



The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles



Author: Tatematsuri
Illustrator: Ruria Miyuki



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8

Tatematsuri / Illust. Miyuki Ruria





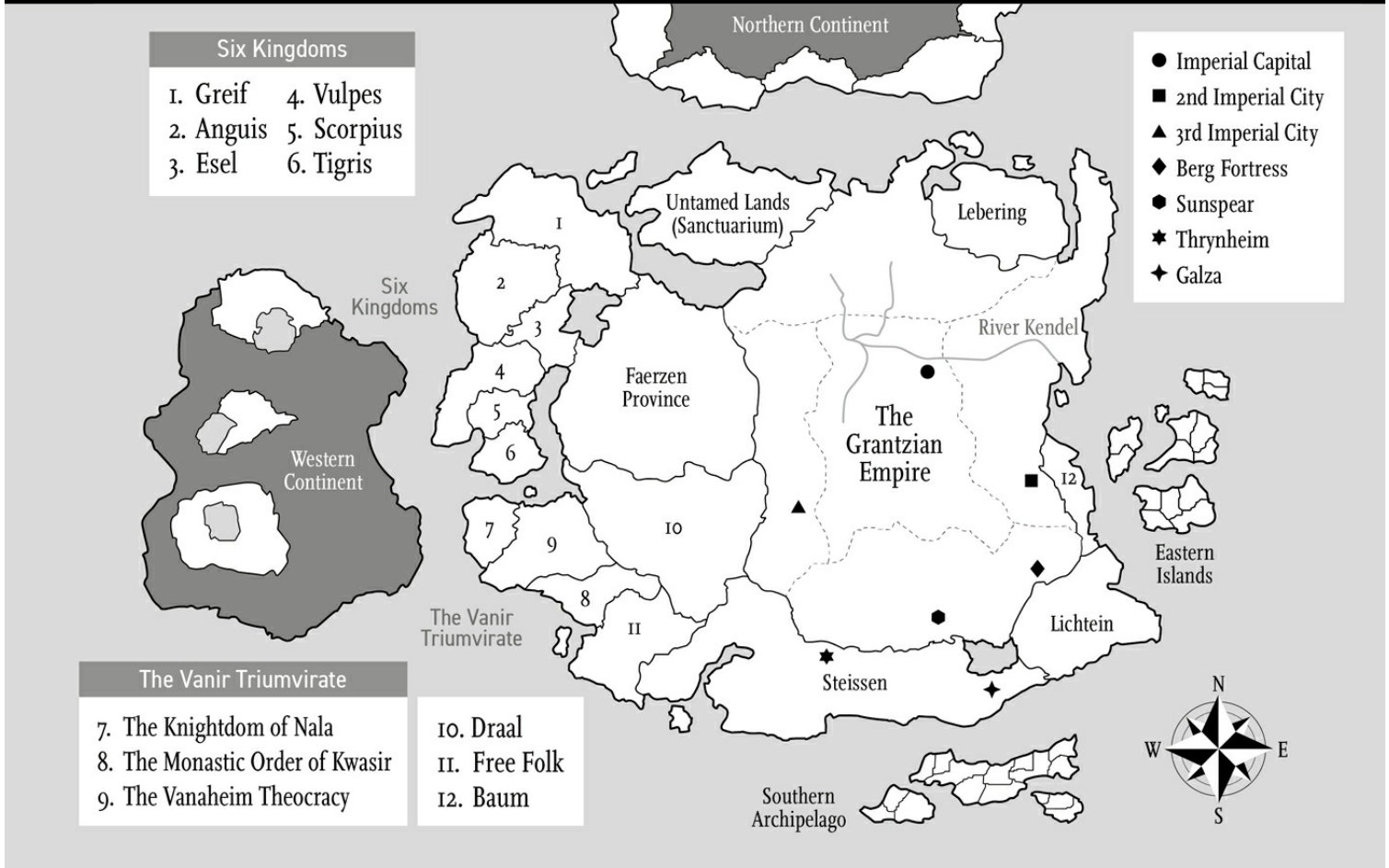
*“Ha ha ha!
Nothing like
the stench of
blood to get
the heart
pumping!”*

Skadi

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...





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

Rain poured. The sky cracked with thunder, weeping from horizon to horizon.

“No! It can’t be! How could this happen?!”

The heavens roiled, the earth shuddered, the wind moaned. All the world conspired to drown out the boy’s wails, but still he screamed into the turmoil.

“Why?! How?! Why did it have to be you?!”

His voice did not prevail. It vanished into nothingness, snatched away by the wind and battered by the rain.

The howling gale and torrential deluge ravaged his body like poison, sapping the warmth from his flesh. In time, his breath turned white and his face grew pale with cold. A chill swathed the land like it had been locked in ice—and so it was only natural that the warmth of the woman in his arms also began to ebb away.

“Stop it, please. Leave her alone...”

The sky sneered at his pleas, scattering them with driving rain. Great droplets poured down on her, freezing and pitiless.

“Rey... Come on, Rey, open your eyes. Please...let me hear your voice again.”

There were many other things he wanted to say. If only he had kept a cooler head, if only he had been more rational... There were a thousand excuses he could have made. But with the flame of her life guttering before him, his mind went blank.

“Why did this have to happen?! Why does she have to die?!”

Even knowing his efforts were futile, he drew her close as though trying to bind her soul to her body. Like a child clinging to a departing mother, he buried his face in her chest and unleashed a wordless howl.

“Someone...anyone...help me, please...”

There was nobody to answer, and yet he prayed all the same.

“I’ll do anything... Please...”

There was nobody to hear, and yet he begged all the same.

“Save her! I’ll do anything!”

There was nobody to lend their aid, and yet he pleaded all the same.

“I know! The Spirit King! You could do it! You’re watching, aren’t you?! You have to save her! How hard can it be for you to stop one soul from passing on?!”

But the moment he looked up at the sky, he knew no miracle was coming. Thick, black clouds swirled in the heavens, a raging, growing storm. As if by contrast, the movement of the woman’s chest became shallower and shallower, her breath growing faint as the rain washed her blood away. Lightning cracked, illuminating the boy’s despair-stricken face, bringing it into sharp relief.

“No! No, no, no!”

Screams split his throat. Ragged breaths clogged his windpipe. Sobs wracked his lungs.

“Ahh... Aaaaaahhh!”

He had pledged his life to her, and the vow now broke his heart. He had sworn to save her, no matter the cost, and that vow now shattered his soul. Faced with an unacceptable reality, an indescribable truth, he screamed in denial of it all.

“Aaaaaaaaahhh!!!”

On that day, his heart—his soul—died.

Chapter 1: The King in Baum

“Good morning, my lord,” said a smooth voice.

Hiro leaped out of bed before he had even opened his eyes. Not a moment later, his eardrums shook with a thunderous crash. An impact shuddered through him, violent enough to shake him to the core.

“Curses,” the voice growled.

Hiro did not hear. The blast had sent him tumbling across the floor.

“Ngh!”

He grunted as his head smacked into the wall. At last, he came to rest. Only then, lying sprawled on the floor, did he open his eyes. His irises—one gold, the other black—registered a dead-eyed woman standing a short distance away, an enormous warhammer in her hands.

“You again...” He pulled himself up into a sitting position, rubbing his head, and regarded her incredulously through the rising dust.

She showed not an ounce of remorse, standing over him with folded arms. “I see your reflexes have not dulled.” Behind her, the bed lay in splinters.

Hiro heaved a sigh and got to his feet. “It’s been two years. I’d have thought you’d have given up by now.”

“‘You may attempt to take my life at any time.’ That, I believe, was the condition you offered me.” Every syllable oozed hostility. She was guarded as a cat and just as keen for him to know that she would never be his friend.

“I suppose I did say that.” Hiro had come to terms with their fractious relationship. After everything the woman had been through, it was understandable. Still, he reserved the right to complain about his lost sleep. “I wish you wouldn’t keep trying every morning, though. I need to rest sometime.”

He reached out for his splintered bed stand, groping for his mask, but she

kicked him away.

“What was that for?”

“I thought I would show you the way to your mask.” She didn’t even blink.

“Funny way of doing it.” With a strained smile, he picked the mask up from where it had come to rest beneath the windowsill. “It’s a nice day today. Shame my morning isn’t as relaxing as it could have been.”

The sky beyond the window was a deep sea blue. A flock of birds swam gracefully across its canvas, heading east, then west, bound eventually across the sea. They flew free of cares or obstacles, as if mocking the people confined to the ground below, flying as their whims took them, no doubt headed for lands unknown.

It was the twentieth day of the fifth month of Imperial Year 1026.

After parting ways with the Grantzian Empire two years prior, Hiro had taken refuge in Baum, a small nation to the east of Soleil. Now he lived in its only city, a medium-sized city called Natua. He had taken up residence in the temple known as Frieden, the Spirit King’s Sanctum, in the room he had once shared with Liz.

“Return Igel and I will be gone,” the woman said.

Her name was Luka Mammon du Vulpes, and she was the former commander of the armies of Vulpes, one of the nations that made up the state of Six Kingdoms on the continent’s western edge. Two years ago, her younger brother had been killed in battle during their invasion of the empire, and she had laid waste to its western territories in a vengeful rage until finally meeting her match in Liz. Now her hatred simmered in her belly, deprived of any outlet. Hiro had made use of that to recruit her to his cause, but as the one who had killed her brother in the first place, he was not exempt from her wrath. She had made an attempt on his life every day, without fail, for two years straight.

“I suppose I did say you’re welcome to kill me and steal him back.” Still, he had not expected that one invitation to lead to constant murder attempts. With a rueful grin, he brushed the dust from his white mantle and strode up to Luka. “Don’t worry. I’ll give you back his arm when the time is right. I did promise that

I'd give you hope."

He leaned close enough for their noses to touch and flashed her a smile, but her expression didn't budge an inch. If anything, her glare bored into him more fiercely.

"But until then, I'll need you to follow orders. That was part of our agreement. Do I have your understanding?"

Luka's eyes flashed. "I have no need of a reminder. Have I not followed your orders to the letter all this time?"

"And I'm grateful for it. Long may our partnership continue."

He clapped her on the shoulder and fixed the mask to his face with a practiced motion. Luka dismissed her giant warhammer—Vajra of the Five Dharmic Blades, forged by the Faerie King.

"Now, then," Hiro said. "I assume you're here for more than just another attempt on my life?"

He regarded her afresh. She was beautiful as only royalty could be. However, her entire left side was swathed in hideous burns, and she had lost her left arm in battle with Hiro two years prior. In that sense, it was hardly surprising that she tried to take vengeance on him every chance she got. Unfortunately for her, she was yet to deal him so much as a scratch.

"Very little else. But yes, I carry a message from the knight-priestesses. Ambassadors continue to arrive, bearing ever more goodwill. They request your presence in the king's chamber."

Barbed as her tone was, she relayed her message as she had been bidden. She was a dutiful woman, despite appearances. In the two years she had been in Hiro's service, she had followed his orders faithfully.

"More ambassadors? Let Garda deal with them. Where is he, anyway?"

Shortly after his return to the world of Aletia, Hiro had encountered a zlosta named Garda Meteor. They had met as foes in the Duchy of Lichtein to the empire's south. After a fierce battle, Hiro had prevailed, but he had seen value in leaving his foe alive. Garda, too, stood to benefit from joining forces, and

they had become allies.

After Hiro abandoned the title of Fourth Prince and reassumed the name of Surtr, Garda had continued to serve him and now resided with him in Baum. With the Kingdom of Lebering so close, the zlostas had judged that there was no need to hide his heritage. Now he displayed his people's distinctive purple skin proudly as he dealt with other nations in his capacity as the king's counsel.

"He is scouting the nearby villages. The local monsters have been restless of late, and the commonfolk have petitioned us repeatedly to cull their numbers."

"No Garda? Then there's nothing for it; I'll deal with them myself."

In principle, Hiro could have delegated the task to Luka, but as she was from Vulpes and technically a deserter, leaving her to handle diplomacy would risk causing an incident. The other options were Huginn and Muninn, but the siblings were hardly trained in formal etiquette and their presence would likely cause offense. No, if he wanted to avoid needless friction, he would have to do it himself.

I could leave it to the archpriestess, I suppose, but I shouldn't bother her with something so petty.

With a sigh of resignation, he set off for the door, Luka falling in after him. After a few paces, he began to sense a distinctly lethal intent emanating from behind him. She was clearly hoping that he would show her an opening.

"Would you mind going first? If we start fighting in the corridor, I'm going to be late." He opened the door, indicating with a thrust of his chin for her to step ahead.

Luka heaved a deep sigh. "Does the great Lord Surtr wish to gaze at my behind as I walk? If the people heard of this, they would despair." Her shoes clacked as she stalked ahead, resigning herself to leading the way. "Stay close. The corridors of Frieden are a labyrinth."

"I'm aware. It has been two years, you know." With a shrug, Hiro set out after her. Knight-priestesses bowed their heads as he passed.

Besides, I've lived here before. Short as my stay was back then.

The floor was paved with flagstones, and their footsteps echoed easily in the silence of the bleached-white corridors. Hiro narrowed his eyes against the sunlight streaming between the pillars. His mind began to wander as he gazed at the well-tended flower beds.

I never thought I'd end up becoming king of this land a second time.

Baum had only ever had one king—when Hiro founded it a thousand years ago. Its young monarch had only sat the throne for a short time. Following Hiro's abdication, the throne had stood empty, and the duties of ruling were taken over by his patron, the second archpriestess.

Baum should never have survived. It's only thanks to the archpriestesses that it still exists today.

Whether they had prophesied that he would need it again, there was no way to know, but regardless of their intentions in keeping the nation alive, the people they shepherded had complicated feelings about Hiro's return. Some had greeted his ascension with discontent and dissatisfaction, others with celebration and cheering, but even the peaceful people of Baum harbored some worries for their future.

I've shown them that there's some advantage in having the Crow Legion around to take care of monsters, but if the sparks start to blow their way, they won't be able to turn a blind eye. I suppose we'll see how much we've ingratiated ourselves when the time comes.

He continued on, musing as he walked. At last, they left the white corridors behind and came to an open garden. The wide space boasted a semicircular fountain and colorful flower beds in full bloom, and the trees were a verdant green. It showed signs of being maintained, but it had been many years since this place had served its original purpose; it had last been used one thousand years ago, when Hiro had resolved to leave Aletia behind. Although created to entertain dignitaries visiting from other nations, it presently served no political purpose, instead being used by the knight-priestesses, trainees, and archpriestess herself as a place of respite.

He proceeded along a path lined with flowers of all kinds until he came to another passage not unlike the one he had left. Before him loomed an aged

wooden door, noticeably larger than any of the other rooms. A Knight of the Spirits stood on either side, their faces concealed by helmets. They lowered their heads silently as he approached.

Luka turned to face him. “You must continue on your own. I will be waiting in one of the nearby chambers.”

“That’s strange. Usually, you follow me everywhere. You can join me if you like. I’ll handle the business myself.”

Entertaining ambassadors sounded lofty, but all it actually entailed was exchanging greetings and offering some banal pleasantries. Nothing important was going to be discussed, so there would be no issue with Luka’s presence. Still, she shook her head, a sour expression on her face.

“Will you truly be so lost in my absence? Like a babe in the cradle...or so I would jest if the people beyond that door did not hail from the Vanir Triumvirate. The danger that they would know me is too great. I am considered a deserter, for all the choice you gave me in the matter. You would risk provoking a diplomatic incident.”

“All right, you’ve made your point. Still, the Vanir Triumvirate, hm? That’s a rare pleasure.”

The Vanir Triumvirate was a trio of nations located to the west, south of Six Kingdoms: the Vanaheim Theocracy, the Knightdom of Nala, and the Monastic Order of Kwasir. The Vanaheim Theocracy was a society ruled by álfar, who venerated the Faerie King, and as the Knightdom of Nala and the Monastic Order of Kwasir had been founded by exalted subjects of its Holy Emperor, the three nations shared a firm alliance. Faerie worship was particularly strong there, in part because of its proximity to the álfen holy land that was the western continent. Six Kingdoms lay firmly in the scope of its cultural influence, and conversions and pogroms were rapidly proliferating within its borders. It was suspected that the invasion of two years prior had been prompted by the Vanir Triumvirate, although the truth was yet uncertain.

“I wonder what they’re doing coming all the way to another religion’s spiritual center. Do you suppose they’re trying to convert us? Or are faerie worshippers just that reckless?”

Coming here would have been no easy road. They would have had to cross the entire Grantzian Empire, and if they had been spotted by any of the imperial soldiers who were particularly zealous spirit worshippers, they might easily have been detained. The two faiths might have once joined hands to defeat their common enemy, the zlostá, but the rift that had formed between them one thousand years ago had only widened since.

Luka snorted. “As if you did not know. They come to scoff. They see that the von Grantz dynasty is crumbling, they hear that spirit worship is foundering, and amid all these premonitions of destruction, a small nation installs a new king. They have come to pay their respects, twisted as they are.”

Hiro privately marveled that she could fit so much scorn into one answer, but he knew that if he drew attention to it, she would only spit more venom. Best to ignore it or he would risk starting an argument.

“It sounds like a thousand years hasn’t done much to ease their grudge.”

“A thousand years ago may be the distant past for humans, but it is a trifling amount of time for the álfar. My own grandparents were there for the rift, and they told me more stories of that time than I care to count.”

The split between álfar and humans had come one thousand years ago in the midst of the war with the zlostá. A human nobleman had become besotted with an álfen woman of royal blood and stolen her away. Naturally, the álfar had been outraged. When Artheus heard what had transpired, he had recovered the woman, but that had not been enough to sate her people’s anger. The álfar had invaded the nobleman’s lands, razed his villages, and executed those responsible. That had earned the humans’ ire, and what had begun as a spark soon threatened to explode into all-out war. While Artheus organized diplomatic talks between the two peoples and eventually issued a formal apology, their friendship had been permanently marred, and although conflict between them was successfully averted, the álfar had withdrawn their troops from the war effort and returned to their lands. Hiro had been on the front lines at the time, but he had heard about what had transpired through reports.

And the discrimination they’ve experienced over the past thousand years hasn’t done much for their opinion of humans.

Such deeply rooted hatred was not easily excised. To come here, to the heart of the Spirit King's faith, must have been beyond loathsome for the proud álfar; they would probably have preferred to slash their own throats.

"I can't imagine it's just my face they're interested in." Hiro pressed his mask back into place and sighed.

"The sooner you meet with them, the sooner you may clear them from your mind," Luka said coldly. With that, she turned and left, likely intending to conceal herself somewhere nearby.

She was right; worrying would solve nothing. Hiro steeled himself, took a deep breath, and approached the doors.

"Let me pass."

The Knights of the Spirits bowed their heads and opened the door.

* * * * *

The interior of Frieden was ostensibly divided into four quarters, although the sanctuary—forbidden to all but the archpriestess—made five. The central quarter was the Baptismal Font, where newborn babes and first-time visitors to Frieden were invited. To the east was the training ground, forbidden to men and outsiders, where the priestesses-in-training learned their skills. To the west was the residential quarter for the knight-priestesses and their squires, where Hiro's chambers were located. The southern quarter was a leisure area open to the general public, mostly occupied by inns and dining halls serving travelers and pilgrims, as well as reception rooms for diplomats and other dignitaries.

The last was the northern quarter. Located neither inside nor outside the sanctum but somewhere in between, it was accessible only through one door. On the other side sprawled another world. Lush, green trees grew in abundance, forest creatures chirped and squeaked, and the babbling of a brook fell easily on the ears. From above showered the rays of the dazzling midday sun. This was the Baptismal Sanctuary, a sacred place that only a select few were permitted to enter.

A white table stood near the entrance, with a set of teaware and a small mound of confectionery laid on top. Two women sat facing each other over

what looked for all the world like an afternoon tea party.

“Clear air, a gentle breeze, warm sunshine, and a fragrant cup of tea... One might think I’ve wandered into another world entirely. Who knew that Frieden boasted such a place?”

An amethyst-haired woman savored the aroma of her tea with a dainty smile. She moved with the kind of seductive grace that would make even another woman’s heart race. In her case, however, it was born not of a beauty that attracted, but an allure that bewitched.

“My! Does that mean my tea is to your liking?”

A gentle breeze, like the first touch of spring, set sultry lights glistening in her compassionate eyes and caressed the length of her shapely nose before finally swirling across her pale pink lips. Her delicate features were both ethereal and compelling, but most fascinating of all was her snow-white skin. She was an auf, a changeling child born as a zlostá but forced to live as an álf. There was only one such creature in Soleil: Queen Claudia van Lebering.

“Very much so. Its refreshing aroma hides a remarkable depth of flavor. I find it quite delectable.”

Answering Claudia’s question—after just the slightest pause—was a woman with a dignified air. Her body was no less voluptuous than Claudia’s, with smooth, lustrous skin that all but sparkled in the sunlight. Within her uncommon beauty lurked an intoxicating fragrance that only heightened her allure, and her soothing aura worked in concert with her fairness to draw the gaze of all she met. Through her windblown hair protruded the distinctive pointed ears of an álf. She was the fourth archpriestess, the protector of Frieden and the only individual permitted to commune with the Spirit King.

Claudia giggled. “But of course the archpriestess of Frieden has an eye for quality. Did I mention that these leaves are an export from Lebering? If you wish, I would welcome you as a trading partner. No doubt the women of the sanctum would be delighted to have them in greater supply.”

“You raise a good point. I shall look into the matter.”

“Then I shall await your answer with great anticipation. While we’re on the

subject, Lebering also does a roaring trade in silver and bronze—both things that Baum needs, if I am not mistaken.”

As nonchalantly as she broached the subject, it was clear that Claudia had ulterior motives. Protocol dictated that such diplomatic negotiations would usually take place in a formal setting, but she seemed to be trying to discern in private whether the archpriestess would be amenable.

The álf’s brow creased imperceptibly, but she soon reassumed her impassive expression, taking a sip of tea and waiting for a moment before breaking into a smile. “I regret to say I have no authority to make such decisions. Frieden rules Baum no longer; we merely reside upon its land.”

When Hiro had assumed rulership of Baum, he had cut Frieden free from the national fabric. The Spirit King’s Sanctum retained its elite troops, the Knights of the Spirits, but they numbered fewer than a thousand. The Crow Legion alone numbered around five thousand; if the former were surrounded, the battle would be short.

