long way to go.”

The closer she drew, the higher the wall between them seemed to loom.

“But any wall can be climbed.”

Once, her ambitions had been a fistful of mist, but now they stood before her, so close she could reach out and grasp them. All the more reason she and Liz had sworn not to give in. The time for watching in wonder was past. Now they aspired to outdo him.

“Don’t count me out yet.” Aura raised her spirit weapon high and leveled it at the remaining bandits. “All units, finish them.”

The Sun and the Moon

Give a man three days, it was said, and he would mature beyond recognition. One man certainly lived up to the proverb. He faced an army of enemies and did not run, fighting on even when he was alone on the battlefield. The abyss swirled in his obsidian eyes, his midnight hair fluttered like strands of silk, and

his dark garb billowed in the gale. The black blade in his hand radiated a terrible might.

He suffered none before him to live, and he suffered none behind him to die. His allies slowly realized that they were safe. He stood shorter than a normal man, with hints of youth in his bearing, but his presence brought a sense of safety that exceeded his stature.

“He’s gotten strong, hasn’t he?” Meteia whispered.

The archpriestess—Rey—nodded quietly. *Strong*, her handmaiden said. Perhaps it was not as simple as that. When Hiro had first been summoned to this world, all he had wanted was to go back home, but after some time under their supervision, he had discovered a desire to aid their cause. Delighted that he wanted to help, she had shared her knowledge. Perhaps she had found her own kind of refuge in his kindness.

Now he was Mars, the most famous general in the land, and the people loved him as much as they did Artheus. Not all adored him, of course. More than a few parties feared that he coveted the throne for himself. Still, he paid their suspicions no mind, and Rey lent no ear to them either. Indeed, if he ever did seek the throne, she would see that he got it. Her brother would not object—after what this boy had sacrificed, he had earned anything he might ask of them. But she knew that was not what he wanted.

“He is my brother,” a voice resounded. “I would expect nothing less.”

A man like a lion stepped into view, blond of hair and gold of eye. He stood as slender as a woman, and his handsome face was softer-lined than was typical of the von Grantz bloodline, but there was no question that he embodied the lion’s spirit. He was a veteran of the battlefield, and he carried himself with the authority to prove it. Dazzling and fiery as the sun, he had a natural magnetism that drew others to him, and it shone fiercely even in this obscure corner of the field. His gravitas compelled those around him to fall silent and bow their heads.

“Held yet matures, sister. I daresay he now stands shoulder to shoulder with me.”

Rey understood what her brother was implying: that Hiro’s growth was

unnatural. Unease filled her chest. It was hard to imagine this was part of the Spirit King's plan—nobody would ever have imagined he would become this powerful. It was them who had transformed him so.

“One might speculate,” Artheus said, “that even on his Earth, he was born to be a king.”

Perhaps that was why had been chosen at all. Perhaps that was why he now found himself the plaything of a strange fate.

It was dangerous to allow him to linger in this world any longer. Nothing good would come of it—not for him, nor for them, nor for Aletia. Yet, selfishly, Rey was scared to let him go. The thought of saying farewell filled her with dread. She recognized the feeling for what it was—an emotion she'd never imagined she would develop, but that was too powerful to resist now that it had taken root. She knew her wishes were selfish. She regretted the days she had spent indulging his compassion, knowing she was turning him from his rightful path. Even so, the emotions in her breast would not be restrained. Her desires would not be denied. Now that she had tasted the nectar of the forbidden fruit, she could not help but reach out and take it. Its flesh would burn like hellfire, but there was no longer any going back.

“Do not worry, sister,” Artheus said. “I shall find a way. I swear it.”

Her younger brother smiled as bright as the sun, and she nodded in reply. The rest of the world might call him unscrupulous, contemptible, even wicked, but he was the only family she had left and he had always cared for her.

“Artheus! Rey! Meteia!” A voice arose from the battlefield.

Rey turned to the noise. Hiro was running toward them, innocent as a puppy, waving with a guileless smile on his face. He looked no different from the day they had first met. To see how calculating he was on the battlefield, nobody would ever imagine that he could look so gentle.

As Rey clutched her hand to her chest, she realized she was feeling a little jealous. A resentful voice in the depths of her heart grumbled that he had called Artheus's name first. She smiled sheepishly, but even her own pettiness was soulful in a sense. She had never imagined she would be capable of these kinds of emotions.

You are the moon to me, Lord Hiro. A healing light that salves all wounds.

Artheus was her sun, and the War God was her moon. Both were as essential as the other, but—with apologies to her brother—she held Hiro dearer. She would never say it aloud, but the moon was her light.

“Rey! How are you feeling? You’re not cold, are you? Do you want my jacket?”