Across the ocean to the east of Baum was a chain of islands ruled by the Twelve Tribes, the forefathers of the beastfolk. To the north was the Kingdom of Lebering, a nation of zlostas rapidly gaining strength under Claudia’s rule. To the west was the Grantzian Empire, tired and battered from countless battles but still the lion of Soleil. And to the south was the Duchy of Lichtein and their slavers.

“I see.” Claudia nodded in understanding. “That’s quite the intricate arrangement you’ve managed.”

“Frieden remains a neutral party, as it has always been. With my greatest apologies, we cannot intervene in an ongoing conflict in any way, shape, or form.”

Hiro’s ascension had been met with a slew of criticism from the surrounding nations, the Grantzian Empire—Baum’s longtime ally—among them. In order to avoid would-be conquerors protesting the occupation of humanity’s most sacred soil, Hiro had separated the nation of Baum from the institution of Frieden. Giving the latter independence and self-governance created a peculiar political situation, but one that kept it from becoming either a liability to his

own nation or an advantage to another.

“Well, I suppose I have no choice but to desist,” Claudia continued. “I shall endeavor to persuade Lord Surtr.” She backed down easily. Either she had only wanted to confirm how things stood or her hopes had not been high from the start.

A faint noise passed between them, the treading of footsteps on grass. Both of their heads swiveled around.

“My, what a rare pleasure.”

A figure stepped toward them, his expression hidden behind a mask, a black blade at his hip. He removed the mask with his right hand, revealing a face with gentle features far too youthful for his age. He looked just as he had two years prior. Even what should have been a growth spurt had done nothing for his height. He had not changed in the slightest, as though time had stopped for him alone.

“Your youthfulness is the envy of us all, Lord Surtr. We of zlosta blood age less quickly than humans, but even so...” Claudia cupped her breasts in her hands. “Some forms of growth will not be halted. Oftentimes I find myself to have developed in the most unexpected places. Yet you never change, not even in the slightest. Tell me, what’s your secret?” Her eyes took on a sultry look as she peered up at him. They glistened alluringly, but in their depths lurked the predatory glint of a hawk regarding its prey.

“My secret? Stay up late, eat all you can, and laze the day away in your chambers. Be the best shut-in you can. If I’m doing anything else, I haven’t heard about it.” With a shrug, Hiro placed his mask back on his face.

Claudia let her shoulders slump in resignation, uncertain whether to laugh or roll her eyes. “Well, you can tell me more about that another time, I’m sure. In the meantime, I see that your shadow is accompanying you again.”

Her eyes flicked to the tree behind him, where Luka crouched among the roots. Normally, she would have said nothing, but the woman was muttering feverishly to herself as she stared daggers at Hiro, gone far past creepy and well into terrifying.

“What? Oh, her?” Being glared at with the fury of a thousand suns didn’t seem to disturb Hiro in the slightest. One might have wondered if he was just as abnormal.

Claudia regarded him like some kind of zoological curiosity. “I almost daren’t ask, but...do you have a thing for clingy women?” She peered into his face, eyes cold like a wife who had discovered her husband’s infidelity.

“Now what do you mean by that?”

“Only that you have given me cause for suspicion. You show no interest in any woman who approaches you, coop yourself up in your room with your books, and only emerge to battle monsters in the company of sweaty men, yet the one person you keep by your side is the woman who tries to kill you. Why, anyone would wonder whether you were getting something else out of this arrangement.”

Hiro snorted in amusement and changed the topic. “And what are you doing here? I thought I told you to wait in a reception room if you need me. How did you even get here?”

Claudia gave a shrug; evidently, she had expected her barrage of accusations to be brushed off. “I arrived in the Spirit King’s Sanctum an hour ago, but the knight-priestesses informed me that Lord Surtr was busy attending to some dignitaries or other, so I decided to take a walk while I waited. My senses are remarkably sharp, as I am sure you are aware. I sensed something most unusual nearby, and where did it lead me but this beautiful place?” She took a sip of her tea, which by now had grown quite cold.

Hiro placed his hands on his hips and rolled his eyes. “Where you met the archpriestess, and you’ve been here drinking tea ever since.”

“More or less.” The archpriestess nodded in agreement.

“Then your business here is done. I’ll hear you out in my chambers.” Hiro turned to Luka. “Luka, escort Claudia to my quarters.”

“Why should I escort this common sneak-thief anywhere?” She glared at Hiro with hatred in her eyes, biting at her thumbnail.

Luka and Claudia shared a mutual loathing that they could not get past. It

extended back two years, to when Claudia had prevented her from beheading Hiro. If Hiro's death was her greatest wish, Claudia's head was her second.

"If she wanders off again, she's yours to do with as you like."

That was a joke, but Luka did not register such things. She stood bolt upright and stepped closer. "Very well. Come along, sneak-thief. And hold your tongue or you shall be disciplined."

Claudia giggled. "Or perhaps a toothless mongrel shall be disciplined in turn."

That was going a little too far on both their parts. They stalked off, side by side, hostility crackling between them. It seemed like a fistfight might break out at any moment.



“You two go on ahead,” Hiro called. “I’ll be right behind you.”

The pair vanished down the corridor, still glaring at one another. It was impossible to tell whether they had heard or not. Once they were gone, Hiro turned back to the archpriestess.

“I assume you saw it all. What do you think they were here for?”

The archpriestess nodded, unfazed by the sudden question. “Presently, I cannot say. But it seems clear that they came to ascertain something.”

To Hiro’s surprise, the ambassadors of the Vanir Triumvirate had done nothing but express their best wishes. It was hard to believe they would have risked their lives making the journey all the way from the southwestern edge of the continent to the east coast just to exchange pleasantries. He knew, however, that the archpriestess would have been watching, even as she sipped tea with Claudia. Hers were no normal eyes. She possessed one of the Three Great Arcane Eyes, the Far Sight. Passed down from one archpriestess to the next, they conferred the power to see across great distances, read the color of people’s emotions, and even descry the future.

“The Spirit King’s presence, perhaps?”

“Perhaps. Indeed, I believe it likely.”

Hiro stroked his chin and expelled an irritable sigh. “I’d hoped they wouldn’t cotton on so quickly.”

“We could never have kept it truly hidden. The Spirit King’s power was great. It is a miracle that the deception has persisted for so long.”

She sounded like she was trying to console him, but her words didn’t come as much of a comfort.

“The Spirit King can’t have returned if Luka found this place.”

Claudia should never have been able to enter it either so long as the Spirit King’s power remained.

“Indeed. The font remains empty. I have called more times than I care to count, but not once have I received an answer.”

“If I remember correctly, the Spirit King was already gone when I was summoned back here. Am I wrong?”

“You are correct. By the time of your return, my pleas received no answers.”

“Did they before?”

“I felt...a presence, at least, but...” The archpriestess lowered her eyes, unusually hesitant. She looked back up, expression mournful, seeming to steel herself. “I must be honest with you, Lord Surtr. The Spirit King’s power has been waning as the human population has grown. By the time of your return, only dregs remained.”

Ever since then, the Spirit King had fallen silent, as though all that remained had been used up to summon Hiro back to Aletia. Most likely, that was why certain parties who had been working in darkness were beginning to emerge into the light: the obstacle keeping them at bay had been removed.

“Something must have changed before then. There has to be a reason this happened.” When Hiro had originally returned to Earth, the Spirit King had not been so weak as to be fatigued by the growth of the human population. “I’ve been looking into something ever since I came back here, and I think I’ve made a breakthrough.”

“A breakthrough, my lord?”

Hiro nodded. “There were two periods of time that interested me. Five hundred years ago and three hundred years ago.”

Five hundred years ago was when the archons and the yaldabaoth had been discovered, and three hundred years ago was when Orcus had made their name as the only assassins ever to slay an emperor.

“My theory was that the Spirit King began weakening five hundred years ago and was almost completely powerless two hundred years later. Otherwise, Orcus would never have been able to accomplish what they did.” Hiro raised a finger. “And there’s more. There were twenty-two emperors between the founding of the empire and the appearance of the yaldabaoth and the archons. But past that point, their reigns started to get shorter. Since the assassination three hundred years ago, very few have lived out their natural lives.”

And that investigation had led him to a piece of the darkness lurking in the Grantzian royal family.

“I saw a man. A man with red hair.”

In the grave where Artheus slumbered, in that otherworld teeming with vast quantities of information, shades of previous emperors had gathered. One among them, a red-haired man, had seared himself into Hiro’s memory—him and the four weapons he carried.

“And imagine my surprise...when I saw he wielded Lævateinn.”

The archpriestess’s eyes widened, and a shudder wracked her body.

* * * * *

The twenty-first day of the fifth month of Imperial Year 1026

A flock of birds drifted across an otherwise cloudless sky. They soared high above the affairs of the people below, reveling in the freedom it offered. The enormous, high-walled city was of no concern to them, nor were the people milling around the stalls lining its streets before retreating to its maze of buildings once they had what they came for. They cared least of all for the palace that rose above the rest of the buildings, awe-inspiring in its magnificence.

The city’s name was Cladius—the capital of the Grantzian Empire, the greatest city in Soleil, and one of the most ancient municipalities in the world. Overlooking its historic sprawl was the imperial palace of Venezyne. Unlike the busy city streets below, a stately silence hung over the palace compound, so oppressive that no one dared to utter a word. The central keep towered over the grounds like a monarch surveying their domain.

Burly sentries stood on either side of the enormous entranceway. Nearby stood a guardpost within which a squad of soldiers bunked. This was a new addition, erected as a solution to the infiltrations that had humiliated the palace guard for the past two years.

Passing through the austere doors, one was greeted by more guards. Visitors were subjected to luggage inspections and thorough body checks. Waiting rooms lay nearby, packed with nobles. A long corridor stretched ahead, leading

to the throne room and then, beyond various twists and turns, a portion of the palace that only the leaders of the nation were permitted to enter. This was where the servants of the royal family had resided before most of them were slaughtered in the First Prince's rebellion two years prior. Now, many rooms stood empty. More than a few still reeked of blood.

Deeper still was a door protected by female soldiers. This was the entrance to the emperor's baths, and the women guarded it diligently, determined not to let so much as a mouse squeak past unnoticed. That much was to be expected—the most important woman in the empire was in attendance.

Within the steam of the grand baths stood a great crowd of beautiful women clad in sheer silks. Several wore swords at their hips, adding a hint of threat to the air. All of their eyes were fixed upon the enormous bath in the middle of the room. In the center stood a great statue of a lion, with hot water pouring forth from its ferocious jaws. The spray glittered in the sunlight shining through the window in the ceiling.

A crimson-haired girl was in the water. Her shapely body was as toned as it was well-proportioned, its natural elegance lending beauty to the steam. Sweat glittered like pearls as it trickled down her skin, adding to her allure. So potent was her charm that her form seemed like a vision created by the gods, with nothing more that could be added or taken away. She was Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz, sixth princess of the empire, Lævateinn's chosen, and the heir apparent to the vacant throne.

She was meditating. Eyes closed, she breathed deep, as though seeking the depths of a deep lake. She was attempting to reach the deepest layers of Lævateinn's domain in order to bring out more of its power.

Not yet... Not yet... I can still go deeper...

It was like her breaths didn't contain enough oxygen. That was how it always felt. Delving into Lævateinn's domain was like trying to find her way by touch in a dark place, seeking the sensation of the previous wielders' memories. Occasionally she would find one, and all at once her surroundings would be flooded with light, and she would open her eyes to find an enormous amount of information exploding before her. She had seen several awe-inspiring sights

unfold already.

Not this one. I've seen this before. There must be more...

She forcibly cut herself off from the searing vision and continued on, seeking greater depths. In time, her breathing grew more labored, the rise and fall of her chest more pronounced, and her expression more pained.

I have to go deeper... Ngh...

Biting her lip and trying to bear the pain could only take her so far. Floundering for air, she reached out her hand, and a new sight burst into being before her.

“Agh... Hah... Back...back here again...”

Liz hunched over, breathing raggedly, reams of sweat soaking into the earth. She looked back up to see a sky so black and furious it could begin to weep at any moment. Great scars pockmarked the earth, only exacerbating the foreboding in the heavens. A battle had been fought here, where its one victim now lay dead. Two figures still breathed amid their strange surroundings: a fair young man with blue eyes and golden hair, and a black-haired, black-eyed boy.

“I’m still not strong enough.” Liz pounded a fist into the dirt.

She stood, wiped the sweat from her forehead, and began to walk toward the pair. This was her second time in this place—the memories of Artheus, the first emperor and Lævateinn’s only other wielder. Indeed, the golden-haired, blue-eyed youth before her was Zertheus, first of the Twelve Divines, in the flesh. One of the commonfolk, who revered the Divines, might have passed out from astonishment. A noble might have shed tears of joy. Liz’s interest, however, was not in him. She cared only for the black-haired boy lying grievously wounded on the ground next to a headless corpse.

“Hiro...”

His breathing was so shallow that it might have petered out at any second. His chest moved up and down imperceptibly, a ragged hole torn through it as if by a spear. So much of his own blood surrounded him that any normal person would have died. More blood burst from his mouth, flecked with bubbles. Liz leaned down to wipe his lips clean, but her fingers failed to touch him, as though she

were trying to grasp mist.

“Why, Held? Why did you not return home? There was no need for you to take on this burden! And yet...what foolishness...”

Liz looked up to see Artheus on his knees, tears streaming from his eyes.

“Forgive me, Held. I call myself your brother, and yet I could do nothing to help you.”

Artheus pulled a piece of a white card from Hiro’s black clothing. It looked a lot like a spirit seal, but the aura it emanated told Liz otherwise. This was something different—something created for Hiro alone.

“This failing is mine. I could have foreseen that this might happen, but I could not bear the thought of you forgetting me. Now I see that I ought to have erased your memories and returned you to your Earth whether you liked it or not.”

He pressed the card to Hiro’s forehead, apologizing over and over as though confessing his sins. Its white surface began to glow, and it seemed to Liz like it was drawing something out of Hiro’s head.

“I shall see this through. You need only return to your world—”

A gust of wind blew across the field.

Immediately, Liz felt something wrong. Her throat turned sticky. All the hairs on her body stood on end. The air began to feel stagnant, like that of an underground jail.

“The boy is stubborn, to absorb my curse and yet live.”

A presence pressed down on Liz, so powerful that she could feel it even through the vision. She could not see its source. It was not visible. But she could sense that something undefinable had appeared in the space before her.

Artheus stared straight at it, as though he could see something in the empty air. His lips pulled back, revealing his teeth. “Come for another battle, Demiurgos? You’re in no fit state.”

“That I cannot do, bodiless as I am. I shall bide my time and await my chance.”

“Then begone with you. Regain your strength. When you return, I will put an end to you myself.”

The presence seemed to laugh. “And will you persist three hundred years hence? Five hundred? Seven hundred? A thousand?”

Artheus hesitated for a moment. “I will put an end to the Age of Gods in my lifetime. I will root you out and obliterate you, body and soul.”

A mocking chuckle shook the air. “That you cannot do. Not so long as your blood-brother’s life remains.”

The malignant presence faded away, leaving Artheus standing alone. He bit his lip in chagrin, unable to respond.

After an oppressive silence, a change came over Hiro’s body. The hole in his chest began to slowly close. Artheus breathed a sigh as his face flooded with relief.

“Held. My comrade-in-arms. This is truly farewell.” With a regretful smile, he lifted Hiro in his arms and set out into the wasteland. “When I pass on, I shall bequeath to you all I can. I hope you can forgive me for being able to offer nothing more than strength.”

Liz began to walk after them as she listened, following along so as not to be left behind.

“The war was long and cost us much, friends and family both. Only our belief in hope kept our feet from slowing. Yet all of that effort bore nothing but power to cling to, and all that truly mattered was lost. This is the fruit of our labors.” Artheus stopped and looked up at the sky. At last, he seemed to catch Liz’s eye. “Quite the bitter irony, don’t you think?”

“Maybe. But that doesn’t mean your efforts were wasted.”

Artheus could not possibly have heard her, but he nodded in seeming satisfaction. “Walk the path your heart wills, successor mine, lest you be left with regrets.”

“I know,” she answered without hesitation. “I will.”

Artheus smiled, although he looked on the verge of tears.

The memory ended there. The world began to crumble. Soon, it was buried under rubble. Even as blinding light flooded Liz's vision, however, her gaze stayed fixed and unblinking.

"I'll snatch your burdens right off your back. And that's a promise."

Her determination had only grown since two years prior. Those words, once spoken in a final fit of anger, had made her stronger. A fire burned in her chest that would never fade.

She breathed a sigh and opened her eyes. She was back in the baths. The smell of sulfur flooded her nasal passages as her lungs filled with air. Water trickled down her skin as she stood up, spilling from her clavicle down to her navel. Her ladies-in-waiting sighed admiringly at the sight, although they quickly returned to their senses and trotted up to her with towels in hand. The lapse in their well-honed manners was so slight that an observer would not have noticed the difference.

As Liz surrendered to their ministrations, another woman approached her.

"Liz, the duke of Lichtein has arrived."

The woman projected a sultry air, her proud beauty tinged with a coquettish streak. She wore her ponytail over her right shoulder, where it heaved atop voluminous breasts. Her clothing included a daring slit up the thigh, and the voluptuous curves peeking through would drive anyone mad with desire. She was Myste Caliar Rosa von Kelheit, Liz's elder half sister and the former third princess who had since become acting head of House Kelheit.

"Go gently on him," she continued. "He looks nervous."

"That depends on what he has to say for himself. I'm not going to compromise on the interests of the empire's people." Liz directed one of her ladies-in-waiting to bring her military uniform and turned back to her sister. "Rosa? Is something wrong?"

Rosa was looking her up and down, chin cupped in one hand. "Not at all. I was just thinking, this is the body that is attracting more ladies-in-waiting every year. Any more and our treasure shall be strained to breaking point, don't you agree?" She addressed the question to one of the women wiping Liz dry.

Liz blushed and lowered her eyes. “Stop this nonsense. You’re embarrassing her.”

“Do you know how many marriage proposals I’ve had to field from hopeful nobles? They should know your current status won’t allow it, but to see the heartbreak in their eyes, it’s hard to feel *this* doesn’t bear some blame.” Rosa traced Liz’s collarbone with a finger before sweeping it down to poke her breasts, ignoring the cold glare she received. “These past two years have a lot to answer for.”

“I’m not dignifying that with a reply.”

Liz stalked past her sister from the bath chamber to the changing room, where she took a seat upon her chair and once more let her ladies-in-waiting tend to her. If she was to have an audience with the duke of Lichtein, it was her duty as imperial regent to look her best. Showing up with wet hair would be out of the question.

“With that extra height and longer hair, you’re looking more womanly than ever. Why, as I look at you now, you might turn even my head.”

Evidently, Rosa had no intention of being deterred. Liz rested her elbow on the armrest and laid her chin in her hand, making no secret of her exasperation.

“Don’t you recall that shameless merchant? A mountain of golden grantzes for one night with you, he said. Why, you were so irate, even I feared what you might—”

At last, Liz’s patience snapped. She glared at her sister. “Chancellor Myste Caliar Rosa von Kelheit, if you have nothing of importance to discuss, please make yourself scarce.”

The center of power in the Grantzian Empire had shifted greatly in the past two years. To a large extent, the change had been forced by circumstance. The emperor had been slain in a rebellion led by the first prince, and the ensuing invasion by Six Kingdoms had cost the lives of the third and fourth princes. On top of that, a group of traitors had taken advantage of the confusion to infiltrate the capital, injuring Rosa, slaying Chancellor Graeci, and grievously wounding Second Prince Selene when he attempted to stand in their way. The string of unprecedented incidents had thrown the imperial capital into chaos.

Even Beto von Muzuk, the leader of the southern nobles and Rosa's predominant rival, had been caught by surprise.

In that, Rosa had seen an opportunity. While Beto was campaigning against Six Kingdoms with Liz, she had taken the chance to act. Leveraging the financial strength of the eastern nobles and Beto's lie that she was pregnant with Hiro's child, she had brought both the disgraced central nobles and the war-battered western ones into the fold. Beto had returned from the battlefield to find her occupying the seat of chancellor as Graeci's successor, her position more secure than ever.

Rosa pursed her lips in a sulky pout. "Where's that little girl who used to follow me around the palace corridors pulling at my sleeve?"

Liz sighed. "Waiting for her chancellor to do her job."

"All right, all right. Don't glare at me like that. I'd hate to think I've offended my dear little sister." Rosa gave a helpless shrug, clearly not remorseful. "Let's get down to business, then."

In a moment, her face turned serious. She dismissed the women attending to Liz and sent them from the room. Now fully dressed, Liz resettled herself in her chair and turned all her attention to her sister.

"House Muzuk—Beto—has sent me a letter."

Beto might have lost the chancellorship to Rosa, but his success in the Six Kingdoms campaign had allowed him to preserve his influence by becoming secretary of the Ministry of Military Affairs. Technically, only the emperor could promote somebody to that position, but Emperor Greiheit had perished in Stovell's rebellion, and his death had still not been made public; officially, he was bedridden with illness. Beto had taken advantage of the complexity of the circumstances to circumvent protocol. That said, Rosa did not have much room to complain; she had done much the same herself to secure the position of chancellor.

More curiously, Beto had not made a public move since. He had left a representative in the capital and returned to his seat in Sunspear, where he had remained for two years.

“I’d expected him to make a move sooner or later,” Liz said. “I suppose the time has come.”

“Indeed.” Rosa nodded. “He’s been working in the shadows for a long while now, trying to make you his puppet.”

“What does the letter say?”

“It’s addressed to the sixth princess, requesting that you send reinforcements to the Republic of Steissen. To the Jötunheimites.”

“Why there?”

The Republic of Steissen had originally been formed from several smaller states. It had its origins in an alliance forged five hundred years ago: the Duchy of Lichtein, the Kingdom of Jötunheim, and Kingdom of Nidavellir—three nations dueling for rulership of the south of Soleil—had joined hands to resist the empire. In time, the Duchy of Lichtein had seceded from the republic, leaving control of Steissen split between the remaining two powers.

Things had taken a turn for the worse three years ago, with the death of the high consul of the senate. An election had been held to fill the position, but the Jötunheimite candidate had been poisoned by the Nidavellirites. A portion of the Jötunheimites had sworn revenge and murdered the Nidavellirite candidate in response. The events had worsened the rift between the two camps and set Steissen on course for civil war.

“Last I heard, the majority of senators had defected to the Jötunheimites. It only seemed like a matter of time before the Nidavellirites lost.”

Rosa shook her head. “It seems things aren’t so simple. As of this year, the Nidavellirite forces are gaining ground again. Our agents are trying to keep track of the situation, but it’s too fraught for them to make much progress. Still, I’m in no doubt that somebody’s pulling the strings.”

Liz settled back in her chair and raised a hand, showing that she had a grasp of the situation. “So Beto wants to gain a diplomatic advantage by putting the Jötunheimites in our debt.”

“On the face of it, yes. However, I suspect his real aim lies elsewhere.”

“What do you mean?”

“He wants me to fail. For you to send support to the Jötunheimites only for them to lose. An imperial disgrace will give him the perfect opportunity to undermine my position.” Rosa gave a dismissive shrug, staring at the ground. “Well, I won’t deny that we could use more results in that arena. We have spent two years with our gazes turned inward, focused on reform. The nobles are growing increasingly dissatisfied with our policies.”

No doubt Beto had known that when he had tossed this dilemma into their laps.

“It’s worth consideration,” Rosa continued. “If our assistance leads the Jötunheimites to victory, we’ll demonstrate your strength to the continent at large *and* tweak Beto’s nose a little, as sourly as it sits with me to go along with his schemes.”

“I’ll do it.” Liz didn’t even hesitate. “If this can stop me, I’ll never be worthy of the throne.”

Rosa’s eyes widened for a moment before narrowing affectionately. The growth in Liz’s confidence was truly wonderful to witness. Pleased, she nodded several times and broke into a smile. “Very well, then. I will make ready for your departure.”

“Now, I suppose I had better get ready for my audience with Duke Lichtein.”

Liz stood up and beckoned to her ladies-in-waiting. They gathered around and set about arranging her hair. Rosa’s gaze softened as she watched, recalling how embarrassed Liz had been the first time. Now she looked every bit the part.

* * * * *

The sun was dazzling as it shone in through the high window. The portion of the flagstones that wasn’t covered in plush red carpet gleamed as it reflected the brilliant rays. Columns of white stone lined both sides of the wide chamber, leading the way to the throne at the far end. The nobles of the empire filled the space between them. This was the throne room of Venezyne, the beating heart of the Grantzian Empire.

Oh, General Rankeel...I was not made for this.

Duke Karl Oruk Lichtein's face was pale with nerves. The aides behind him quailed beneath the stares of the imperial nobles. The date of Lichtein's nonaggression treaty with the empire had expired, and he had come with his men to sign a new one, but he had not expected to be confronted with such overwhelming magnificence.

We all look dreadfully out of place...

He and his retinue's clothes might have been sewn with equally fine cloth, but next to the nobles all dressed in the latest fashions, it was hard not to feel outdone.

This is the difference between a duchy and an empire, I suppose.

Even as he stood, despondent, drums began to beat. An orchestra struck up a stately melody. Karl could hardly even hear it. His nerves were half to blame, certainly, but more than that, he was stunned by the beauty of the woman who had just arrived.

Could that be Lady Celia Estrella? Surely not...

Her sister, perhaps. He cast his mind back to his memories two years prior.

No, there's no mistake. She carries herself much like she did back then, but with her youthfulness gone...

She had already been fair enough back then, but the two years since had wrought a stunning change. Karl felt less surprise and more fear.

If she'd been born a normal princess and not a Spiritblade's chosen, I shudder to think how many nations she would have brought low.

Every ruler on the continent would have fought for her hand. They would have piled enough golden grantzes at her feet to bury the Glauzarm Mountains.



He recovered from his shock-induced reverie to find that the performance had ended. The historic beauty was now surveying him and his retinue from her seat on the throne.

Ah...

Karl hurriedly fell to one knee and bowed his head. A flurry of movement issued from behind him as his aides followed suit. They, too, had frozen at the sight of the sixth princess.

“I, Duke Karl Oruk Lichtein of the Duchy of Lichtein, hereby request the signature of a new treaty between our nations. By way of gifts, I bring you the finest delicacies that the Duchy of Lichtein has to offer, as well as our own medicine, which I hope you will convey to His Majesty, Emperor Greiheit, along with my best wishes.”

“Thank you, Duke Lichtein. The skill of Lichtein’s apothecaries is known far and wide. Their work will be certain to hasten His Majesty’s recovery.”

Karl lowered his head again. The sixth princess took the signal to continue.

“Now then, to the matter at hand. What are the terms of this treaty you wish to sign?”

There was a coldness in her voice that suggested rejection. His shoulders began to tremble with terror as his nerves reached their height.

“Forgive my presumptuousness, Your Highness, but I had hoped to ask a boon of you. Two years ago, the Grantzian Empire took possession of the north of our nation. I hereby request its return to the Duchy of Lichtein.”

Karl kept his head firmly bowed. He did not have the courage to see for himself the anger that had surely passed across those beautiful features. Still, he could sense the change in the air. It was subtle, but as the words left his mouth, she grew palpably more hostile.

“We have invested a great deal of coin into that region, and our settlement plan continues apace with the collaboration of its existing residents. Why would you have us throw all that away?”

The north of the duchy had been a wasteland for as long as anybody could

remember, but in the past two years, the empire's irrigation efforts had transformed it completely. That such a feat had been accomplished in such a short time was a testament to imperial engineering and skill. However, it had created discontent in Lichtein. Certain parties had begun to find new fault with Karl and Marquis Rankeel's unilateral decision to cede the land to the empire. Some nerve to complain about that, Karl thought sourly. If they hadn't, the nation would have fallen there and then.

"I do not ask you to do this out of the goodness of your heart, Your Highness. The Duchy of Lichtein is willing to offer eighty percent of the tax revenue from the region for the next two years, as well as leasehold rights over the nearby mines for the same period of time."

Those were not bad terms. The mines alone would recoup the empire's investments in the region, and the tax revenue would more than compensate them for the effort they had put in. However...

"As I have said, our settlement plan continues apace with the collaboration of the land's existing residents. Many imperial citizens have already begun to build new lives there. Would you ask me to uproot them and send them back to their old lives? Would you have me be that cruel?"

The sixth princess's anger swelled fiercely. Sweat beaded on Karl's brow as her gaze burned into him. He gritted his teeth, realizing too late that he had trodden on the tiger's tail.

So it's true, then, what they say... She cares for her people above all else.

As far as dukes of Lichtein went, Karl was comparatively lenient on the people—a rarity in a nation that made its living from the slave trade. But while he could sympathize with the sixth princess's point of view, hailing from a land that measured lives in gold made it difficult to understand.

"Duke Lichtein, I understand that your nation is facing starvation."

Karl had made no mention of that, hoping to avoid showing weakness to another nation's ruler, but it was true. The Duchy of Lichtein was facing its greatest famine in recent memory. More than half of its land was consumed by desert, and no rain had fallen on the rest since the previous year. Its crops were failing, and its nobles had begun feuding with one another over the oases they

controlled. The situation had been worsened by the Republic of Steissen, which had dammed the vital water source that was the River Saale, deliberately exacerbating the drought.

“I can understand your need for the water-rich land in the north, but the Grantzian Empire cannot forsake its own people.”

Faced with the sixth princess’s cold gaze, Karl felt no choice but to back down. Her anger was great, and the pressure weighing down on him was immense. Making any further demands would likely lose him his head.

“I... I understand, Your Highness.”

“If you wish, the Grantzian Empire would be pleased to provide you with all the support we can. I will send a civil tribune to you later. You may confer and come to a decision.”

“Y-You have my thanks,” he stammered.

“There will be a humble dinner provided once proceedings have concluded. I invite you to enjoy yourself.” With that, the sixth princess stood up from the throne and left the chamber.

Forgive me, General Rankeel. Truly, I was not made for this.

Karl had come away from the negotiation with nothing. Nothing but a lesson in power from a girl younger than he was.

I was not made to rule. Not like she is.

He bit his lip in shame. Not only had he failed, but throughout the entire conversation, he had not once mustered the courage to raise his head and look her in the eye.

Chapter 2: Plots and Schemes

The twenty-fourth day of the fifth month of Imperial Year 1026

The flames of war smoldered all across Soleil. Nobody was safe, and yet the common people were powerless to alter the course of events. They could only wait, tormented by fear, for the fire to erupt into an inferno that engulfed the continent. Until then, they lived their days in dread, uncertain about what the next day would bring.

Perhaps that uncertainty was why so many more pilgrims had begun to visit Baum in the past two years. Some came to Frieden to pray for the safety of their husbands or sons on the battlefield, some to lament the dark cloud hanging over the land, and some—mostly nobles and dignitaries from various nations—to trade large sums of coin for spirit seals in preparation for the harsh times ahead.

The nation only had one place to host so many visitors: Natua, a medium-sized city that lay in the gentle curve of a natural basin. Above streets heaving with pilgrims rose the dignified form of the temple of Frieden.

Hiro's room lay within the temple itself, behind the solemn sheen of its white walls. A gentle breeze entered through the window, riffling playfully through the pages of abandoned books before carrying the stale air of the chamber back outside. The tomes filling the nearby shelves were yellow with age, but the shelves themselves had been cleaned with evident care. There was not a speck of dust to be seen.

This was the same room that Hiro had used during his brief stay in Baum shortly after returning to Aletia, and it had also served as his quarters one thousand years ago. It had not changed in the slightest. As before, two flags stood by the window: a pair of scales on a white field, and a dragon on a black field clutching a silver sword.

"Hmm..." A thoughtful voice issued from behind the pile of books on the aged writing desk.

If Claudia is to be believed, the second prince's power has declined so much that the northern nobles are falling apart. Yet another consequence of the attack on the palace.

Two years prior, a group of intruders had infiltrated the grounds of Venezyne. Chancellor Graeci had been slain at their hands, and the second prince had been seriously injured. The chancellor had received a lavish funeral, Hiro had heard, although Selene had not attended. He had returned to his seat in the north, where he was still recovering.

The moment he loses his physical strength, his political power goes with it. How quickly somebody can fall from grace.

With the two political giants of the north either dead or in seclusion, the northern nobles' steadfast union had begun to unravel.

Soon enough, they'll start to think about biting the hand that feeds them. Convenient for me, but a problem the empire won't be able to ignore.

Not that the ruling authorities could do much. The central and western nobles had been exhausted by recent conflicts, while the north had been quietly building its strength for years. If conflict broke out, they could reputedly field upward of two hundred thousand soldiers.

They might not be unified, but they're still strong. Anyone who pokes that particular beehive will soon regret it.

Hiro stroked his chin in consternation. He stood up and walked over to the bookshelf.

"Let's see here..."

It was important to read the tempo of events and act accordingly. In history, in war, in politics, and even in diplomacy, those who moved too slowly were easily read, but those who moved too quickly fell flat on their faces. Events in the north had been progressing slowly so far, but now the situation was picking up speed.

And then the tempo will slow down again, almost to silence...only to conclude with a sudden bang.

This flow of events was not natural. Something on such a scale had to be orchestrated by someone. And Hiro was almost certain that party was Orcus.

They're aiming for rulership of the north...or perhaps it's the collapse of the empire that interests them. Or something they'll get from it...

He pulled a book from the shelf. It was an account of events at Friedhof, the great wall in the north.

A red-haired emperor...Orcus...and Liz's mother...

As Hiro opened the book, something caught his eye, and he stopped, page in hand. His eyes turned from the book to his bed. A woman was lying on the covers, sleeping peacefully. Her dark skin glimmered with sweat in the sunlight flooding the room.

"Fallen asleep in her armor again... I don't know how she does it."

Huginn wore a set of light armor customized for mobility, which she found convenient in her line of work. The resulting design left a lot of skin showing, although thanks to her toned muscles, the effect was more artistic than seductive. She had entered Hiro's service two years ago in the aftermath of the civil war in Lichtein. Both she and her brother now spent their days rushed off their feet working as liaisons with his spies across the continent, although occasionally, when she had the time, she sneaked into his chambers for a nap.

"More to the point, what are *you* doing?"

It was not Huginn whom Hiro addressed, but Luka, who was prodding obsessively at the other woman's cheek.

"She truly is just like Igel. Just as defenseless, just as stubborn... Even her cheeks are just as squishy. Do you suppose she might be Igel reborn?"

"I'm not sure her age quite matches up."

Luka didn't even blink, continuing to poke Huginn's cheek. "Heh heh... Heh heh heh... Igel, Igel, Igel, Igel, Igel..."

Nobody could get through to her once she was like this. That was a lesson Hiro had learned too many times over the past two years. Interrupting her would only cause her to lash out with lethal intent.

“Just don’t overdo it.”

Electing to leave her to it, he returned to his chair, book in hand. As if on cue, a heavy noise issued from the door.

“Scuse me,” came a gruff voice.

Before Hiro could say a word, the door opened and Garda came in. Huginn’s commander, he had also come into Hiro’s service following the fighting in Lichtein. He thrust out his hand wordlessly, a letter clutched in his fingers.

“Who’s that from?” Hiro asked.

Garda shrugged and handed it over. He was a man of few words at the best of times, but it was unusual for him not to answer a question when asked. Frowning, Hiro scanned the letter. It had been sent by an agent undercover in Lichtein.

“So the duchy is massing its forces on the imperial border? Interesting.”

“Thirty thousand,” Garda said. “I might call them impressive numbers if slaves didn’t most likely make up the bulk. There’s no telling what they’ll do.”

The zlosta spoke the word “slaves” with particular distaste. Hiro’s brow furrowed. Garda had once sparked a revolt in Lichtein with the aim of liberating its enslaved population. No doubt he was unimpressed that the practice still persisted. Still, it seemed to be the army’s potential actions rather than their treatment that concerned him now. Asking him why was probably pointless, given his unwillingness to prioritize personal feelings; better to wait and let him broach the subject in his own time.

“Why do you think they’re mobilizing now?” Hiro asked, moving the conversation on.

“Drought, like as not. No rain’s fallen on Lichtein since the year’s turn. With no water of their own, they can buy or they can take.”

Water was life in a desert nation. Buying it from other nations would not nurture their own crops, and losing access to sources would lead to ruin. Hiro had heard rumors of Lichtein’s nobles turning on one another for the oases that dotted the nation.

“I see.”

That explained the concern on the zlosta’s face. If the duchy was intent on stealing water, the first place they would look would be the northern region they had ceded to the empire two years prior—and in that region was Mille, the young girl who had once been the figurehead of Garda’s Liberation Army. She lived in a village close to the imperial border, and if war broke out, she would be right on the front lines. No doubt that was what was weighing on his mind.

Truthfully, if the duchy and the empire are having a dispute, I don’t want to get involved.

The empire had not cast its gaze outward for two years, choosing instead to focus on internal affairs. Rosa’s first priority as chancellor had been punishing nobles guilty of wrongdoing. She had taken their assets, confiscated their lands, and stripped them of their titles. More than a few houses had collapsed under the weight of their punishments. Naturally, the measures had met with outcry, but the war-weary commonfolk had been delighted to see corrupt nobles get their comeuppance, and their support had empowered Rosa to push forward forcible reform. Still, that had its limits, and Hiro expected that they were now coming into view.

She’ll be looking for an opportunity to demonstrate the empire’s strength, for the benefit of both its people and the rest of the continent. If the Duchy of Lichtein is making itself a target, I should leave them to it.

Still, if war broke out between the empire and Lichtein, it would be hard to guarantee Mille’s safety—and if she was in danger, there was no telling what Garda might do.

And I do owe her father a debt...

He would have liked to help them if he could, but from a political standpoint, nonintervention was the best choice.

“Scuse me, but is the boss around?”

A new arrival entered the room: a fierce-looking man with a scarred face. His muscular body projected no aura of discipline and certainly not a shred of elegance—if anything, he looked like a bandit or a brigand. He was Muninn,

Garda's right hand and onetime vice-commander in the Liberation Army. He was also Huginn's brother.

Garda looked back over his shoulder with a scowl. "I hadn't heard you were back."

Muninn was supposed to be infiltrating Steissen. If he had returned to Baum without informing his commander, it could only mean there was a problem of some kind.

"Something's come up. I could've sent a report, aye, but I figured it'd be quicker to ask what you made of it face-to-face. 'Sides," he added, casting a glance at Hiro, "it involves the chief."

He looked at Luka uncomfortably, clearly reluctant to state any specifics out loud, but Hiro gave a reassuring nod. There would be no problem if she overheard. She only cared about taking his head and had no interest in anything else.

"She can stay. What did you want to talk about?"

"Ah...right. Well, as I'm sure you know, Steissen's split into two factions, and they've been at each other's throats for a while."

Steissen was ruled and administered by its senate, which was split into two factions: the Nidavellirites, consisting mainly of dwarves, and the Jötunheimites, composed primarily of beastfolk. The high consul had died shortly before Hiro's arrival in Aletia, leaving the nation in turmoil over who would hold the position next.

"I remember. The Jötunheimites' victory looked certain for a long time, but the Nidavellirites have been clawing back ground recently. I hear their neighbors are rushing to hedge their bets."

Many parties hadn't even deigned to engage with the Nidavellirites, certain that the Jötunheimites would come out on top, and as a result were not in good standing with the former. Now that the tide was turning, they were scrambling to curry favor.

"Aye, 'sright. Well, two-faced nobles aside, turns out there's a story behind this comeback the Nidavellirites are making."

“Aside from other nations sending them weapons and funding, you mean?”

“That’s one reason, but there’s more to it. See, the man who leads ’em, Utgard’s his name... They say he’s of the first emperor’s blood.”

Hiro was taken aback for a moment, but he quickly shook his head. “That’s impossible. If it was true, it would have been the talk of the continent long before now, and Steissen would already be his. That can’t be the reason. It’s just a baseless rumor.”

Muninn frowned. “Aye, I thought the same, so I took a look for myself. There’s a necklace this Utgard keeps around to prove it, see, one that’s s’posed to have been the first emperor’s. And, well...far as I can tell, it’s the real thing. A lion made of silver and gold, with his crest and all.”

Lying was not in Muninn’s nature. Hiro knew that well enough by now. If he vouched for this necklace, it was almost certainly the genuine article.

“Artifacts of the first emperor aren’t exactly easy to come by in foreign nations. If he does have one, that’s fairly convincing proof of lineage.”

Still, the situation struck Hiro as strange. If this Utgard had been sitting on such a powerful trump card, why had he waited until his back was to the wall to reveal it?

Most likely because it’s bait. And the person he’s trying to bait is probably Liz.

If Hiro had been his target, he would have claimed to be a descendant of the second emperor instead.

But what’s he trying to accomplish by luring Liz to Steissen?

That was the biggest question. Somebody was pulling the Nidavellirites’ strings, that much was clear, but what they wanted was a mystery. Still, there was no point in thinking about it now. By the time Hiro reached up to adjust his mask, he had made up his mind.

“Muninn, could you send more agents into Steissen? About thirty should do.”

Muninn blinked. “Thirty, chief?”

“That’s right. I’ll mostly need them for reconnaissance, but they might have to take on other duties if needed.”

“You got it.” The man bowed.

Hiro turned to Garda. “Ready three thousand cavalry. We’ll be passing through the Gurinda Mark, so we’ll need to notify the margrave.”

“What of the duchy? Or do you mean to ride straight through to Steissen?”

Hiro grinned. “If they stand in our way, I’ll show them no mercy. Either they’ll let us pass or I’ll scatter that force they’re gathering at the border.”

Garda smiled. “Very well. I’ll get the men ready to ride.”

As Garda left, Hiro moved to return to his book, but stopped as he saw Muninn approaching the bed.

“Hey, what’s my sister doing there— Oof!” The man reached out to shake Huginn awake, only to abruptly go flying across the room. He crashed into the wall and slid down to the floor, where he groaned in pain. “What in the... What happened?”

A woman stood before him, lips pulled back in a horrid smile. “No common bandit may interrupt my Igel’s sleep, on pain of death.”

“Eh? Who’s Igel? What’re you talking abo— Gyaah!”

Luka’s foot crashed down hard enough to split the floorboards. Muninn leaped away with tears in his eyes.

Luka’s smile turned ghastly. “Please don’t run. I don’t want to get your brains all over the corridors.”

As Muninn fled, Hiro returned his attention to his book.

No need for me to intervene. He won’t die. Probably.

Two years ago, Luka had cared for other people about as much as for roadside pebbles. Her displaying any interest at all in somebody else was a welcome development.

* * * * *

Cladius, more commonly known simply as the imperial capital, was one of the oldest cities in Soleil. It had been founded over one thousand years ago by the first emperor, who had moved his nation’s capital shortly after resolving to walk

the path of empire. As a result, the imperial palace of Venezyne overlooking the city was just as ancient.

Yet all things aged with time, no matter how carefully they were preserved, and the palace was no exception. Portions of its stonework had deteriorated over the centuries. Often it was repaired, but sometimes it was declared dangerous and demolished, freeing up new space for construction. The palace had changed little outwardly over the past thousand years, but its interior had grown more convoluted with every new emperor and the ensuing series of renovations. Its bowels were filled with chambers rigged with traps to snare intruders, enormous baths forbidden to all but the emperor, labyrinthine networks of corridors, great halls for entertaining prostitutes—all relics of the time of their creation.

One place in particular, however, had remained untouched throughout the years: a corridor with no doors, no adornment, and few lights. It seemed to lead nowhere. If an intruder did somehow manage to get that far, they would find themselves at a dead end and no doubt turn back, scratching their head at it still seeming to be under construction. Yet it was one of the most important places in the palace. It was the Passage of Emptiness, forbidden to all but a select few and a sacred site to all loyal to the royal family, and it concealed the path to the graveyard where the past emperors were buried.

“According to the chief gravewarden’s records, the last visitor to the imperial burial grounds was Hiro.”

Two women made their way along the corridor.

“But what could he have been doing down here?” Liz stopped and looked back at her sister over her shoulder.