He moved to shrug off his overcoat, but she stopped him with a hand, smiling ruefully. She could not possibly borrow his *regalía*. Aside from anything else, she would risk earning its ire. After all, they were rivals in a sense.

“No, thank you. I would rather not be strangled to death today.”

They certainly made for an odd group, but there was something golden in the time they spent together. She prayed silently to the Spirit King that the joy she felt might last a little longer.

Spring Meets the Gale Sovereign

He learned his motherland was rotten on the day he slew his brother.

He learned the throne was rotten on the day he slew his father.

He learned the world was rotten on the day he laid the neighboring lands to waste.

There was no redemption lying in wait for him. No love. No hope. He could discern no reason to live.

In lieu of anything else, he abused his power. He ravaged other nations as his ambitions bid, satisfying his base avarice with rampant plunder. By the time the enjoyment faded, his actions had sown discontent across the land, but he felt no fear—perhaps the fall of his empire would provide a new diversion. Yet fate was cruel and did not see fit to teach him the novelty of defeat. Soon, ten years had passed since he took the throne of the Grantzian Empire, and his thirst remained unsatisfied.

He had obtained the blessing of a Spiritblade, assumed the throne, taken a wife, sired children, and devoted his every waking moment to the development

of the empire. More than a few nations had burned as he indulged his ambitions. Yet his heart knew no contentment. He dreamed of one day becoming the thirteenth Divine, but he could not tell if even that was his true desire. It felt as if he was trapped in impenetrable darkness, uncertain what he wanted or where he was going.

“For what purpose was I born?” Emperor Greiheit whispered to the wind sheathing his right arm. “For what reason do I live?”

A soft breeze brushed his cheek as if in hesitation, but that was all.

At that moment, he heard voices from outside. Somebody pounded on the carriage door. He opened the window to find the deputy captain of the imperial guard looking in.

“We are close to Linkus, Your Majesty.”

“Have we, indeed. I pray their taverns at least have good drink.”

The southern territories had once been a cluster of smaller nations. They had been absorbed by the empire several generations past, but the grudges of that time still remained—the people’s hearts were ever complex and mysterious. Now, the tremors of constant warfare had reopened old wounds, and the people of the south had grown critical of the throne.

“I do not see the need for this charade. If they will not bend the knee, we shall simply make them. I ought to be razing Faerzen and on my way to conquer Six Kingdoms.”

Unlike the álfar, humans lived short lives. That was a law that even a Spiritblade’s blessing could not bend. He had much to do, which meant he had to make prudent use of the time he was allotted—rather than, say, wasting his time on some meaningless tour of the south.

“I fear we have little choice, Your Majesty. We must do something to quell this internal strife.”

The deputy captain opened the door and bowed his head, the better to placate his emperor. Greiheit stepped out and looked around. As he got his bearings, he saw a gathering of Linkus commonfolk watching from afar, clad in mud-stained clothing.

“Half of them wear little better than rags,” he remarked. “Is this the place that was once called a verdant paradise? I was a fool to hope for fine drink.”

He heaved a sigh as he looked at the tavern at the side of the road. His imperial guard seemed to have entered ahead of him; patrons were already hurrying out.

The deputy captain shrugged, smiling wryly. “Those tales are from the old days, when the south was one. Perhaps Your Majesty might have found more to entertain him in Sunsphear?”

“I would rather drink ditchwater than spend another dinner listening to more drivel from more accursed officials.”

Greiheit passed through the tavern door, sat down, and rested his legs on the table. His guards brought him a goblet of wine. He downed it in one gulp, then looked over his men—a wordless sign of permission. Soon they were making merry with drinks in hands. Greiheit snorted as he watched the deputy captain pour another cup.

At that moment, the door burst open with a tremendous bang. The sunlight was too strong for him to see who had entered, but judging by his guards’ protests, it was nobody he knew. Oddly, however, they hesitated, as if afraid to confront the intruder. If anything, they backed away.

By the time Greiheit’s eyes adjusted to the glare, the figure had advanced before him. The deputy captain froze with his bottle upturned, leaving its contents to overflow from the goblet and over his emperor’s fingers. It was hard to blame him. Even Greiheit, who had his share of princesses waiting on his hand, was struck dumb by the woman he saw. Yet he recovered more quickly than his men—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he was shaken to his senses. Before he knew it, he was lying sprawled on the floor.

“What kind of emperor carouses while his people suffer?!”

For a moment, he did not even register what the woman was saying, only that she had her fist raised. His cheek began to burn. As he came to the realization that he had been punched, her foot struck him square in the face.

It was not anger he felt, but something stranger—something he could not

quite identify. All he could think about as he watched the crimson-haired woman flee the tavern was how bitter dirt tasted. His guards were drawing their swords, and he was taken aback by the anger in his voice as he commanded them to stop. Those who moved to chase after her, he sent flying with Gandiva.