“It seems somebody broke in during the chaos of Stovell’s rebellion. With father dead, the chief gravewarden turned to him for orders.” Rosa flipped through the book in her hand as she spoke. “It was the second emperor’s grave that was desecrated, it seems. No doubt that influenced the man’s decision.”

“What? The second emperor’s grave, desecrated?”

Rosa nodded. “It says here that the barrow was broken open and the body exhumed. Just that one tomb, mind you, and it was all they took. Nothing else

was touched.”

How strange. Why would somebody want a body instead of the riches it was buried with? Liz couldn’t think of a reason.

“At least now we can make some progress,” she said.

“Quite. These records should give us some insight into what happened.”

After the imperial burial grounds had been broken into during Stovell’s rebellion, the chief gravewarden had put together a plan to strengthen security. However, he had been unable to put it into practice before a second group of infiltrators had broken in, killing him and the rest of his order. With the burial grounds forbidden to all but the gravewardens and the emperor, the palace had been unable to assess the extent of the damage. Only the discovery of the chief gravewarden’s private records several days earlier promised to shed new light on the situation.

“Let’s head down.” Rosa stowed the book away and lit the lantern hanging at her waist. She took the lead, pulling out a map.

The corridor ahead was dark. Lights on the walls provided some illumination, but not nearly enough to dispel the gloom carpeting the floor. Despite the danger of tripping, however, they could not follow the walls; the day after the attack, several soldiers had been injured by traps while attempting much the same thing.

“This place is made to keep intruders out of the imperial burial grounds. We couldn’t very well strip it of all its defenses. It took two months to document as much as we did, even with Scáthach’s help.”

After the soldiers had been injured, Liz had taken charge of the investigation, noting down all the traps she could find along the route to the burial ground entrance. The map Rosa now held contained the results of her findings. If Liz put a foot wrong, Lævateinn’s blessing would keep her safe, but the same could not be said for Rosa, so she had no choice but to follow in silence as her elder sister took the lead.

“Thanks to the chief gravewarden’s records, we now know where most of them are,” Rosa added. “I’d like to conduct a wider investigation with more

soldiers, but considering the circumstances...”

“Better not, I agree,” Liz finished. The burial site of the Grantzian emperors was sacred ground. She wanted to avoid more people than necessary knowing where it was. Even among the nobility, it was nothing more than a rumor. She herself had not been certain of its existence until after the attack; the only other people who knew were Rosa, Aura, Scáthach, and certain members of the five great houses.

“Quite. We’ll have to do the hard work ourselves.”

Rosa stopped before a destroyed section of wall. She lifted the lantern high, illuminating a staircase that went down into darkness. Then she began to descend the stairs, lighting the torches lining the wall as she went.

“This will be my third visit, but it’s been more for you, I hear.”

Liz nodded. “I’ve been to the second emperor’s grave more times than I can count.”

She could sense Rosa’s reproachful look from the steps ahead, but no words of rebuke followed. It was only thanks to Liz’s frequent visits that they had made so much progress documenting the traps.

“You always did have a soft spot for Mars, didn’t you? Was it fruitful?”

“No. It was empty. Like there was never anything there at all.”

“If only they hadn’t stolen the body. No doubt you would have felt differently with the man himself present.”

Liz opened her mouth to say that wasn’t what she was getting at, but at that moment, they reached the bottom of the stairs. A long corridor extended before them. The floor was covered in old bloodstains, and the walls were scored with blade marks and black splatters—traces of the battle between the gravewardens and the intruders. The stench of blood still lingered in the air.

The corridor opened into a wide space, so high that the ceiling was shrouded in darkness. The feeble light of the lantern only just sufficed to drive the creeping gloom back from their feet.

“Well? What is it that you wanted me to see?” Rosa turned around, the light

from her lantern dispelling the shadows from Liz's face.

"Something has been bothering me."

"Oh?" Rosa cocked her head.

Liz took the lantern and stepped in front. "There have been a few things that caught my attention in the times I've been here, but there was one in particular that I could never make sense of."

Around them, several gently sloping mounds rose from the darkness. Each was a barrow housing one of the deceased emperors. They traced out a large circle in the underground space, ringing a colossal boulder.

"Why did they leave such a big rock lying here when they took such good care of the rest?" Liz rapped the face of the rock with her knuckles and looked back at Rosa. "That's strange, don't you think?"

"Is that why you needed me? Or rather, the chief gravewarden's records?"

Liz nodded, walking around the rock to the other side. "You can go in. The inside is hollow. I don't know why, exactly, but I think it was made to hold something."

"And you think it's a tomb?"

"I think it's the first emperor's tomb."

Somewhere behind her, Rosa gasped.

"But why—why here, why *inside a rock*—I don't know. That's what I'm trying to figure out."

She had visited the imperial burial grounds many times after the entrance was uncovered, but although she had been able to locate every other emperor's tomb, the first emperor's barrow had always eluded her. Eventually, she had grown suspicious enough of the rock in the center to take a closer look and discovered what seemed to be an entryway.

"But the inside was ransacked. Completely destroyed. Perhaps that was what the grave robbers came for."

Liz stepped through the rock wall. A field of flowers stretched away before

her, withered and dead. Fish bones carpeted the bottom of a small, dried-up spring. In the center lay a stone pedestal, smashed to rubble, where perhaps a casket had once lain.

As Rosa made her way through the brown field, dried foliage rustling vainly with every step, she noticed something glinting in the lantern's light. She squatted down and picked it up.

"What is this? A ring? Ruby and topaz... And over here..."

Liz brought the lantern closer so that she could see.

"Paper, or what's left of it. It's been burned. A book, perhaps?" Rosa stood back up, pursing her lips. "If it was an offering for the dead, I'd expect there to be a coffin."

"But there isn't one. No coffin, not even a body. That's why I wanted you to check if the records had anything to say."

"Now I see it. You want to know if this truly is the first emperor's tomb, and if so, whether it was always like this or if somebody made off with his body."

Liz nodded, but Rosa only frowned.

"I'm afraid I might not be much help. I read through the records when they were found, and they made no mention of this rock. As for the first emperor's tomb, they said only one thing."

"What?"

"Nobody but the next emperor may enter. That was all."

"So you don't think this is the right place?"

"I think it's too soon to jump to any conclusions. How are we to tell what it was?" Rosa looked around for a moment, then back at Liz, giving a pointed shrug. "For now, this is a dead end. Perhaps there is some manner of secret passage or chamber hidden somewhere, but we won't know until we conduct a thorough investigation."

"Then let's start looking." Liz raised the lantern.

Rosa grabbed her shoulder. "Not today. It's late."

“But we’ve already come all the way down here. Surely we can afford to look around a little.”

“I can take care of this myself. This is no time for you to be shouldering new burdens. You make for Sunspear tomorrow.”

The following morning, Liz would leave the capital and travel south, meeting up with the Fourth Legion’s Knights of the Rose along the way. Afterward, she would meet Beto von Muzuk at House Muzuk’s seat of power in Sunspear before making her way to Steissen.

“But—”

“You are desperate to know more. I understand, believe me. But with so little to work with, you will only confuse yourself. We must be calm and thorough, and address our problems one by one.”

Many ills still plagued the empire: House Muzuk’s designs on the chancellorship, the various hostile groups working in the shadows, the embers that still smoldered in Faerzen, the instability of the central territories, and the precarious state of the war-torn west. The invasion of the burial grounds was too important to ignore, but it was low on the current list of priorities. Liz had more pressing matters to attend to in her capacity as imperial regent.

“All right. I trust you to take care of it.”

Two years ago, she would have been too stubborn to concede, but experience had mellowed her. After the passing of the previous emperor and the deaths of many of his heirs, the onus had been placed on her to lead the nation, and she had been flung headlong into war. The gauntlet of trials that she had faced at the time had forced her to mature tremendously.

“I won’t let you down.” Rosa put on a reassuring tone. “I’ll start the investigation tomorrow. If I find anything, you’ll be the first to know.”

Liz smiled wryly. “Take some time if you need to. I know you have your own problems to manage.”

“The duchy, indeed. As if I didn’t have enough on my plate...”

A messenger had arrived from the Gurinda Mark the previous day, reporting

that the armies of Lichtein were massing along the border of the land they had ceded to the empire. Most likely, the duchy had resorted to extreme measures in the face of starvation. Given free rein, Rosa would have organized the military immediately, but the south was the purview of House Muzuk; she could not act until they submitted a formal request for reinforcements. If she and Liz took matters into their own hands, they would hand the great house an excuse to take umbrage and undermine Liz’s rule, perhaps critically.

“I’ll convince Beto to mobilize his forces once I get to Sunspear. But on the slight chance that I don’t make it in time...it’ll probably be the eastern nobles who will have to march.”

“Easily dealt with. I’ll instruct them to begin assembling their forces. Leave me to take care of things in the capital and try to pounce on any opening Beto gives you. Rest assured that I’ll be ready to follow up if you need me.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t intend to give him an inch.” Liz brushed a lock of hair back behind her ear, revealing eyes bright with determination.

* * * * *

The thirtieth day of the fifth month of Imperial Year 1026

In the empire’s southern territories, just to the south of the Gurinda Mark, was a region known as Caktos. It was plagued by scorching winds all year round, and shimmering heat hazes rose over the sunbaked earth. Formerly part of Lichtein, its irrigation systems had vastly improved under imperial rule, and while its parched lands were still far from revitalized, the drought-ridden duchy would have given almost anything to have them back.

The sun was as fierce as a midsummer day as it glared down at an army encampment. In the center was a tent bigger than the rest—the command tent.

“Word has come that Lord Karl will soon return, sir.”

The aide addressed the figure at the head of the table: General Rankeel Caligula Gilbrist. Thirty-seven years of age, he was a war hero known and feared in the surrounding nations under the name of the Rising Hawk. Despite his military prowess, his inflexible personality ensured that the nobles of the land tended to keep him at arm’s length.

“Good,” Rankeel said distractedly. “Inform me when he arrives.” He folded his arms and sank back into thought. He had an important decision to make: whether or not to launch an attack on the empire.

“Are you still considering, sir?” the aide asked.

Rankeel huffed through his nose as he stared at the map. “Of course.”

“With respect, the duchy is almost on its knees. The nobles and the commonfolk are the least of our concerns. There is no telling what the slaves may do in their desperation.”

“I am well aware. A fine time for the faults of slavery to come back to bite us.”

No water meant crops failed. Crops failing meant people went hungry. When the people in question were poorly fed at the best of times, they would not sit by and wait to starve to death. They would turn all of their pent-up anger and resentment against their masters.

“There are more slaves in Lichtein than peasants,” Rankeel continued. “If they all rose up, it would be anarchy.”

“Then what choice is there? If we cannot feed our people, we can but take from other nations. The duchy will not last longer than a year, perhaps no more than six months.”

The duchy had no water and little grain. It was making the slaves angry, the commonfolk restless, and the nobles more despotic. Civil war was not the only thing that could bring a country low. If the people were starving, so were the soldiers, and that rendered them vulnerable to invasion.

“Lichtein truly must be cursed,” Rankeel grunted. “At last, Lord Karl was beginning to take charge, and now we’re met with this.”

If they didn’t want to meet an ignoble end, their only choice was to steal from other nations. That was the question before Rankeel now: whether to invade the empire in the name of reclaiming their former lands. If they lost, not only would they fail to reclaim the north, the reparations would empty their treasury. However, if they did nothing, either the drought would start a civil war or Steissen would invade across the western border. It felt as though the duchy were trapped in a labyrinth with no exit in sight.

“Have you considered invading Steissen instead, sir? If we could unblock the River Saale, we would have our water. They were the ones who dammed the river. We would have good cause.”

“That I’ve considered, but the empire is the better target. The republic would cost us too dearly in time and lives.”

Attacking Steissen in retaliation for damming the river had been Rankeel’s first instinct. It was Nidavellirite soldiers who kept watch over the border. However, with the faction regaining strength in recent months, the border had become more fortified. By contrast, the empire had only just begun developing Caktos. Many forts were still under construction, and there were plenty of vulnerabilities for an attacking force to exploit. It would be far quicker to take it back than to breach the wall on Lichtein’s western border. As such, Rankeel had marched north with thirty thousand soldiers, but now he was questioning whether it was worth betting his nation’s fate on their success.

“Then we ought to wait for Lord Karl,” the aide said. “He may well bring good news.”

“Indeed.” Rankeel nodded, but he could not hide his doubts. He was not so optimistic about the future. It was hard to be, given what he knew. “Things never go as planned, it seems.”

He looked down at the letter on the desk. It was from Karl, announcing that the negotiations had failed. Rankeel had never expected much, but a part of him had held out hope.

“If they will not return their land voluntarily, we must await our chance to take it by force.”

He had not told his aides about the letter for fear that they might jump the gun. He intended to overlook a certain level of pillaging, but he did not want settlements razed to the ground. The duchy would lose its moral high ground if its soldiers ran rampant. On a more practical level, he did not want to lose labor that might be useful in the days ahead, and besides, an uncoordinated army was little better than a mindless mob. Restoring order and holding on to the territory would be just as challenging as taking it in the first place.

“At least Lord Karl will benefit from the attempt.”

The negotiations would have failed no matter who was at the helm. In that sense, sending him to gain experience had been a good choice. If anything, his hesitant disposition meant that even if he had spoken out of turn, he would have given little offense.

“Sir, a letter of protest has arrived from Margrave von Gurinda.”

“Again? I suppose I can hardly blame the man, with thirty thousand men on his border.” Rankeel put a fist to his chin. “We shall tell him that we are here to escort Lord Karl. With our internal situation so unstable, we had no other choice but to come in force.”

“Very good, sir. But should we not strike soon, before he can gather his forces?”

“I understand your concern, but remember, the empire’s south is unstable too.”

“Unstable, sir?”

The aide looked puzzled, as anybody focused solely on the empire’s exterior would. Any time spent researching its internal affairs, however, revealed that it was even more of a powder keg than Lichtein. The new chancellor had been trying to force through reform, and her heavy-handed measures had met with protest from the establishment.

“The margrave owes his loyalty to the chancellor. He will not be able to gather men so easily; at least not from the southern nobles. On his own, he will be able to field five thousand at best—little challenge for us.”

The empire’s internal struggles were not to be underestimated. House Kelheit—and hence the chancellor—were the ones to keep an eye on, but they were locked in a contest of power with the southern nobles and could not easily send their forces south. Doing so would risk sparks flying and starting fires they didn’t intend.

“While the eastern and southern nobles are staring each other down, we will claim the north,” Rankeel concluded.

“Very good, sir. I will ensure the men are ready to march at a moment’s notice.”

“If you would. But don’t put the men on edge. Loosen our hold on the slaves’ collars and our defeat will be certain.”

“Understood, sir.”

As the aide left, a messenger came in, out of breath. “General!” he announced. “A force is heading this way! They number three thousand men!”

One of Rankeel’s eyebrows rose as he looked over the map. “Margrave von Gurinda?”

“No, sir. Their banners show a set of scales and a black dragon.”

“They are soldiers of Baum?!” Rankeel stood up from the chair in surprise, leaning over the table as he stared at the messenger. The other aides in the tent also stopped what they were doing and turned their attention to the conversation.

“So it seems, sir. They are riding directly for us.”

“Where are they now?” Rankeel directed the man’s attention to the map with a thrust of his chin.

The messenger hurriedly approached the table and looked over the map. “They are two sel from here and closing.”

“Why did we allow them to get so close?”

“I can only apologize, sir. We were so focused on watching Margrave von Gurinda’s movements, we had not thought to send anybody to keep an eye on Baum.”

“Normally I would call this unacceptable, but nobody could have predicted this. Still, an embarrassment.”

Baum had maintained a neutral position for centuries. History did not list a single instance of it taking up arms since its founding. Nobody would have expected it to mobilize a military force. Even so, Rankeel struck the desk in anger, cursing his own naivety.

“How many times have I warned myself of the dangers of such assumptions? I have only myself to blame.”

“Nobody is at fault, sir,” one of the aides in the tent said. “Nobody could have expected Baum to take action.”

“We will assemble the men at once,” said another.

Rankeel nodded and turned to the rest of the officers gathered around the table. “It may still be possible to settle this without drawing steel. We shall dispatch an envoy and stall for time. If battle does erupt, send three thousand slave infantry to the vanguard while the rest of the army mobilizes.”

“At once, sir.” The aides scattered to see to their various tasks.

Rankeel looked down at the map once more. “Why now, of all times?” he mused. He knew too little about Baum. They had just welcomed a new king—that much he was aware of—but none of the spies he’d dispatched had returned with any information that would benefit Lichtein. More precisely, none had returned at all.

“No doubt the rest of the continent is in the same position. None of us know anything. It’s impressive that they’ve allowed so little to slip out. Impressive and worrisome.”

Despite their brief dispute, Baum’s alliance with the empire still stood strong. That was only to be expected given the spirit stones and spirit seals that it produced, not to mention the fact that it housed the Spirit King.

“Small in breadth but large in stature, indeed. Truer words were never spoken.” Rankeel allowed himself a self-effacing grin at the gulf between Lichtein’s influence and Baum’s. “But the real question is what they’re after.”

If Baum was mobilizing after centuries of inaction, there had to be a reason, but it was hard to imagine it could have anything to do with Lichtein. It might have been small, but its lands were fertile. It had no use for Lichtein’s desert terrain, and it could procure any resources it needed from the empire with one letter. Lichtein offered nothing that it could want.

“A mystery indeed.” Rankeel snorted at the seemingly impossible conundrum. “Well, no use giving it any more thought. If I want an answer, I’ll have to get it from the horse’s mouth.”

For the first time in years, war was in the air. Rankeel’s smile deepened as he

felt his body tense. He stowed away the map on the table and brought out another that showed the surrounding terrain in greater detail.

“Enough wrestling with useless questions. Time to address the task at hand.” Toying with a pawn in his palm, he narrowed his eyes at the map like a predator that had caught sight of its prey.

As Rankeel grew excited at the prospect of the upcoming battle, one of his aides approached. “Baum has sent an envoy,” the man said.

Rankeel stopped what he was doing and turned around, glaring more fiercely than he had intended. The man shrank back. Seeing his trepidation, Rankeel pinched the bridge of his nose and cast his eyes up, holding back his anger.

“I don’t like this one bit. Everything they do feels like they’re testing us. It’s as if they’re the ones spoiling for a fight.”

He had thirty thousand, and the enemy had three. It was clear who was at an advantage. Yet they seemed to be trying to throw him off-balance with audacious moves, and he could distinctly sense them laughing at his consternation.

“Show them through,” he commanded. “Let’s hear what they have to say for themselves.”

Soon enough, the Baum envoy was shown into the tent. Rankeel thought her beautiful at first, before he caught a glimpse of her unsettling, clouded eyes. The left side of her body was so horrifically burned that he hesitated to approach her. She was like a vengeful ghost; her spirit had died, yet her body lived on with no hope for the future. Her empty left sleeve fluttered in the breeze coming in through the tent flap.

“I come on behalf of the Gurinda Mark,” she said. “I request an explanation for why you are massing your forces on the border, a blatant act of provocation.”

She offered no pleasantries but cut straight to the point, claiming the moral high ground while inciting her counterpart to anger. It was more than discourteous; it was blatantly insolent.

Rankeel had his qualms about a female envoy being sent in the first place. In

principle, it was a protected position, but in practice their lives were cheap and subject to the whims of whomever they were visiting. Sending a woman into the middle of a hostile encampment did not seem like the act of a sane mind. Still, the envoy herself seemed unruffled. She had steel in her spine, Rankeel thought, her manners notwithstanding.

“I am Rankeel Caligula Gilbrist. Know that we mean Baum and the empire no ill will. As much as it pains me to admit it, our nation is in a precarious state, leaving no choice but to wait for our lord duke here until we can escort him home. I pray for your understanding in this matter.”

“Indeed. Then you ought to explain that to Lord Surtr in person.”

The woman’s response raised a great many questions, but she allowed no time to answer them. She turned around and left, leaving a perplexed atmosphere in her wake.

“What do you make of that, sir?” one of the aides asked. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen such an ill-mannered envoy. Ought we take her head?”

Rankeel turned to the man, faintly appalled. “And give them a justification to make war? I think not. They may just be looking for an excuse.”

“An excuse, sir? They are only three thousand. Righteous or not, they are no threat to us.”

“They are not, no. But are you blind to the empire behind them?”

The aide’s eyes widened. At last, he had realized what Rankeel already knew. The southern nobles would not assist Margrave von Gurinda because of his alliance with the chancellor, but if Baum called for aid, they would have no choice but to intervene.

“Do not forget that Baum’s influence far outstrips its size. If they called for aid and the empire did not answer, its citizens might revolt. They crown a new king and the rest of Soleil has no choice but to allow it, despite its protest. The Spirit King’s name is weighty indeed.” Feeling uncomfortable standing up, Rankeel resettled himself into his chair, folded his arms, and ground his teeth.

One of the aides approached him hesitantly. “Then what shall we do, sir?”

“We wait. We have no other choice. Make ready to receive this Surtr.”

The man had been the talk of Soleil since his coronation, but Rankeel had never seen his face. Some claimed he hid it out of shame of his ugliness, others so that different nations would not be jealous of his beauty. He was an empyrean being as ageless as the álfar, a light that shone in the blackest night, a veritable midnight sun. Each rumor was more outlandish than the last, and none rang true.

“This will be a fine chance for me to see the truth for myself.”

Rankeel stood up and walked outside. The sky was aggravatingly blue, and the sunlight seared his skin as it sought to bake the earth.

“Too much rain and the ground drowns. Too little and it dries. Either way, the harvest fails. Sunbaked ground seems to thirst for the blood of men.” He shaded his eyes with his hand as he stared up at the sun.

An aide approached. “Baum has sent its riders, sir.”

Rankeel nodded, turning to gaze at the approaching dust cloud. A group of horsemen was approaching, kicking up the distinctive red dirt of the desert in their wake. An ornately decorated carriage led the party. It had no walls, only a ceiling supported by four pillars, the better to cool its occupants. The riders behind were clad entirely in black—the Crow Legion, Rankeel supposed. Word on the wind claimed they had left the empire for Baum after the fourth prince’s death. It seemed the rumors were true.

Rankeel nodded to himself at the sight. Dressed in uniform black and advancing in unison, they were every bit as imposing as he had expected. Some of the slaves were starting to look nervously at their own poor weapons and armor. They might have had the superior numbers, but if steel was drawn, they would clearly not be in for an easy fight. There was no force so formidable in Lichtein.

“Not a group to be trifled with lightly. Not least given our nation’s history with black banners.”

The sight inevitably recalled Rankeel’s loss years prior. A shadow fell over his features at the shameful memory. To him and the rest of the nation, the color

black was the stain of defeat.

In time, the carriage came to a stop before Rankeel and a man stepped out. His youth was almost as surprising as the strange mask he wore. The lower, visible half of his face was soft-featured, like he was not yet fully grown, and he was shorter than the men around him. He could not have been more than sixteen years of age.

And yet, hair as black as jet. Fortune deserts me today, it seems.

The fourth prince's youthful features flashed through Rankeel's mind. For a moment, he wondered if it could be the same man, but he quickly dismissed the notion. All human beings aged, to a greater or lesser extent. Two years ago, they could have been the same person, but this masked man was too young. What was more, it was impossible to ignore that one of his eyes glinted gold behind his mask. The other was black, but the fourth prince had possessed two black irises.

A one-armed woman emerged from the carriage to stand behind him. Rankeel's eyes widened.

That envoy again...

Her stagnant eyes pierced him with a glare that could kill.

"No need to intimidate the man, Luka."

"Hmph. He was staring at me so, I felt the musclebound fool needed reminding there are more fearful things than brawn." She retreated behind the masked man's back, biting her thumbnail.

For a moment, Rankeel felt uncertain about what to make of the pair, but he quickly reminded himself of his duty. "I am Rankeel Caligula Gilbrist, marquis of the Duchy of Lichtein and commander of this army," he said, adopting a courteous manner. "Forgive me for not being able to offer you a more fitting reception."

The masked man nodded. "I am Surtr, the Black-Winged Lord and second king of Baum."

His words were brief, but his name carried weight. Rankeel felt an indefinable

pressure settle on his shoulders.

So he's taking the name of a lord of old.

In the beginning, God had created Aletia. Lamenting that his efforts had ended in failure, he had disappeared, but not before creating five alter egos to rule the world in his stead. That was the birth of the Five Lords of Heaven and the beginning of the Age of Gods.

Still, to call himself the Black-Winged Lord in the Spirit King's own home...

In the context of the complex history of Soleil, Rankeel understood this was no cause for outrage—better than calling himself the Spirit King, at any rate. Still, the name of the Black-Winged Lord was far too heavy for a human to bear.

Either he has extraordinary confidence in himself or he wants us to think he does.

The coming discussion would reveal which. The man was unlikely to spill his innermost secrets on the negotiation table, but some sense of who he was would bleed through in his words. It always did. The slightest gesture spoke volumes.

“The sun is strong today. If you would, I have arranged for us to speak in the shade.”

Rankeel showed the party to the simple tent he had ordered his subordinates to erect. A cool breeze tickled their cheeks as they entered. In the corners lay precious ice, while slaves maintained the temperature by wafting giant fans.

Rankeel took a seat in one of the chairs. The masked man sat opposite. Luka took up a close position behind him.

“May I offer you some wine? Or I could have my men outside bring water, if you would prefer.”

Rankeel clapped his hands and slaves entered, carrying wine and water, but the masked king made no move to reach for either. He only stared at Rankeel with his unsettling golden eye. At last, he spoke.

“Withdraw your men from the border at once.”

Rankeel regarded the man through the stream of burgundy liquid slowly filling

his goblet. A unilateral demand to retreat was not how he had predicted negotiations would begin. He almost wondered what this king expected, but he avoided letting his dissatisfaction show as he raised his goblet to his lips and smiled.

“We will withdraw as soon as Duke Lichtein returns.”

“And what happens when you don’t keep your word?”

“We have not put pen to parchment. We simply have an understanding. There is no telling what the future might hold. Perhaps some small conflict may be unavoidable.” Rankeel’s eyes flashed; he was well aware of the threat in his words.

“Then why don’t we hasten that future?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that I will dye this ground red with the blood of your soldiers.”

The masked king’s knuckles rapped against the desk. His presence swelled. A shiver ran through Rankeel. He had felt the same before, two years ago, when he’d sat across the table from the fourth prince of the empire. That made no sense. The boy was dead. Had he not reasoned that much just a few minutes before? But then, what was this chill creeping up his spine?

At that moment, a soldier pulled back the tent flap. “Lord Karl has returned, sir.”

Scowling internally, Rankeel made to reply, but the masked king’s solemn voice interrupted.

“Perfect timing. Why don’t we let your master decide what to do?”

Rankeel could only nod in assent, trying his best to maintain his composure. “Very well. Escort Lord Karl here at once.”

In short order, Karl appeared at the entrance, looking a little bewildered. He withdrew a little and averted his eyes, sensing the tension in the tent.

That’s a poor habit. One he’ll have to fix if he’s ever to grow, and the biggest reason he hasn’t won the confidence of the nobles.

Karl was far too quick to shrink away when confronted with the unexpected. If he only had a little of his father's spine, the nobility would place more trust in him, and the coming drought would be less of a threat to the nation's integrity.

"Your Highness," Rankeel said, "I present to you the king of Baum."

Karl's eyes widened. "What is he doing here?"

This was going nowhere. Starting to grow irritated, Rankeel opened his mouth to launch into a brief explanation, but the masked king got there first.

"It appears your negotiations with the empire have failed."

Karl froze, put abruptly on the spot. Rankeel glared at the masked king with fury in his eyes.

"You are trapped in a dark labyrinth with no way out. If you want to escape, you will have to use force. Will Lichtein choose change, or will it choose destruction?" A smile spread across the man's face as he looked them over. "Starving beasts choose to pillage. They cite reasons to disguise their hunger, claiming they are only taking back what is theirs, but they hunger all the same. The empire's resettlement plan is progressing quickly, after all. The north is rich in ore, lumber, water, and food. Enough to sustain the whole pack of you."

"Assuming for a second these assertions are correct," Rankeel said, "they would still be no business of Baum's."

"Not so." With an impatient sigh, Surtr rested his elbows on the arms of his chair, clasped his hands, and laid his chin atop them. "A great many imperial citizens have migrated to Caktos under the imperial resettlement program. They are under Frieden's protection. As faithful believers in the Spirit King, Baum cannot allow them to come to harm."

"So tell me, what do you intend to do about it? Do you intend to stop thirty thousand starving beasts with three thousand sickly sheep?"

"I will weigh your survival instincts by the oldest measure there is—in combat. On this very ground, if you would like."

Surtr regarded them with his golden eye, his voice inflectionless. Rankeel broke into a cold sweat as a nameless dread crawled up his spine. Karl shrank

even further, his eyes fixed firmly on the ground.

All at once, the masked king broke into a grin and the tension was dispelled. “But naturally, we cannot ignore the plight of Lichtein either. You too are faithful believers in the Spirit King.”

“I fail to see the point of all of this,” Rankeel said. “What is it that you are doing here?”

Surtr rose to his feet so that he looked down at them. “I offer you mercy. Freedom from the ills that plague you. Lichtein needs water to escape this drought, but you cannot slake the entire duchy’s thirst with your oases. Your only choices are to take from other nations or to undam the River Saale.”

Rankeel had considered as much, but with the Nidavellirite faction regaining strength, it would be too difficult to breach the wall on the Steissen border. That was why he had resorted to attacking the empire in the first place.

“If you are aware of that,” he said, “surely you know why my men and I are here.”

“Of course. What I am promising you is that I will free the river.”

“A difficult boast to credit. And even if you do make good on your word, we are in no position to offer you a reward.”

“I’m not asking for much. A mine or two will do.”

Rankeel paused for a moment. “That we can give you.”

The empire would have taken the mines anyway if negotiations had succeeded. They were no great loss. Still, it was a small price to demand from a starving nation. There was some hidden scheme at work here; Rankeel could feel it.

Surtr gave him no chance to think about it. “Then the deal is struck. I will have an official contract drafted in short order.”

“Hold a moment. The wall between Lichtein and Steissen is sturdy as a fortress and long besides. We have crossed blades with them many times, but never once have we managed to breach it. As best I can tell, you have only three thousand men. I fear you overestimate yourself.”

“Then I will gladly take ten thousand from you. Career soldiers, mind you, not slaves.”

“Thirteen thousand will not be enough. If it were, we would be there and not here.”

Surtr raised his hand to his mask and smiled. “Marquis Rankeel, there are other ways to attack a wall than from the front.”

* * * * *

The fourth day of the sixth month of Imperial Year 1026

When asked what the greatest city in the southern territories was, the first name on any imperial’s lips would be Sunspear. If the imperial capital was magnificent, Sunspear was shining. But its freedom and open-mindedness were not gifts of the ruling House Muzuk. They were the product of its status as a nexus of trade from all across the continent, a veritable inland port through which all manner of exotic goods flowed. It was connected to the imperial capital to the north, Lichtein and Steissen to the south, the third imperial city to the west, and House Kelheit’s seat of Baldickgarten to the east, and its reserves of gold ensured a constant stream of prospectors hoping to strike it rich. Most of all, it was where the empire’s upper class collected. That, more than anything else, was why it shone.

“This’ll make my fifth time to Sunspear,” the white-haired old soldier said, stroking his chin. “Never gets any less lively.”

“It’s almost as cheerful as the capital. Maybe all the foreign trade has something to do with it.”

Liz rode by his side, gazing at the merriment on the people’s faces from atop her horse. Behind them followed the two thousand soldiers who made up the Knights of the Rose, the elite troops of the Fourth Legion that defended the south. They took up the road as they passed. Crowds waved from either side of the street, and dancing girls twirled and spun to the tune of stringed instruments, drawing roars from the people as they rained flower petals on the parade. Every pair of lips praised Liz’s name.

“It’s an impressive welcome, right enough,” Tris said, “but House Muzuk must

have deep pockets indeed to fund all this.”

Liz nodded. Politics typically came down to money in the end. Still, there were limitations. No amount of coin could buy rain, the absence of which could bring a nation like Lichtein to its knees regardless of its finances. It was tempting to believe that wealth could solve all problems, but humans were helpless before the power of nature.

“They must. I won’t blame them for putting stock in coin, but it’s a precarious kind of power.”

A single mistake in managing one’s finances could make any amount of wealth vanish like a puff of smoke.

“Fritter it away and it’s gone forever,” Liz continued, “but even if you invest it, there’s no guarantee you’ll make it back.”

Rosa had leveraged House Kelheit’s financial might to win the support of the western and central nobles and secure the chancellorship, but Liz had heard that doing so had cost her half of all the assets she had accumulated, and the western and central territories were still far from secure. It would take time to recoup the coin she had invested, and in the meantime, House Kelheit’s coffers continued to dwindle.

“House Muzuk uses its coin wisely, though,” she added. “Sometimes, it’s worth putting on a lavish display to show off your strength.”

Bringing the entire city out in force for this welcoming procession served three purposes. First, to boast that House Muzuk’s pockets were deep. Second, to demonstrate that their control of the south was unshakable. And third, through the people’s guileless cheers, to overwhelm Liz and her train with the extent of their power.

“And there they await, at the end of this parade, in that shining golden palace of theirs. A pretty den for a pack of wolves, right enough.”

Liz couldn’t have put it better herself. She turned her attention back to the fore, toward the procession’s ultimate destination: the gaudy palace called Glitnir, which House Muzuk had constructed entirely out of gold. Beto waited by the entrance, smiling broadly. Beside him was a handsome young man whom

she did not know. As she dismounted before them, he and his entourage bowed their heads in unison.

“Once again, I bid you welcome, Lady Celia Estrella. We have been awaiting your arrival with great anticipation.”

“Thank you for the welcome. You may raise your heads.”

Beto looked up and, with a genial smile, laid a hand on the shoulder of the man beside him. “First, allow me to introduce my esteemed friend. He has been away from these lands for some time, and he has but recently returned.”

“I am Lodurr Freyr von Ingunar, Your Highness,” the man said. “Lord von Muzuk’s faithful servant since my early youth.”

He cut a dainty figure and at a glance seemed unsuited to battle, but he carried himself with a warrior’s training and moved with a grace to rival any of the palace’s ladies-in-waiting. Unlike the dusky-skinned merchants of the south, his skin was sallow white—indeed, it had an almost sickly tint of blue. Perhaps that was why he stood out more than Beto, although more likely, the cause was his palpable aura of strength.

“I have heard great things about you, Your Highness. It seems the land speaks of nothing but you and the late fourth prince.” Lodurr cast a mournful gaze at the sky. “Before his passing, the streets were awash with talk of the second coming of the Kerukeion and the prosperity it would bring the empire. I cannot fathom your loss.”

“Thank you for your words. I have no doubt they will put his soul at ease.”

Liz felt a little strange receiving his condolences, knowing as she did that the other half of the new Kerukeion was still alive and well, but she could not let that show. She replied in suitably sober tones before turning back to Beto.

“Let’s eat first. Then you can tell me more about the situation in Steissen.”

“Of course, Your Highness.” Beto nodded. “My wife was overjoyed to hear that you would be coming. She has lent her own hand to some of the dinner preparations. I would be honored if you would try them.”

“I look forward to it. I had the chance to try Lady von Muzuk’s handiwork

several times while I was in the capital, and it was always delectable.”

“Oh? In the capital?”

Liz nodded. “That’s right. With my sister.” She turned around to the carriage behind her, signaling for it to draw closer.

While her back was turned, Beto cupped his chin in his hand and narrowed his eyes. “Did you, now? How very interesting.”

There was an unusual edge to his words, but he concealed it well enough that Liz didn’t notice. By the time she turned back around, he had donned a diplomatic smile.

“Will somebody else be coming?” he asked.

“Only the one. She doesn’t like the heat, so I let her ride in the shade.”

As she spoke, a white streak leaped from the carriage doors and bounded up to stand by her side. Beto found himself looking at the proud figure of a white-furred wolf—Liz’s pet, Cerberus.

Liz leaned down to scratch the beast’s head as she brushed against her legs. “Do you suppose she could join us?”

Beto looked a little taken aback, but he did his best not to let it show. “But of course. I will arrange for dinner to be served forthwith.”

He turned, still looking a little shocked, and returned inside the palace. Liz followed.

Almost as soon as they were indoors, Beto’s wife—Selvia Sephone von Muzuk—met them in the hallway. “It’s an honor to welcome you to Glitnir a second time, Your Highness,” she said, head bowed. “Dinner is ready to be served. This way, if you please.”

She turned around and led the way without so much as a word to her husband. Beto watched her go in stunned silence, and Ludurr looked unimpressed with both of them.

The group followed Selvia and were soon shown to a dining hall. Liz took her place at the head of the table, with Cerberus sitting politely by her side. Before them lay a vast array of sumptuous dishes—and a great deal of fruit, she

noticed.

“Fruit seemed fitting for a lady,” Selvia explained, laying her hand on her cheek with a wide smile. “I must insist you try these dates. They’re all the rage in Sunspear.”

It would be impolite to refuse. Liz nodded in agreement.

Selvia clapped her hands in delight. “Excellent. Now, enough of these stuffy greetings. We must eat before our food gets cold.”

With that, the servants sprang into motion, pouring mead into the party’s silver goblets as the diners set about digging in.

Beto was the first to break the silence. “I notice that Lady Aura is not with you this time, Your Highness.”

“No. She’s in the west right now.”

The empire had begun plotting to retake Faerzen in recent months, and Aura had headed to the western territories to begin making preparations. Scáthach had joined her to ensure her safety.

“Oh? Then she is serving under Lord von Bunadala—her father, I mean?”

“That’s right. In preparation for the day we take back Faerzen.”

In recognition of Aura’s father’s efforts in battle against Six Kingdoms two years prior, House Bunadala had been elevated to the status of a great house. It had replaced House Münster, which had been in steady decline ever since the death of Third Prince Brutahl. With a more competent leader in charge of the western nobles, plans for the recapture were proceeding apace.

“I hear that there have been more and more clashes on the border of late,” Beto mused. “Her presence will surely lift a great deal of weight from her father’s shoulders.”

“If I may, Your Highness,” Ludurr ventured, “what do you mean to do after Faerzen has been retaken?”

“Reinstate its monarchy, of course.”

Six Kingdoms had been steadily tightening its control of Faerzen. The previous

year, the empire had responded by announcing that Scáthach, the last of the royal line, was under its protection. Six Kingdoms had countered by accusing the empire of using her for its own ends. The conversation had degenerated into mud-slinging, leaving Faerzen's people ignored. According to Rache, who continued to work toward his nation's liberation, the commonfolk wanted Scáthach restored to office but had no desire for the empire's return. However, after two years of Six Kingdoms squabbling among themselves over ownership of Faerzen and with their fortunes showing no signs of improving, a growing minority had begun to call for the empire to chase out their oppressors.

"That will be a hard road indeed, Your Highness," Ludurr said. "To breathe life back into a fallen nation is no easy thing. Its towns are razed, and its people are weary and resentful. Three years is far too short a time for that to be undone." He shook his head in pointed melancholy. "Retaking Faerzen would mean subjecting its people once more to the fires of war. Their bitterness would only grow. Even if you reinstalled the monarchy, Lady Scáthach may return to her homeland to find it in ashes."

"We're taking steps to make sure that doesn't happen."

He chuckled. "Indeed. Well, I will be honored to help in what meager way I can."

Why was he suddenly trying to ingratiate himself? Liz stopped eating and laid her cutlery down, making her displeasure plain. Ludurr only gave a cold smile that made no attempt to disguise his mercenary intentions.

I don't like this man one bit.

His eyes were not smiling. Ice crawled up her spine as their burning gaze held her fast. Something about him seemed uncomfortably predatory, like a snake waiting coldly for its struggling prey to weaken.

"I hope I have not offended, Your Highness," he said. "I only thought to offer my assistance."

At a glance, he looked like he wouldn't hurt a fly, but Liz sensed something calculating hovering on the edges of his delicate features. In an instant, her guard went up. Her heart hammered in her chest, warning her that she could not give this man an inch.

“Perhaps the day will come when I will take you up on that offer,” she replied, “but not today. I have far too many things to attend to. We can discuss this some other time.” She smiled back gracefully, trying to avoid giving the game away, and turned her attention to Beto. “More importantly, Lord von Muzuk, why have you not moved to defend the Gurinda Mark from Lichtein?”

Beto laid his cutlery down and turned to her coolly. “I had forty thousand men ready to ride at a moment’s notice, Your Highness, but marching them to the border might itself have provoked the duchy to war. I found myself with no choice but to wait. However, the situation has now changed.” He made a show of shaking his head. “Word came only a few days ago that they have retreated.”

“Are you sure?”

“Very much so. As to why, I can only speculate, but there can be no mistake. A rather anticlimactic end to the whole affair.”

He sounded disappointed, and for good reason: he had no doubt hoped that Lichtein would get rid of Margrave von Gurinda for him. A great deal of plotting had probably just gone to waste.

“Word should already have reached Chancellor Rosa in the capital. No doubt a messenger will come soon enough.”

“So the duchy has fallen back...” Liz murmured to herself. Her overwhelming response was relief, but she couldn’t deny some uncertainty at the unexpected turn of events. It was possible that Beto was lying; she would have to look into the matter herself to be certain. But if he was telling the truth, it meant that she could set her other concerns aside and focus on Steissen.

Rosa will be able to handle the rest. As for me...

It was time to move on to the main topic. “Then the next matter to discuss is Steissen.”

“Allow me to explain the situation,” Lodurr said. He turned to Beto. “With your leave?”

Beto raised a hand, indicating for him to go ahead.

He turned to Liz with a probing gaze. “How familiar are you with the current

state of the republic, Your Highness?”

Liz took care not to let her guard slip as she answered. “I know it’s broadly split into two factions: the beastfolk of Jötunheim and the dwarves of Nidavellir.”

“Correct. For a long time, the Jötunheimites appeared dominant, but recently, the Nidavellirites have begun to rally...which is troublesome for us.”

Lodurr’s lighthearted tone made it hard to get a sense of the urgency of the situation. His breezy manner was difficult to read, as though designed to tie his listeners in knots. Liz frowned, unable to divine what he was thinking.

“Why do you say that?”

“The empire lent its support to the Jötunheimites with the expectation that they would emerge victorious, but our prediction missed the mark. Now, to put it plainly, everything we have invested is at risk of coming to ruin.”

“But what’s the cause of this miraculous comeback?”

“Well, that’s the curious part. Beginning around the turn of the year, word began to spread that Utgard—the leader of the Nidavellirites—was born of the first emperor’s bloodline.”

“Do you mean to say he has the blood of von Grantz? That’s the first I’ve ever heard of that.”

“It’s a hard story to credit, but he claims to have proof. And from what I’ve been able to gather, he does at least have an artifact of the first emperor in his possession.”

“Then it sounds like we should be looking to ally with the Nidavellirites.”

Lodurr pursed his lips. “I fear that Utgard is not fit to be high consul of the senate. The people revile him. If he were to defeat the Jötunheimites, Steissen would once again fragment into its constituent nations and descend into civil war.”

That would likely have repercussions for all of the southern territories, if not the entire empire. It was a peculiar time for the nation—it was relatively insulated from foreign interference, but far from stable. Only Rosa’s skillful

management under Liz's leadership held it together. If Steissen descended into war again, the nobles she had humiliated would rise up and demand her ousting.

And if the southern nobles join in, she'll be forced out of office.

It was only a hunch, but Liz suspected that if Steissen truly broke apart, the southern nobles would have nothing left to hold them back. They could march on the central territories in force. Without Rosa, she would have no power to defy Beto and his lackeys. She would be forced to marry their choice of husband and live out the rest of her days as an empress in name alone.

And that's the last thing I can allow to happen.

Even as Liz was thinking, Ludurr continued. "Skadi of the Jötunheimites can be temperamental in her own right, but she is beloved by the people and held in high regard by the senate. His Majesty believed that she would be best placed as high consul...and in his absence, we must turn to you for aid."

"I think I understand the situation now, but why are you asking me to go in person?"

Beto or Ludurr would have made just as good a representative of the empire. If anything, that would have been in their interests too; it would put them in a position where they could influence the war in Steissen as they saw fit.

Ludurr, however, only shook his head. "True, Your Highness, you need not. But the greater Steissen's debt to us, the greater the returns we shall see."