“Ha ha... Ha ha ha ha ha! Truly, fate is a strange mistress.”

Even he was not quite certain why he was laughing. All he knew was that he had gained something irreplaceable. He felt his heart begin to thaw beneath its many layers of ice. His throat grew tight at the misfortune of it, and he began to weep at the tragedy of it.

“That I would find you in this place, in this age, at this time...”

At last, he had found a reason to live, and all he could do was resent the curse that bound him. He learned fate was rotten on the day he met her.

Proud Howl of the White Wolf

The white wolf could still recall the day they met. Her master had been younger then, with an innocent smile, but when she glimpsed the darkness lurking beneath, she realized how cruel fate could truly be. Humans were unkind creatures, quick to hurt each other with words or with fists, and the red-haired girl was not exempt. The wolf saw at once how much the girl must have suffered with no friends around her, and she swore to be a steadfast ally until her debt was repaid. For ten years they lived as sisters. The moment to leave had long come and gone—but then, she thought with a yawn, maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing.

“Come on, Cerberus! Let’s go hunting!”

She was sunning herself in her favorite spot when the crimson-haired girl came calling. She wasn’t much of a girl anymore, but the white wolf knew she still cried like a child inside her heart. They had been together for more moons than the wolf cared to count; she could read her master’s mind like the back of her paw.

“What’s wrong?” The girl’s eyes turned sad. “Aren’t you coming?”

The wolf looked away, feeling suddenly guilty. In truth, she did not want to go hunting. She didn't see what was so enjoyable about chasing those nimble little rabbits through the undergrowth or pouncing on those dirty, smelly boars. Meat was far tastier cooked than raw. The wild truly had left her, she thought wryly, but then, that too was fate.

"You need to get some exercise. You've just been lying around recently. Rosa's worried you're getting fat."

The wolf's ears twitched at the name of the woman who loved to rub her belly. Only the rudest would treat a divine beast like some sort of pet. Fortunately for her, this wolf was forgiving enough to let herself be fussed over without biting or growling. Besides, the woman always brought the most delicious offerings. That was enough to make up for her lack of courtesy, more or less.

"Oh, don't look at me like that." The crimson-haired girl petted the wolf's head with a rueful smile. "Come on, we're going."

The wolf gazed up at her. The girl had taken on a strange aura of authority in recent days, much like the boy who compelled others to his will. She knew the reason—the girl was beginning to cultivate the qualities of a ruler. She had grown stronger since parting with the boy. After so many years together, it was easy to tell. Both her body and soul were becoming those of an empress.

The wolf, however, could not afford to fall under her spell. She would much rather have spent the rest of the day napping in the sun than dirtying her white pelt—her heaven-sent proof of divinity. She snorted out a sigh and laid her jaw emphatically back on the ground.

"I swear, you were so much more obedient when you were a puppy. Didn't you love hunting back then?"

The white wolf glared back. She had not. She had pretended to play and gambol to cheer her master up from her constant gloom, but she had never truly enjoyed it. She had wanted to see the crimson-haired girl smile, that was all. Still, that role was coming to an end. Few people in the empire could make this girl cry now. She had enough allies at her back that she no longer needed a hunting partner.

“Tris was worried about you too, you know. ‘The beast’s getting rusty,’ he said.”

The wolf sighed again. Although the impersonation sounded nothing like the real thing, the old soldier’s name tugged at her heartstrings. Tris had been a little overprotective at times, but he had been the crimson-haired girl’s guiding light and a constant guardian at her back. He had the wolf’s gratitude, even if she reserved one or two gripes. If he and the black-haired boy had understood the crimson-haired girl’s heart better, they would have stayed by her side rather than choosing to leave. Males could be so selfish sometimes.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go?” the crimson-haired girl asked forlornly.

The wolf’s ears flattened against her skull. That voice in particular always got to her. She couldn’t stand to see the girl’s shoulders slump. No, there was nothing for it. With an air of resignation, she got to her feet.

“Feeling more up to it now?” The girl’s voice filled with joy.

The wolf had to squint as if looking into the sun. A smile truly suited her best. It would not do to let it fade. So today, again, the wolf would howl—to drive away the crimson-haired girl’s sorrow, to shatter the walls that stood in her way, to send running anybody who would do her harm. No matter what fate lay in wait, even if the world met its doom, she would watch over her sister.

To the last, she would walk beside her.

To the last, she would share life’s trials and joys with her.

To the last, she would never betray her.

Her howl sounded like an oath as it rose proudly to the sky.



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The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles: Volume 9

by Tatematsuri

Translated by James Whittaker Edited by Tess Nanavati

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