In short, he wanted to ensure that the empire was in the best standing with the Jötunheimites when they eventually won. Liz felt like she had more of an inkling of his plans.

They're hedging their bets. They want to make sure they stand to gain, no matter who wins.

If the Jötunheimites prevailed, Beto and Ludurr would profit handsomely from supporting them. If the Nidavellirites came out on top, they would be able to take control of the empire.

Well, not if I have anything to say about it.

The first step would be to secure victory for the Jötunheimites. If they lost after she offered them support, it would only weaken her standing.

Resolving the conflict comes first. Then I can think about undermining House Muzuk's position.

Liz returned her attention to the discussion with renewed determination.

"All right. I understand. But what do you intend to do about this Utgard? I can't speak to his character, but if he really is descended from the first emperor, I want to avoid taking his head."

"That particular piece of news has yet to spread through the empire, Your Highness," Ludurr said. "As yet, it remains a rumor at best. His fate may be left to your discretion. If you chose to take him under your protection, I don't doubt he could be furnished with some piece of land on the border."

As likely as not, that was another reason they had chosen Liz for this task. As heir apparent to the throne, she could execute Utgard with impunity.

"I see. Leave this to me, then. I'll take care of it."

"Of course, Your Highness. We will await news of your success."

Sparks crackled between Liz and Lodurr as the conversation came to a close. Beto looked on with amusement.

"If you wish to spend the night here, Your Highness," he said, "we would gladly furnish you with a room."

"Thank you for the offer, but I have to decline. I plan to head for Steissen as soon as I can. I'll spend tonight at camp."

"Very good. But I must insist that you take three thousand of our cavalry. They may not be the Knights of the Rose, but I have gathered the best we have to offer. What's more..." Beto passed a white envelope to a servant for them to convey to Liz. She cocked her head, not following. "That contains the names of our agents among the Jötunheimites. They may be of use to you. Please, do not hesitate to call on them if you find yourself in trouble."

"Thank you for your help."

"Not at all. It is I who requested your presence, after all. If there is anything

you require, you need only ask.”

A loud clap sounded. All eyes turned to its source, Selvia.

“Now all that dreary talk is done with, shall we get back to dinner? It would be a crying shame not to let Her Highness enjoy this spread we prepared before it gets cold.”

“With pleasure,” Liz said. “What would you recommend?”

“As I mentioned before, you must try the dates, but between you and me, the stew is quite divine.”

The tension dissolved as Liz and Selvia fell to idle chatter. Only one figure sat apart, watching them with icy eyes: Ludurr. As subtle as a snake watching its prey, his hostility flared for only a moment before he suppressed its presence. The edge in his gaze was invisible to all at the table.

Or rather, invisible to all but one.

“That’s trouble and no mistake,” Tris murmured to himself.

Chapter 3: The Dwarves and the Beastfolk

The thirteenth day of the sixth month of Imperial Year 1026

Lichtein's sky was as bright as a midsummer day. The column of cavalry made its way across the prairie, their ranks neat and orderly despite the heat. A well-ventilated carriage trundled along at its head, carrying a boy with black hair and a strange mask.

"We shouldn't be far from the border."

Hiro yawned as he looked around. Prairie stretched away in all directions, the ground marred with cracks and colored brown with dried vegetation. No rain had fallen for many days. It would have been a wasteland if not for the scattering of human figures in the distance.

"Last year, this place was lush with greenery, I hear," Luka said. "You wouldn't think it now. A lesson to Lichtein that they live and die at nature's pleasure." She turned to the figures on the horizon. "Yet still they try to grow their crops. Even without water, they cling to hope."

The people had been born on this land, raised by crops grown on its soil. They would not easily give it up for lost. No doubt they came here every day, praying that something would change. Fearing for their lives, enduring sleepless nights, they hoped against hope for a miracle.

"That is why we show them mercy. When a man terrified for his life realizes that he will live to see tomorrow, he is stricken to his soul with gratitude." Hiro touched a hand to his mask, his smile broadening.

Luka watched in distaste. "So you are simply taking advantage of people in need."

"It's a time-honored tradition. That's how rulers earn the loyalty of their people."

"So that is why you seek to free this river?"

Hiro shrugged. “It’s one reason. But it’s only a step along the way to what I really want.”

“Is that so.” Luka shot him a sidelong glance, but as ever, any attempt to read his mind was thwarted by the mask. Unable to glean any hints, she lowered her gaze to the ground, seemingly losing interest.

“I’ll let you think about it. You’ve got plenty of time.”

Hiro returned his gaze to the fore. An enormous wall of packed earth stretched from one side of the horizon to the other. He could make out the figures of slaves walking along its length, carrying sacks of earth—reinforcing it in anticipation of an attack, perhaps, although it was equally possible that it was still under construction.

“It’s strange to see a wall in such different colors. You can see exactly where it’s been attacked.”

Watchtowers had been erected to guard the locations in question, and a large number of sentries were visible on the battlements.

Their cheeks look thin. They don’t seem to be well-fed.

As he mused, a gate of wood and iron came into view. It had clearly weathered a great many assaults; it was chipped and dented in countless places and stained with more blood and fat than water could wash away.

A ducal soldier rode up to the carriage. “I fear we cannot accompany you any farther, my lord,” he said.

Here, Hiro would bid farewell to the ten thousand men he had received from Rankeel. He would also leave behind all but five hundred of the three thousand Crow Legion soldiers he had brought from Baum.

“You’ve done fine work. Now you can sit back and wait for the good news.”

“Of course, my lord. We pray for your success.”

As Hiro raised a hand in answer, the gate opened with a shuddering groan. He and his men rode inside.

Garda approached the carriage. “We’ll keep two hundred on the vanguard and three hundred behind. No objections, I trust?”

“None. Although I don’t expect them to attack us anyway.”

Hiro had already informed Steissen—or the Nidavellirites, at any rate—of his intention to visit. They had responded that they would welcome his arrival, but on condition that he brought only five hundred men, which he had done. Luka and Garda were with him as well.

“How are Huginn and Muninn doing?” he asked.

“Word came not long ago. They said they’ve arrived undetected. Their preparations are underway.”

“Good. Now all that’s left is to see who this Utgard really is.”

Sunlight glinted off the armor of the riders in front strongly enough to make him squint. Seeking somewhere else to rest his eyes, he looked around. The remnants of battle littered the ground. As an opening in the border between Lichtein and Steissen, this place must have seen its fair share of fighting over the years. Rusted blades lay abandoned alongside half-buried cuirasses and unrecovered corpses, their flesh rotted clean away. A starved monster glared up at the party as it gnawed on a human bone. Despite the blue sky above, the lingering death and resentment in the air lent their surroundings a gloomy feel.

“Little left of the river,” Luka remarked under her breath, looking at what appeared to be a deep trench. That was likely the River Saale. A large volume of bones lay on its banks, as if they had crawled there in search of water.

“That explains why only monsters can survive around here,” Hiro said.
“Although even that’s a matter of time.”

With its prey dying out, the starved monster they had just passed would soon meet the same fate. The lack of water was killing off this land’s fauna as surely as its flora.

“And beyond the deadlands...is Steissen.”

A great wall loomed before them. It was far higher than its equivalent on the Lichtein side and sturdy enough to match its formidable reputation. Forts stood guard against attack at strategic points. Any poorly planned assault would end in a bloodbath.

“Now I see why they thought the empire would be an easier target,” Hiro said. “You’d need to commit a lot of men to break through something like this. All the more so if most of your soldiers were slaves.”

As they approached the wall, a soldier appeared on the watchtower. “Halt!” he cried.

All at once, the battlements were bristling with archers, all of their arrows trained on the force below. The Crow Legion raised their shields and gathered around Hiro’s carriage, readying bows and settling into battle positions. The dry prairie fell silent as a millpond. Even the slightest noise could trigger a raging storm of violence.

Despite the tension, Hiro’s smile never dropped. He raised a hand. “I am Surtr, the Black-Winged Lord and second king of Baum. I was told I have been granted permission to pass. Tell me, has Steissen broken its word, or has it simply never heard of the concept of messengers?”

Before leaving the duchy, he had sent a missive to Utgard in the Nidavellirites’ stronghold of Galza. The reply had come with a writ of passage.

“Here. See for yourself.”

Hiro raised the document, complete with Utgard’s seal, but the soldiers did not lower their bows, and nobody rode out to confirm its authenticity. He tossed it to the ground in disgust.

“Steissen has been skirmishing with Lichtein frequently of late,” Luka said. “It seems the dwarves are suspicious of all humans now.”

“That would explain the inhospitable welcome.” Hiro laid back on the carriage couch with a sigh. “We’ll wait, then. No point in getting worked up. That’s what they want.”

“When steel might be drawn at any moment?” Luka cast another glance around. The soldiers were staring one another down beneath the burning sun, the air so tense that they didn’t even wipe away their sweat.

Fortunately, they were not kept waiting long. The gate swung open, breaking the silence. A single figure emerged from the shadows behind. His torso was barrel-shaped and he stood significantly shorter than Hiro, although he looked

nothing like a child; his face was aged, and he wore a neatly tied beard on his chin. The flashes of musculature through his armor revealed him to be a seasoned warrior. Judging by his distinctive appearance, he was clearly a dwarf and perhaps an officer to boot; his armor was of finer make than that of the men on the wall.

“Apologies for our poor manners, my lord. Lord Utgard told me of your coming. Please, this way.”

“What’s your name?”

“Thorkil, my lord. Commander of the borderwatch.”

“Well, Thorkil, I have some advice for you.”

“Yes, my lord?”

“Think carefully before you do this again. It could easily have turned into an international incident, and that’s the last thing Steissen can afford right now. It’s in no position to be making enemies.”

Thorkil looked back with naked animosity.

Looks like he has quite some hatred for humans after all...

As Hiro looked back coldly, Thorkil seemed to become conscious of the anger he was exuding and bowed his head to hide it. “Thank you for your advice, my lord. I shall bear your words in mind.” With that, he turned around and began to lead the way.

Hiro glanced up at the battlements. The archers were gone. He signaled the standard bearer to march. It had not been quite as simple as he had hoped, but he had managed to enter Steissen.

Hiro and his troops emerged on the far side of the formidable wall to find themselves surrounded by three thousand Steissen soldiers. Some were mounted on ponies—dwarves, he assumed. They wore far sturdier armor than the rest and carried jewel-encrusted swords at their belts. On their chests was the livery of Nidavellir. They regarded Hiro and his company with evident disdain, daring them to put a foot out of line and give them an excuse to draw steel.

“The dwarves in the middle seem to be staring at us.”

“They’re the elites of Nidavellir. A repulsive lot, to be certain.” Luka began to bite her thumbnail and stamp compulsively on the ground, seemingly unable to restrain her irritation. “The dwarves have the hands of gods, they say. Nobody crafts better blades, and it often goes to their heads. Sometimes they go to serve in palaces, but their arrogance soon gets them thrown out.”

“Do you have something personal against them?”

“Not at all. It just sits ill with me that when the best of them win renown in foreign lands, the rest brag about their feats as if they were their own, supping fame like fine wine when they’re worth less than a cup of vinegar.”

“And those are the elites, you say? Do you think they have anything to do with the recent disturbance?”

“The system should be burned to the ground.”

Luka was growing less and less restrained. It seemed prudent to leave her alone for now. It would only cause trouble if she lost control here. She was beautiful, despite her burns, but her sheer prickliness made it difficult for anybody to approach her, man or woman. She supposedly had a soft spot for children, but it went unfulfilled—naturally, they did not want to come near her.

“The elites, hm...” he mused. He had heard the rumors. There was a privileged class in Nidavellir; an institution one was only eligible to enter if they, their fathers, or their grandfathers had contributed in some exceptional way to the nation. The dwarven senators who made up half of the senate were all members of the elites. Known as the Nidavellirite faction, they had helped to rule Steissen for many years.

Ostensibly, the elite system was a meritocracy that cared nothing for background, but the reality was less rosy. Contributions to the nation had to be assessed by somebody, and in this case, that somebody was the existing elites. As much as they professed that talent could come from anywhere, in practice, they were all dwarves. The result was that, in Steissen—or at least, in the territory of Nidavellir—the established upper class had the power to render accomplishments worthless, and anybody not lucky enough to be born a dwarf had no hope of advancement. Anybody who wanted to establish themselves

had no choice but to leave for another nation and make their mark there.

“Now I remember. I read about this. Humans are kept as slaves in Steissen, beastfolk are considered livestock, and álfar are kept as trophies. Even the poorer dwarves are spat on and abused.”

A society could not support a privileged class like the elites without cracks appearing in its foundations. That was the cause of the strife that currently gripped Steissen.

“Some nerve their leader has, calling himself a descendant of the first emperor.”

“The powerful always did care for themselves first and foremost,” Luka remarked. “If their position becomes unstable, they will shore it up by whatever means they can.”

“The simplest answer there is. Let’s just hope it’s true.” With a wry smile, Hiro turned his thoughts to the future. “Now, what to make of all this...”

His hand of cards was limited but versatile. The question now was how to play it most efficiently to reap the greatest rewards.

“The empire has also moved to intervene, I believe.” Luka interrupted his musings.

“So I hear. I remember the report.”

“Apparently, a certain girl with crimson hair has taken charge.”

“I heard that too. Liz will be providing support to the Jötunheimites in person. Does that bother you?”

“Not in particular.” Luka fell silent again, retreating back into her own little world.

Hiro cocked his head—it was unusual for her to bring up something like that—but there was no point pondering it now. He quickly banished the matter to the periphery of his mind.

* * * * *

The walls of Sunspear’s golden palace caught the evening sun, showering the

city in rainbow light. Inside, Beto and his right hand, Ludurr, were having a discussion over a bottle of wine.

“Now,” Beto said, his chair creaking beneath him as he leaned back, “how do you think Lady Celia Estrella will overcome this trial?”

Opposite, Ludurr took a composed sip from his goblet and smiled. “An interesting question. I believe I have a reasonable grasp of her character.”

Beto leaned forward. “What do you think?”

Ludurr cast his gaze to the window, narrowing his eyes against the picturesque sunset. “Honest, if not given to subtlety, perhaps.” He shook his head. “No, she is wise in her own ways, sharp of instinct and quick of wit. She read all of me that I let her, and she seeks to grow further yet. If she is this impressive now, I fear to think what she may become in time.”

“She has grown beautiful, hasn’t she? One might mistake her for an álf. A shame—had she been raised a princess, she might have bought a nation or two.”

Ludurr snorted. “That is not quite what I meant.”

“I know. A jest, nothing more. But if nothing else, her appearance proves the purity of her heritage.”

“The royal family’s bloodline has mingled with many others in the past thousand years, so it is not unheard of for it to bear forth remarkable beauties.” A smile spread across Ludurr’s face as he savored the aroma of his wine. “Still, who would have imagined that she would be born with red hair?”

“Only the late Emperor Greiheit and the other great houses knew, I suspect.”

“No,” Ludurr replied. “They were not the only ones.”

Beto laid his silver goblet on the table, frowning. “The first empress consort?”

“Close, but incorrect. She was an unfortunate puppet, nothing more. And now the empire no longer has empress consorts.”

Silence fell for a short time, and then Beto drew a breath of realization. “Orcus.”

Ludurr smiled. “Correct. And that is also the reason behind Emperor Greiheit’s expansionism. Where the imperial family goes, Orcus follows. A problem we must address sooner or later.”

“But first comes the question of whether Lady Celia Estrella can overcome this hurdle.”

“As I said, her growth is remarkable. And she is not content to rest on her laurels—she seeks greater heights. Soon, we shall see whether she can make these events in Steissen another stepping stone, or whether they will prove a fatal fall.” Ludurr drained his goblet with evident relish. He would enjoy seeing which.

Beto pulled a face, pushing his cup away as if its contents no longer interested him. “Do you expect her to fall foul of the traps you have laid?”

“I wonder. We shall have to wait and see.”

“That von Kelheit witch can no longer be allowed to do as she likes. If we do not oust her somehow, House Muzuk will find itself finishing this race in second place.” Beto picked up the bottle and refilled Ludurr’s cup.

“We have plenty of opportunities for that. It is not yet time to panic. We could better use this chance to test Lady Celia Estrella.”

“Test?” Beto offered Ludurr the goblet now brimming with wine.

“To determine whether she has the wherewithal to solve her own problems. She has always had capable advisors to assist her in the past. That makes it difficult to gauge her true worth.”

Ludurr rested an elbow on the table and reached for one of the pieces of fruit piled in the bowl. The drink seemed to be getting to him. Something manic glinted in his eyes as he bit into an apple.

“And if she falls short, we may oust Countess von Kelheit from the chancellor’s seat as you wish. But no matter which of the Jötunheimites and the Nidavellirites prevails, we stand to gain. We need only watch from afar and reap the rewards of our success.”

He struck the apple against the table as though his interest had waned. His

brow creased as he regarded Beto afresh.

“But I would hear more of what happened two years ago. I understand the von Bunadala girl snatched the seat of campaign strategist from your grasp. May I ask how you and the rest of your advisors let that happen?”

This was clearly a topic Beto had hoped to avoid. His expression changed and he looked away awkwardly, unwilling to meet Ludurr’s gaze.

Ludurr was undeterred. “And that was not all, was it? If you were feuding with Countess von Kelheit for the chancellorship, why did you not send for me?”

Ludurr had spent the past three years in Steissen, spinning various schemes. He had hastened the death of the high consul, arranged the assassination of both factions’ electoral candidates, and worked to split Steissen in two, all while collaborating with the Nidavellirites to dam the River Saale and exacerbate the drought in Lichtein. Satisfied that his plans had succeeded, he had returned to Sunspear, only to find himself confronted with a slew of Beto’s mistakes.

“I regret to say I underestimated her.”

“So you made an error of judgment.”

Beto lifted his chin, although his voice shook with shame. “Indeed. I thought too much of our capabilities. I believed House Kelheit posed no threat to us, even without you here.”

“And it took the loss of the western and central territories for you to learn your error.”

“I can make no excuses. It was my mistake, and I apologize for it.” Beto lowered his head, making no effort to argue.

Placated by the show of contrition, Ludurr’s anger lessened by a shade. “Well, what’s done is done. If you acknowledge your mistakes, I will not press you further. You at least managed to make yourself a ministerial secretary. To fight our way back from this position will be amusing in and of itself.” The seeds for that had already been sown. Ludurr chuckled, in a better mood. “I look forward to seeing how the first emperor’s necklace avails us.”

Beto raised his head again. “Indeed. Besides, we are used to having the odds against us.”

“I did not say you were forgiven. You will keep your arrogance on a tighter leash in the future. Besides, that was not your only failing. Why did you appoint your wife acting secretary? If she was to be a hostage in the palace, that would be one thing, but she travels constantly between Sunspear and the capital. What purpose does that serve?”

Beto’s face paled as though he had abruptly run out of air. “She told me she wanted the position. I could not refuse her.” Where he was usually confident, now his voice was weak and his tone was awkward. He always grew evasive when it came to this subject.

“So love is to blame?” Ludurr scowled.

Beto’s shoulders slumped as he heaved a sigh. “Would that it were so.”

He cast a wistful gaze out of the window, as though reminiscing about the distant past. The sun had long set now, and darkness lay over the world like a curtain.

* * * * *

Distant howls shook the night. The land felt different now that the sun had gone down. Every noise became more unsettling, and terror thrived in the absence of light. Even the scent in the air had changed.

Today, the night contained an especially hostile presence. Five thousand heavily armed soldiers made their way down the road. Liz led from the front, with Tris by her side. Her white wolf gamboled nearby.

“It seems we’ve made it, Your Highness,” the old soldier said.

Shadows danced across Liz’s shapely features in the torchlight. “It’s gotten cold now that the sun’s gone down. Once we’re across the border, we’ll send a messenger to the Jötunheimites and ask if we can use the fortress for the night.” Liz glanced up the road. Lights shone in the darkness ahead, evenly spaced, wavering in the wind. “We might not be able to see it right now, but if those torches are any indication, it’s large enough.”

The fortress lay where the empire met Steissen. This was the first time Liz had ever seen it.

“It’s unbreakable, they say,” Tris said. “All sorts of peoples make their home in Steissen, and no one builds sturdier foundations than the dwarves.”

“So that’s why other nations would rather send support than try to invade.”

“Aye, that’s the right of it. Steissen might be in turmoil, but it’s no easy pickings. Its towns have high walls, and its forts are strong. You’d need a large force to lay it low. The wall along the Lichtein border is particularly formidable, I’ve heard.”

“Have you ever been to Steissen before?”

“Only once, with Dios.” Tris’s face grew sorrowful in the torchlight as he looked up at the fortress, recalling the past. Dios had passed away during Lichtein’s invasion. “I’ve little to tell from that time, Your Highness. We returned to the empire almost as quickly as we arrived.”

“I see.” Liz didn’t probe any further. The old man suddenly seemed terribly fragile.

Silence descended between them as the conversation petered out. Only the drumming of horseshoes and the crunch of armor disturbed the quiet. They rode by the sounds of the night. Gradually, the lights before them grew larger and larger, until a fortress emerged from the darkness, given shape by the moonlight.

Liz called the column to a halt.

“Welcome to Jötunheim province! You all look dead on your feet, but would you mind showing me to your commander? It’s only right I give a proper greeting.”

A figure appeared before them—a formidable woman dressed in revealing traditional garb. She carried a bow and a well-sharpened axe at her waist, and a dead rabbit dangled from her belt. Behind her stood a host of burly warriors clad in animal hides. They looked so uncouth that they could easily have been mistaken for bandits.

Liz dismounted and approached the woman. “I am Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz of the Grantzian Empire.”

The woman’s eyes widened with surprise in the torchlight. She looked Liz over from tip to toe. “Well, ain’t you a fine thing. You the princess?”

Liz cocked her head, taken aback by the woman’s forward manner. “And you are?”

“Me? Call me Skadi. Skadi Bestla Mikhail, ruler of Jötunheim province by order of the senate.” Her nostrils flared as though taking in Liz’s scent.

“I take it you’re here to represent the Jötunheimites?”

Skadi took a step back. “That’s right.”

She closed the distance again, still sniffing. There was something oddly animalistic about her motions. Sensing Liz’s wary gaze, she turned to look her in the eye. Only then did Liz realize what seemed so off about her—her sclera were black instead of white. Upon closer inspection, two curved, goatlike horns protruded from her forehead.

“You’re one of the beastfolk, aren’t you?” Liz asked.

Skadi nodded, a broad grin spreading across her face. “Sure as sunshine.”



Before the creation of the republic, Steissen had been divided into nine different nations. Some had belonged to the beastfolk, some to the humans, and some to the dwarves. Jötunheim had been the foremost beastfolk nation, Lichtein the foremost human one, and Nidavellir the foremost dwarven one. The Republic of Steissen had been born when they joined hands in alliance to resist the empire's influence. As time passed, the nation's peoples had intermingled, but many still chose to dwell in regions where their fellows were most common, and so each province's population was still dominated by its original inhabitants.

"Thanks for lending your aid," Skadi said. "The Nidavellirites are a tenacious bunch. They've been starting to give us some trouble in recent months." She extended her hand for Liz to shake.

"Not at all. We'll be glad to help in any way we—" Liz reached out to grasp Skadi's hand, only to find it no longer there. The beastwoman had abruptly squatted down and was now gazing at her waist.

"So this is the famous Lævateinn, eh? I'd heard the whispers, but this is the first time I've seen it for myself."

"You aren't a very good listener, are you?"

"It's my beastfolk blood at work. Makes it hard to sit still."

There was little Liz could say to that.

"Well," Skadi continued, "we can't loiter around here forever. Care to come in?"

She clasped her hands behind her head and walked off without waiting for an answer. After a couple of paces, she stopped.

"Oh, that's right. There was one thing I wanted to ask you." She turned around. "Tell me—why did my brother Dios die?"

A cold wind blew. The torches' light fell away as they guttered. Unable to make out Skadi's expression in the darkness, Liz could do nothing but stand dumbly. Behind her, a shudder of shock ran through Tris.

* * * * *

The fifteenth day of the sixth month of Imperial Year 1026

Galza, in Nidavellir Province

Dawn had not long broken, but an uproar more suited to a battlefield rang out where there should have been stillness. The earth shook as 3,500 soldiers tore along its length, shaking drops of dew from the leaves to soak into the earth. Birds rose from the treetops as their horses thundered past, and animals burst from the underbrush to scatter in all directions.

Hiro sat up, idly watching the scenery go by. His blanket slipped to the ground, still warm with his body heat. He rubbed his eyes and cast his gaze around the carriage. Luka was still asleep, curled up in her blanket like a cat. Huginn lay next to her, expression tormented as though she was having nightmares—caused by Luka’s arms around her neck, no doubt.

“What’s Huginn doing here?” Hiro mused. She was supposed to be undercover in Galza. If his memory served, she had not been present when he went to sleep, back when they had changed to this larger carriage.

Garda peered in through the driver’s window. It seemed he had heard Hiro talking to himself. “She came during the night. I thought she could use a rest, so I let her in. I have her report, if you’d care to hear it.”

“That’s all right. I’ll ask her once she’s awake. Do you know where Muninn is?”

“Holding the reins. I offered him the same as his sister, but he said he couldn’t sleep safe with his mortal enemy in the carriage. So here he is instead, trying to keep his eyes open.”

“Every time I go near Luka, the fists come flying...” An exhausted voice issued from beside Gardar. “Put one foot wrong and I’ll be a goner.”

Hiro nodded. Luka seemed to have a low opinion of Muninn’s position as Huginn’s brother. He wasn’t quite certain how serious she was about their feud, but she certainly lashed out viciously enough every time he approached.

“I don’t think she’d hurt you in front of Huginn,” he said, stifling a yawn.

Muninn groaned. Beside him, Gardar chuckled.

“The boy has suffered enough, One-Eyed Dragon. Besides, you awoke at a good time. Galza’s on the horizon.”

“Finally, the end of our journey. I was just starting to miss my bed back in Baum.” Hiro raised both arms above his head and stretched. “Oh, that’s an idea. Muninn, once we make it to the city, you have permission to take it easy for a while.”

“Eh? You mean it, chief?”

“We shouldn’t be going anywhere in a hurry. Get your strength back while we wait for things to develop.”

“You got it! And wouldn’t you know it, I got just the tavern. It has the sweetest mead, the prettiest dancing girls, and bards with the richest voices you ever heard. Paradise, long as you don’t mind a brawl or two!”

“All right. Just keep it in moderation.”

Muninn was typically laid-back, and it was unusual to see him quite so enthusiastic. The lack of sleep seemed to have made him a little giddy.

Hiro turned back to Garda. “How are the men holding up?”

“This is nothing for the Crow Legion. They’ve marched for three days straight more than once.”

Hiro and his forces hadn’t stopped to rest in the day and a half since the border, marching through the night. The Nidavellir elites flanking them seemed determined to deny them any sleep. It was a petty kind of mischief, and one that the dwarves also had to suffer, which was turning their march into something of an endurance contest.

“I’m not sure what we’ve done to annoy them.” Hiro cocked his head.

“I reckon I know,” Muninn piped up. “It’s Thorkil, their commander. I heard about it at the tavern. He tried to lead a force into Lichtein five years back, but the Rising Hawk—that’s Marquis Rankeel—sent him packing back to Steissen. Word is he lost his lands for it, and he’s had a chip on his shoulder about humans ever since. They say he’s the one who signed off on damming the River Saale.”

Hiro snorted dismissively. “So he’s just taking his anger out on us. If he’d lost his family or something, I might have sympathized.”

“The dwarves are a prideful lot, and that goes double for the elites. Scratch their honor and they’ll hold it against you ’til they die, no matter if they were the ones at fault, or even if you’re a dwarf too. There was this bunch I ran into at the tavern, let me tell you about ’em...”

Muninn was unusually talkative today, and it didn’t seem like he was going to stop anytime soon. Hiro found his attention drifting outside the window toward Galza. The first thing that struck him was the height of its walls. They stretched so far skyward that he had to lower his head to the carriage floor to see the top. The walls of the imperial capital were imposing in their own right, but nothing like this.

“That’s dwarven architecture for you. Not an easy place to lay siege to.”

Any would-be conqueror’s determination would falter after one look at the walls. They were too high for a siege tower to breach the battlements and well beyond the reach of ladders. One might try to go through instead of over, but the stonework was thick, layered, and as hard as the earth itself; catapults, trebuchets, and ballistae would be lucky to leave a scratch, and the watchtowers above the gate were poised to rain fire arrows down on a battering ram.

“You’d have to hire other dwarves to develop new siege weaponry,” Hiro mused, “or else surround the place and try to starve them out.”

Any serious attempt to take the city would require committing a huge number of soldiers for a long period of time. A half-hearted effort would simply bounce off its walls.

“The River Saale is close, I suppose. Flooding the place might work.”

Coin to hire local laborers, borrowed slaves from Lichtein, and some skillful earthworks would be all it took to turn the city into an island.

“Then again, I’d want to keep the city intact. That would make it easier to rule once the fighting was done. In that case...we could buy the loyalty of someone on the inside and destroy it from within.” Hiro sank deeper and deeper into a

sea of schemes. “Time, that’s the problem. Everything would all take time...”

“Why are you acting as though you will have to take the place?” Luka had woken up and was looking at him askance.

“It’s not like that. Those walls just looked like a challenge, that’s all. Besides, isn’t that every boy’s dream? Climbing over a castle wall to lay waste to their enemies?”

“Your dream, perhaps.” Luka’s eyes pierced into him as she drew her arms around the still-sleeping Huginn.

No, that wasn’t quite right. Hiro looked closer. Huginn was very much awake, and her eyes silently pleaded for his help. Feigning sleep seemed to be her response to finding herself in Luka’s grasp. He smiled at her ruefully.

Garda appeared at the driver’s window again. “The elites say they’ll lead the way. They want us to leave the Crow Legion here, although they’ll permit a ten-man escort. What say you?”

“I accept their terms. You can pick our escort. Tell the rest of the men to make camp and wait for further orders.”

“I’ll see it done.” Garda pulled away from the window again.

It was hard to blame the dwarves for feeling uneasy about letting a foreign army inside their city, even one only five hundred strong. Any nation would have done the same. That said, with walls this sturdy, surely they could have afforded a more generous offer than a ten-man escort.

“Well, not that it matters. It’s enough that we’ve gotten in this easily.”

Hiro’s lips pulled into an ominous smile beneath his mask. Luka snorted and looked out of the window. They passed through the gateway bored into the forbidding walls to find themselves in a city of stone. Almost all of the buildings were built with piled-up rocks, rugged to look at and visibly solid.

“I take back what I said,” Hiro murmured as he looked around. “This place would be easy to conquer.”

Luka didn’t respond. The curious sight didn’t seem to arouse her interest. “I see a lot of dwarves,” she remarked.

“It used to be a dwarven nation. They still make up around half of the population.”

Yet there were no other races visible, only dwarves. The streets seemed strangely quiet for a city that was supposed to be the Nidavellirites’ stronghold.

“All these smithies reek of oil,” Luka sniffed.

“Dwarven craftsmanship is first-rate. A blade forged with care by the best of their smiths can be as good as a spirit weapon, or so I hear.” Hiro gestured to the stalls lining the road. “And their glasswork isn’t bad either. A little polishing and they can make it shine as pretty as any jewel.”

“Hm. Impressive.”

The merchants’ wares glistened like a kaleidoscope as they caught the sun’s light, but the darkness of Luka’s eyes registered none of their color. Even dwarven artisanry seemed to make no impression on her.

“Many of these houses look unoccupied. And these shops are all manned by dwarves.”

“It does seem like the other peoples have been driven out, doesn’t it? I’d hazard a guess that the shopkeepers are all relatives of elites.”

As the townscape rolled by, Hiro noticed that several shops seemed to have been torn down. Bloodstains were visible on the stone. Whether they had been pillaged by soldiers or torched in pogroms, it was clear that nothing good had happened there.

“War can breed both suspicion and solidarity. But in a diverse nation like Steissen, the former comes more naturally than the latter.”

The stalls were lined with shiny objects as though to attract tourists, but nobody was coming to buy. As Hiro’s party made its way along the road, the wares on display began to change, becoming more utilitarian and diverse: arms and armor, tea sets and cutlery, accessories and household goods. Yet with no customers, they were worth as much as pebbles by the roadside.

“I see more wooden buildings around here,” Luka remarked. “And these streets feel sullen.”

The carriage left the road and proceeded along a slightly uneven track. Rows of wooden longhouses stood nearby. Perhaps they had once housed non-dwarven races; now they were in the process of being demolished. The party was reaching the city center now, and still they had seen nobody but dwarves on the streets.

“The city’s built for wartime,” Hiro said. “The buildings near the walls are made of stone so a stray fire arrow can’t set them alight.”

“I have yet to see a human who could clear those walls with an arrow.”

“A human couldn’t, but another one of the five peoples could.”

“Ah, yes. The uncivilized beasts. I suppose they would be strong enough.”

Steissen’s west was the domain of the beastfolk, and the Jötunheimites, who hailed from there, naturally counted many beastfolk among their ranks. Their extraordinary strength could propel an arrow over the walls with ease.

“I’m surprised the Nidavellirites have managed a comeback if they allow this kind of oppression. The first emperor’s necklace only has value to the other peoples.”

If the Nidavellirites regarded anybody who wasn’t a dwarf with contempt, Utgard’s claim to the first emperor’s bloodline wouldn’t command much sway. It might attract hatred, but not loyalty. If anything, it might convince more people to side against him.

“Word is some other nation got involved to smooth things over.” Huginn abandoned her pretense of sleep to join the conversation. “The Nidavellirites have been getting a lot of coin from somewhere. Utgard’s been bribing senators to keep his side together.”

Many outside of Steissen venerated the first emperor. Attracting their attention would be an easy way to gain support, and once Utgard had their coin, he could use it to buy the loyalty of the greedy and powerful.

“You probably saw when we came through, but he’s filled out his ranks by conscripting other races, as well as any dwarves who don’t like his leadership. He came down on any who spoke out with an iron fist, and if they still ran their mouths after, he let the elites take them and their families to the gallows.”

Those executions had been limited to the early days, Huginn explained. Now the preferred method was to take any dissenters' families hostage and force them to obey. Several Nidavellirite senators had decried Utgard's methods as inhumane, and some had attempted to defect to the Jötunheimites, but through this method, they had ultimately been pressed into service.

"No mercy, even to his own," Hiro mused. "It sounds like he's gone the worst kind of power-mad."

He was getting the picture now. The rot in Nidavellir did not stem from the dwarves themselves, but from the privileged class known as the elites. Indeed, the root of it all seemed to be Utgard himself.

"There's nothing more troublesome than a clever tyrant."

Utgard had used the first emperor's name to attract the support of Steissen's neighbors and force his detractors to obey, dragging the Nidavellirites back from the brink of defeat.

But ruling by fear never works for long. Things will start to come undone sooner or later. All these purges will destroy Steissen's culture, send it spiraling into decline, and eventually tear it apart.

The one ray of hope was the Jötunheimites, who were still holding out. If they managed to defeat the Nidavellirites, Steissen could be saved from ruin and rebuilt.

"I reckon Utgard only let you in so easily because he thinks there's coin in it, Your Lordship," Huginn said. "Like as not, he figures if he welcomes you as a guest, he can wrangle more support out of his neighbors. The man's a piece of work and no mistake."

That was probably on the mark. Hiro could think of no other reason the Nidavellirites would have been so welcoming.

"You're not...thinking of joining them, are you, Your Lordship?" Huginn looked at him, her eyes full of uncertainty. Surely she could guess what his answer would be, but he couldn't blame her for wanting to confirm; after all, she knew how protective he was of the first emperor's memory.

He shifted his attention behind her to Luka. The woman regarded him with

silent intensity, her arms still around Huginn's shoulders. He cast a wry smile in her direction and replied as casually as he could.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to side with the Nidavellirites. Not even if this Utgard really is who he claims to be."

"I-I'm glad to hear it, Your Lordship!" A broad smile spread across Huginn's face. Behind her, Luka's anger dissipated.

"On that point, I'd like you to find out where these hostages are. We'll need to know where they're being held so we can free them when the time comes."

"Understood, Your Lordship. I'll tell my men to look into it, along with what this Utgard's really up to."

"Please." Hiro nodded appreciatively.

"You can count on— Eek!"

"Isn't that a relief, Igel?"

"Gerroff!"

As Huginn tried to reply, Luka pushed her to the floor of the carriage and began to rub her with her cheek. The tense atmosphere of a few moments prior vanished in an instant.

Hiro turned his attention away from the pair and up to the driver's window. A large palace had come into view, silhouetted against the sky. It was a magnificent building, like an artisan's sculpture crafted from wood and stone. A low white wall surrounded it, manned by a host of soldiers ready to repel any signs of unrest.

The elites signaled to the sentries at the gate, and the doors ground open. Hiro's carriage passed through the open portal without incident.

The palace entrance came into view. A large crowd stood in front of the doors, dressed in luxurious garb. They shone to a tacky degree, as if they possessed all the wealth in the world and were not afraid to flaunt it.

"Jewels choose their wearers as much as their wearers choose them," Hiro murmured. "And they could make any gemstone look as dull as a roadside rock."

Muninn turned around to look back through the window. “That there’s the Nidavellirite senators and their associates.”

“They look quite well-off for people who were losing to the Jötunheimites a few months ago.”

“No one dresses fancier than a dwarf drunk on power, chief. Rumor has it they’ve even forgotten how to wield their swords. There’s an underground bar in town where the commonfolk gather, and I’ll tell you this: the dwarves who ain’t elites don’t got good things to say about the ones who are.” Muninn began to hum a jaunty tune. “‘Shame of Nidavellir, strangers to toil, jewels on their hands where they used to wear oil, laid down their hammers to count out their gold, grasping for gems while their forges grow cold, living the high life that folks only know, when they’ve forgotten who lives down below.’ They were singin’ that, chief. Uh, loud.”

He blushed, scratching his cheek bashfully. Unfortunately for him, a scar-faced man looked far from cute doing that. Huginn went pale, and Luka began to exude an ominous aura.

“You know that never gets a good reception,” Hiro said.

Muninn continued humming as he spoke, oblivious to the roundabout warning. “I say dwarves, but most of ’em are half-human or half-beastfolk nowadays. The elites try to keep their bloodlines pure, but that’s old thinking. Most of the commonfolk don’t care who’s what.”

“Interesting. Perhaps we could make use of that.”

Just as Hiro was about to sink into thought, the carriage came to a halt. The doors opened and sunlight streamed through. He stepped outside to find himself greeted by a crowd of dwarves.

“Ah! Lord Surtr, my old ally! In our hour of need, you come to honor our ancient pact! Truly, I am overjoyed.” A dwarf came forward from the throng and fell to one knee with his hand on his belly. Between his grandiose voice and ostentatious garb, he could have been an actor on the stage. “A pleasure to meet you, I’m certain. I am Utgard, lord of Galza and descendant of Emperor Artheus himself.”

Hiro’s nose wrinkled in displeasure behind his mask.

* * * * *

Thrynheim, in Jötunheim Province

The province of Jötunheim had once been a nation of beastfolk, who still made up the majority of its population, and was situated in Steissen’s only grasslands. One could see to the horizon in all directions. To the west lay a fertile breadbasket, while to the east was the fortress city of Gastropnir, home to the largest hunting grounds in all of Aletia. The province’s geography permitted the breeding of fine horses, the export of which formed the backbone of its wealth and supported much of Steissen’s economy. If the dwarves were peerless smiths, the beastfolk were unrivaled breeders of animals; once upon a time, the former’s weaponry and the latter’s warhorses had kept Steissen’s lands peaceful and its armies strong, but that time was long past, before they had turned on each other in bitter conflict.

It was the seventeenth day of the sixth month of Imperial Year 1026, and Liz had arrived in Jötunheim Province’s capital of Thrynheim.

“The stars look so close out here.”

The sun had set, and the curtain of night lay over the world. The stars were the only light in the darkness, glimmers of resistance proclaiming their presence to the people below.

In the palace of Thrynheim, a banquet was underway. A bundle of lumber blazed in the courtyard. Humanoid figures danced around it with drinks in hand, their steps ranging from merry to feverish. From the smiles on their faces, one would never have guessed they were a people at war. In a sense, not worrying about tomorrow was in their blood. The beastfolk lived life for the joy of the moment, reveling in taking the front line in battle, and even their funerals involved sending the deceased off with a smile. They did as their whims dictated, preferring to act rather than think.

“A white wolf, eh? Now that’s a rare sight. I thought they only lived on the islands to the east.”

Skadi tossed Cerberus a hunk of meat on the bone. The white wolf sprang

after it with astounding speed and tore into it with relish.

“Have you ever been there?” Liz asked beside her.

She shook her head, goblet of ale in hand. “Never. The Twelve Tribes only care for purebloods. Anyone else, it’s said they drive them off with steel.”

“Have you ever thought about it?”

“When I was younger, for certain. Now I don’t know. After a thousand years, it might as well be a faerie tale. Nobody’s sure the place exists, and even if it did, you’d have as much chance coming back from it alive as you would from Ambition.”

She took a large gulp and turned to Liz with reddening cheeks. It was only her first, but her steady gaze made it clear that she was not a weak drinker. Liz made a mental note to leave her cup alone for now.

“Anyhow,” Skadi said, “you can ask me all you like, but first, I got a question for you.”

“Hm?”

“That white wolf of yours.” Skadi gestured to Cerberus, who was busy cracking a bone in her jaws. “How’d you get your hands on her?”

“If you’re hoping for a grand adventure, it wasn’t anything like that. Just luck. I found her wounded and took her in.”

“Quite some luck.” Skadi’s brows pulled together dubiously for a moment, but she shrugged it off and downed the last of her ale. Then she set about tearing into her meat.

By her side, Liz quietly worked her way through her enormous plate of vegetables. But watching the beastwoman eat made it difficult to stomach even that, so she turned to the dancers in the courtyard instead.

“I’d heard Jötunheim was a lively place, but I didn’t quite expect this.” She had no problem with merry banquets, but naked dancing was perhaps a step too far.

“What’s wrong? Not enjoying yourself?” Skadi moved to seize her arm.

Seeing where that was likely to lead, Liz inched back out of her reach. “No, I’m fine. I’m having fun just watching.”

“Hmph. I’d heard human princesses were all prudes. I suppose it must be true.”

“I don’t think being a princess has anything to do with it. Besides, aren’t you part human?”

“Some. A little bit of álf, a little bit of dwarf... Everyone’s everything here. But my beastfolk blood runs thickest. I’d rather cut loose than feel shame.” Skadi rapped her horns with a knuckle and grinned. “Still, I’m with you for now. Just happy to watch my people have some fun.”

She poured herself another goblet of ale and watched the dancers for a while, squinting against the firelight. After some time, she turned nonchalantly back to Liz.

“We leave in three days. Planning to join us, Princess?”

“Of course. That’s why I’m here.”

“We’ll be going straight to Galza. We’re going to beat those Nidavellirites once and for all.”

“Are you sure you should say that out loud?” Liz looked around, checking whether anybody was listening in.

“Don’t you worry. I can sniff out a rat twice as good as any human. Call it my animal instincts at work. Ain’t no way anyone could hear us over this racket, anyhow.”

“All right, then. If you say so.”

Skadi sounded so confident that it was hard not to be convinced, and besides, she bounced between topics quickly enough not to let the conversation get awkward. Suddenly, something in the distance caught her attention.

“Huh. Looks like that old man of yours is joining in the fun.”

“What?” Liz followed her gaze to see Tris surrounded by beastfolk, who were throwing him high into the air. Tears streamed from his eyes with every ascent. She burst out laughing. “Ha ha ha! I don’t think I’ve ever seen him look so

happy.”

“Happy, huh? You figure those are tears of joy?” asked Skadi.

“Oh, no. He’s scared of heights.”

Ordinarily, she would have gone to help, but Tris had been distant ever since their arrival in Steissen, growing quieter and spending more time thinking alone. It didn’t come as much of a surprise that he was looking for a way to take his mind off things. There was no need to intervene. Better to let him laugh, cry, and rage as much as he needed. Hopefully, it would not be long before he was back to his normal, hearty self.

“So they’re tears of terror. Not a lot of guts for a man his size.” Skadi took another gulp of ale from her goblet.

“He can be surprisingly sensitive sometimes,” Liz said.

“Oh? You known him long?”

“He’s been with me ever since I was a little girl.”

Both he and Dios had served her faithfully, even when nobody else had expected anything of her. She wondered if the day would ever come when she could repay him for his loyalty. He was not a man who cared for gold, but despite how long they had known each other, she was struggling to think of a reward that would appeal.

Skadi scratched her horn and sighed. “No doubt you care for him, ’specially if you go back that far, but old age is a foe no one can beat. Or someone might do for him before he gets there, like assassins did for my old man.” She leaned back, legs crossed, and looked up at the night sky. “He can’t fight by your side forever. And if you’re his commander, you got a duty to tell him when he’s past his prime. Don’t wait too long. If he’s been as loyal as you say, you owe him that much.”

“I know. I’m going to bring it up eventually.”

“Good. Although, by the looks of him, he’s not in danger of keeling over anytime soon.”

Anything could happen on the battlefield. War picked no favorites when it

came to reap its harvest. The weak could survive while the strong died, and vice versa. Strong, courageous, wise men like Dios often died young.

“So...” Liz began hesitantly. “You asked about Dios...”

“So I did. And you never did give me any answers.” Skadi rolled over and gazed at Liz in the torchlight, stifling a yawn. “I had four siblings, all by different mothers. Dios was the only one with a human mother and, well...your lot just ain’t as strong as beastfolk. He was the oldest of us, but it wasn’t long before he felt like the runt of the litter.”

Any living creature, no matter their race or species, was born with an innate sense of pride. Yet Dios’s had been crushed almost from birth, just because he had been unlucky enough to be born human in Steissen.

“Discrimination ain’t as bad here in Jötunheim as it is over in Nidavellir, but when you’re talking about the chieftain’s firstborn son...well, that’s a different story. Everybody held him up to the standards of the beastfolk, and when it turned out he wasn’t any stronger than the average human, they gave up on him. Not his fault, of course. And he hated knowing he fell short, so he worked himself raw. But there’re some gaps you can’t make up no matter how hard you try. In the end, their expectations were too heavy for him.”

A prideful noble son born to a responsibility he couldn’t bear. It was a tale as old as time. Dios had not been the first, and he would not be the last.

“He never got on well with our father. In the end, he ran away, and that was the last we ever heard of him. I tried to send someone after him, but my old man stopped me. Better that way, he said. He was an embarrassment. Anyway, someone offed my old man three years back, and my other brothers went with him. And with Dios gone, that left me chieftain of Jötunheim.”

Liz’s eyes widened. She had never known how closely Dios’s circumstances had mirrored her own. Perhaps he had seen himself in her; perhaps that was even why he had pledged himself to her cause. There was no point in puzzling over the matter now, however. The thoughts of the dead were forever barred to the living.

“You saw yourself in him for a moment there, didn’t you, Princess?”

Liz jumped in surprise. Skadi seemed to have read her mind. Come to think of it, she had mentioned something to that effect.

“Is that what you meant earlier? Your animal instincts at work?”

Skadi righted herself, grinning as she waved her hands in front of her face. “No, no, nothing like that. It doesn’t take my nose to know who you are. The whole continent knows your story. And let me say this...” She pointed a finger at Liz’s nose. “Dios ran away. You didn’t. Don’t go around telling yourself you’re the same. You chose the hardest road and came out standing. That’s worth something.”

The beastwoman heaved a deep, melancholy sigh, looking at Liz out of the corner of her eye all the while. “That’s what I wanted to ask. Dios spent his whole life running away. In the end, did he...” She turned to face her fully, eyes burning like a wolf’s in the moonlight as they took on a new intensity. “Did he find it in him to stand and fight?”

A gust of wind blew between them, as if reaching out to wipe the tears of sorrow from Skadi’s eyes. It tousled Liz’s hair and caressed Skadi’s head as it passed on through. As Liz looked up to follow its path, she felt the revelry grow distant. The canopy of stars shone brighter than ever, so close that at any moment they might come tumbling down to earth.

She gave a small smile, which was gone by the time she looked back at Skadi. “He did. He died a warrior’s death.”

She spoke clearly and firmly, making sure her words could not be snatched away by the noise. They seemed to strike home. Skadi broke into a grin of sincere delight.

“A warrior... A warrior, eh?” She gave a mighty shiver, thrusting her goblet to the sky in an eruption of joy. “Then that’s all that matters. A warrior’s death is the greatest honor any of the beastfolk could wish for.”

“Are you sure? It was my fault he—”

Liz couldn’t finish the sentence. Skadi had grabbed her face, covering her mouth.

“I ain’t out to make you pay. That wouldn’t do me any good.”

“Bhuth—”

“But nothing. All I wanted to know was whether my brother had died a good death. I ain’t asking you to make yourself a martyr.” Despite Skadi’s aggression, there was an undeniable kindness in her words. “Nod if you get it. Or I’ll crush your jaw right here and now.”

Her eyes weren’t joking. Liz’s jaw began to creak. Skadi must have had a little too much ale to control herself completely. Liz was still struggling to keep up with what was happening, but she nodded. Suddenly, she was free.

“When a man dies a warrior’s death, we send him off with a smile. Might be new to you, Princess, but it’s how we do things here in Jötunheim.” Skadi thrust her goblet skyward again. “That’s how real beasts think.”

The beastwoman stood and, to Liz’s surprise, started stripping off her clothes.

“I think I might dance after all. Wouldn’t usually, but today’s special. Today, I celebrate my brother’s life.”

Her attire was light at the best of times, so it quickly came off, revealing her rippling muscles—which were just as quickly hidden again as Liz tore off the tablecloth and threw it over her.

“Have a bit of modesty!”

There was more than an echo of somebody else in her words.

* * * * *

Galza, in Nidavellir Province

It was late at night. The streets were deserted. Insect cries rang loud, filling the stillness of the city with a constant hum. By contrast, the palace of Galza was lit up like midday, bathed in an opulent glow.

Hiro and his party were whiling away the hours in their chambers. Hiro was perched on the edge of the bed, while Garda sat cross-legged on the floor. Luka hugged her knees, nestling on the windowsill and covered by a blanket. The moonlight cast her face in silver as she stared at Hiro.

“Where are Huginn and Muninn?” Hiro asked Garda.

“Huginn is meeting with our agents in the city. Muninn you sent on leave, as I recall. No doubt he’s carousing in that tavern he spoke of.” Garda crossed his arms and cast Hiro a glance. “So? Come to any conclusions yet?”

“I won’t know for sure until I can get a closer look. But I expect it’s the real thing.”

“Then this Utgard is what he claims?”

Hiro tilted his head with a noncommittal grunt. Artheus had been a notorious womanizer, and even the queens and princesses of the nations he had conquered had not been exempt from his attentions. It was not difficult to imagine him counting a dwarf among his lovers.

“Another question, then,” Garda continued. “What would you do if he was?”

“Huginn asked the same thing. Don’t worry, I’m not planning on siding with him. But if he really does have the first emperor’s blood, it might be worth letting him live as our pawn.”

“And if not?”

“Then I’ll make sure he pays for his lies, of course.”

“Then there’s little to do but hope Huginn can tell us more.” Garda gave a dismissive shrug, satisfied that Hiro had no conflicted feelings on the matter. “Come to think of it, I heard that the little princess has joined the Jötunheimites. They’re massing their forces in Thrynheim as we speak.”

“Then we should watch and wait until things start happening. There’s nothing we can do until Utgard makes a move.”

Garda nodded. He stood and made for the door.

“Where are you going?” Hiro asked.

“I thought I might share a drink with my men outside the walls. They deserve a rest too. I can’t let Muninn have all the fun.”

“Treat them all to a round. Chalk it up to expenses.”

“Very well. If anything happens, you know where to find me.” Garda laid his hand on the doorknob.

“Oh, that’s right,” Hiro said. “You can start making ready now. There shouldn’t be any further changes to the plan.”

“Aye, I’ll see to it.” With that, Garda left the room.

Once the zlosta was gone, Hiro rolled back onto the bed. He lay there for a while, sinking deeper and deeper into thought. How was the board laid out, and what pieces could he move in order to achieve his goals? And even before that, there was something more important to consider.

If Utgard isn’t Artheus’s descendant, that would mean someone else is pulling his strings. Who gave him the necklace, and how did they get it?

Artifacts of the first emperor were not easy to come by. If somebody had secretly obtained it, they would need to at least have connections within the royal family or among the great houses. Or perhaps it had been stolen—there were rumors that the imperial burial grounds had been breached on the same day Chancellor Graeci died. All involved had been sworn to silence before the day was out, so if anything had been taken, only Liz and Rosa would know.

On that subject, I suppose Orcus might be involved...

The shadowy assassins acting more openly had given Hiro the opportunity to learn more about them. Sensing the presence of his nemesis had been a significant result. Indeed, if not for that, all his effort feigning death at the hands of Six Kingdoms would have gone to waste.

He’s moved back underground now, though. If there’s one thing he’s good at, it’s covering his tracks. But I’ll flush him out sooner or later, and then I can finally put an end to this with my own hands.

Hiro raised a hand before his face. He removed his mask and touched his fingers to his right eye.

Your gifts are proving useful, Artheus. Very useful.

He realized belatedly that the candles on the desk had burned out. Only the faint light of the one on the nightstand still illuminated his face. His golden eye gleamed brightly in the darkness, ethereal and regal.

“Will you not sleep?”

A glacial voice issued from somewhere near his feet.

“Can you not sleep?”

The one-armed figure of Luka crawled its way up his supine form. She moved with awkward, jerky motions, like a broken wind-up doll.

“I was going to think for a while. You go on ahead.”

The woman halted, still draped in her blanket. An abyss, darker than darkness, swirled in her eyes as she regarded him. “That would defeat the purpose.”

Hiro smiled wryly. “Hard to kill me if you’re asleep, right? I should have guessed.”

“I don’t know how to kill you.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t.” His voice came out weaker than he meant. A wave of exhaustion seemed to have crashed over him; he must have been more tired than he thought. He snorted. There was a woman right here out for his head, and yet he couldn’t bring himself to feel afraid.

“Does something amuse you?”

“Not at all. I was just thinking how complicated everything has gotten.”

“You have only yourself to blame for that. This entire situation is your doing.”

“I guess you’re right. Oh, and one more thing... About what you said before...” Hiro gave a rueful smile. “I don’t think I know how to kill me either...”

Before the sentence was out, he sank softly into darkness.

Chapter 4: Word on the Wind

Thrynheim, in Jötunheim Province

Dawn had not long since broken, and the morning mist still lay thick in the ground. Ranks upon ranks of soldiers stood before Thrynheim's gate. They had been summoned by the Jötunheimite senators from the surrounding lands in anticipation of a decisive battle with the Nidavellirites. They comprised a motley collection of races and carried a variety of weaponry, but they were united by their hope for a better future for Steissen as they waited, grim-faced, for the order to march.

More than a few of their number had personally experienced the cruelty of the elites. Some wanted revenge for murdered kin, others desired to cast the shackles of oppression from their homeland, and yet others hoped the conflict would help them make their way in the world. They were an eclectic group, but while their fervor may have been untempered, their ferocity more than made up the difference.

A little way from the Jötunheimite forces, the imperial troops also stood in ranks. They numbered five thousand in total: two thousand Knights of the Rose, the Fourth Legion's elite troops, and three thousand riders borrowed from House Muzuk. Liz rode at their head, with Tris beside her. Cerberus scratched her ear with a rear paw on the ground nearby.

A man approached on horseback. "Lady Celia Estrella, I apologize for keeping you waiting. My name is Brutus." He offered a bow in imperial fashion.

Brutus had been recommended by Beto von Muzuk. He was slender of limb and noble of feature, but something about him set Liz ill at ease.

"Do you have a noble rank?" she asked.

"I do not, Your Highness." He answered without a moment's hesitation, and his face did not so much as twitch. He did not seem to be lying.

Liz still could not shake her misgivings. "Any siblings?"

“I have neither siblings nor parents, Your Highness. I lost them to bandits two years ago, along with our house and all of our fields.” A vengeful flame lit in his eyes that set Liz’s hairs on end, almost as though it were aimed at her. “Lord von Muzuk took me in when I had nothing left. I am overjoyed to have the chance to repay his kindness!”

Brutus clenched the hilt of his sword, his breathing growing ragged. He seemed to be suppressing a great deal of emotion.

Liz realized that she must have made him relive some unpleasant memories. “Forgive me. I didn’t mean to bring up a painful subject.”

“Please, think nothing of it, Your Highness. In any case, Lord von Muzuk has commanded me to serve as your guide and offer you what assistance I can. I have been apprised of the details. Would you mind if I accompanied you?”

“Of course not. Beto told me you would be coming. You may join the ranks.”

“At once, Your Highness. I am yours to command.”

At that moment, a shout interrupted them. “I carry a message from Lady Skadi! Where might I find Lady Celia Estrella?!”

Liz raised a hand. “Here.”

The messenger came up to her. “We mean to march forthwith. Are you ready to depart?”

“We are. Tell Lady Skadi that she can leave whenever she likes.”

“As you command!” The messenger turned his horse about and returned to Skadi’s ranks in a cloud of dust.

“Tris!” Liz called.

“You’ve need of me, Your Highness?”

“We’re leaving. Make sure the men are ready. Now that we’ve gotten involved in this war, we can’t afford defeat. It would embarrass the empire.”

“Morale’s in good shape, Your Highness. No overconfidence, but a healthy dose of tension. Soon the whole continent will see the empire’s strength!”

The Grantzian Empire had been quiet for two years. This conflict was a prime

opportunity to show the rest of Soleil that it was still a force to be reckoned with. After three heirs to the throne had fallen in battle, its neighbors had sensed that its foundations were in jeopardy, and the news that the emperor had taken ill—while less compromising than the truth—had set their eyes gleaming with ambition. Even now, they schemed to lay claim to its lands. One of the few things stopping them was the uncertainty caused by the string of incidents that had plagued it. Liz would need to score a victory for the Jötunheimites to keep them in check, not to mention foil Beto's schemes to claim the chancellorship. Resolve flared in her crimson eyes.

At that moment, a horn blew, higher in pitch than the imperial style. A battle cry rose from the Jötunheimite troops. Their voices rang loud enough to pierce the clouds, and the explosion of their fervor split the air with shuddering force.

Liz breathed deep as she listened to the distant roar, calming her nerves. In the corner of her eye, the Jötunheimite forces began to move. She whipped Lævateinn from its sheath and held it high.

“All units, march!”

She set off. The imperial soldiers fell in behind her, not a hair out of place. They were more restrained than the Jötunheimite troops, but they burned with battle fervor in the early morning stillness. From here, they would march on the stronghold of the Nidavellirites, the famously impenetrable city of Galza.

Liz turned to Tris, who rode alongside her. “Are you nervous? It’s been a while since your last time on a battlefield.”

“That it has, Your Highness.” He scratched the back of his head bashfully. “But truth be told, I feel as ready as a man half my age.”

She looked at him with concern. Now that battle was on the horizon, he seemed a little too eager to get back into the fray, but there was no point warning him to exercise caution. She had known him long enough to realize that would do no good.

“Just don’t get carried away, or you’ll steal all the younger soldiers’ glory.”

“I don’t know about that, Your Highness. It’s been a while since I took to the field.” Tris’s voice was somber, and he had a faraway look in his eyes. “I couldn’t

be there for the fight against Six Kingdoms. I'd like to make a better account of myself this time around."

Two years prior, he had begun to lose his spark. Now he was a shadow of the man he had been in his prime. The reason was simple: he was growing old. Where once he had been able to fight off a band of trained soldiers with ease, now he struggled to keep pace with Liz on a sprint. He trained alone when he found time—she had seen it—but there was no hiding that his strength was failing. With every passing day, he grew a little weaker.

She could only imagine how frustrating it must be. When she had told him she would be joining this venture, he had seized on the opportunity, insisting that she take him in any capacity, even if that meant being confined to the rearguard. It had only been on the day of her departure that she had finally relented. With any luck, this campaign would restore his confidence, although she had her doubts. Their enemies were mostly dwarves—difficult opponents for a human at the best of times, let alone one feeling the ravages of age.

Tris smiled wryly. He seemed to have guessed what she was thinking. "These old bones need no special favors, Your Highness. Treat me as you would any other soldier. I know I'm good for little else. A man who never made it past third tribune doesn't have the rank or the knowledge to serve in command."

Tris's status did not match his rank. He was only a third tribune and a platoon commander, and yet he now served as aide to the emperor's heir apparent. Battalion and brigade commanders had no idea how to engage with him. It was impossible to use him as an officer, and he could no longer fight by Liz's side on account of his age, but he was also too selfless to care about advancing his own station.

"Rest assured, I won't beg for a place on the vanguard. I'll serve wherever I'm needed." He drew his sword from its sheath. Most likely, he had never missed a day maintaining it. The blade was clear of nicks or blemishes, and it showered the land with light as it caught the sun. "I am yours to command, Your Highness."

Liz had no wish to watch him ail, but neither could she stop the march of time. Nobody could, save perhaps the gods.

“I know.”

She returned her gaze to the fore as Tris nodded in reply. The sun beat down fiercely in the clear blue sky, oblivious to the turmoil in her heart.

* * * * *

The twentieth day of the sixth month of Imperial Year 1026

Galza, in Nidavellir Province

As ever, the city was quiet. Less typically, the palace was in an uproar. Pale-faced residents rushed between the rooms before fleeing with bulging trunks in tow. Servants raced down the corridors with cloth bundles in hand, their duties forgotten. Carriages swarmed the front of the palace, swallowing up portions of the waiting crowd before departing in a chorus of whinnies.

Amid all the chaos and shouting, Hiro shook himself free of drowsiness. His room was filled with dust.

“Morning already...”

He gave a wide yawn. The bed beneath him was in pieces. Through bleary eyes, he gazed at the birds resting their wings outside the window. They looked so peaceful, he couldn’t help but smile until a loud crash sounded from outside and they all took flight.

“What’s going on?”

He wasn’t referring to the bed, but rather the disturbance in the palace. His eyes found the woman standing by the wall, looking utterly unconcerned with what was going on around her. Her empty left sleeve hung uselessly, and her face was, as ever, indifferent.

“I couldn’t say,” Luka replied. “I was so preoccupied by you, I didn’t have a thought to spare for anything else.”

If her cheeks had reddened, he might have mistaken her words for a confession of love, but her eyes were lightless and her expression was fixed. As if that wasn’t enough, her voice dripped with murderous intent. No, there was no mistaking this for anything other than what it was.

“Really? Not at all? When the place is this loud?”

“Not in the slightest.”

This was going nowhere. Hiro found himself with nothing to do but close his mouth. A curious silence fell between them, not quite anything, not even awkwardness.

All at once, a clamor sounded from the corridor. Hearing the clatter of armor, Luka assumed a battle stance, but Hiro waved his hand, signaling for her to stand down. The door burst open.

“Ah! My ancestral ally, my unwavering comrade in arms! My apologies for all this commotion. No doubt you must be terribly concerned.”

Utgard entered with his typical theatricality. Unlike the last time they had met, he was dressed for battle, clad in shining golden armor with a jewel-encrusted sword at his belt. Behind him were two soldiers wearing similarly gaudy plate armor, alongside Thorkil, the dwarf who had escorted Hiro to the palace.

Golden armor, hm? I doubt he'll put it to use, but at least it'll make him an easier target.

Standing out wasn't necessarily a bad thing for a commander. A visible presence on the front line would inspire the troops. Still, it was hard to imagine Utgard fighting; he looked like he had hardly ever held a sword.

“Will you be taking the vanguard, Lord Utgard?” Hiro asked.

The dwarf flinched in surprise. “Me? Surely you jest, Lord Surtr. No, I shall await news of our victory on the back lines. Unlike the humans and beastfolk, I see no honor in fighting at the front.”

In that case, Hiro thought, he should have put on armor drab enough for a funeral and hidden in the heart of the army. *It won't help morale if he's keeping himself out of the fighting.*

Pointing that out would only draw the dwarf's ire, however. Hiro looked at him coldly, as he might regard a shyster, but otherwise said nothing.

“I say,” Utgard continued, “whatever happened to your chambers? Don't tell me you have been set upon by ruffians?” He cast a leery eye over the wreckage

of the room.

“No, nothing like that. We had an argument, that’s all. I’d appreciate it if you could see about getting me a new bed, though.” The lie fell so easily from Hiro’s lips, it didn’t even register in his inflection.

Utgard glanced at Luka and burst out laughing. “Ha ha ha! She’s a fiery one, I see! Never you mind. I shall have the servants attend to it.”

He didn’t seem to doubt Hiro’s claim for a second. Admittedly, dwarves weren’t known for caring much about the little things, but in this case, it seemed more like he was too preoccupied with other concerns to be observant. As his laughter died down, he regarded Hiro afresh.

“Lord Surtr, it appears the Jötunheimites have begun to march.” A hint of urgency had appeared in his eyes. “We, of course, will ride out to meet them.”

Hiro listened quietly. It was widely known that Utgard had bought himself wealth and influence with the first emperor’s name, but what was worse, he believed he had done it all through his own power. The sad golden shape standing before Hiro now was proof enough of that, which meant it was not hard to predict what he would say next.

“What say you, Lord Surtr? I would have you join me, if you’re willing.”

He hoped to proclaim to the whole of Soleil that Baum stood with him, all while using Hiro to divide the Jötunheimites. If it would have profited Baum, Hiro might even have gone along with it, but siding with the Nidavellirites would only lower the nation’s standing for no gain. After a moment’s thought, he shook his head.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to refrain. I only have five hundred men to my name, and I doubt your troops would be willing to listen to me.”

That was a convincing enough reason. Utgard lowered his eyes as he sank into thought. His face was covered in shadow, but his desire for Lord Surtr’s aid was palpable.

“I’ve come prepared to negotiate trade, not to help you fight a war,” Hiro said. “Besides, with my paltry escort, I’d only be a burden to the valiant dwarves of Nidavellir. I will remain here and await news of your victory.”

He made a point of flattering Utgard, silently begging him to find something else to do. Perhaps some god had been listening, because the dwarf nodded with evident delight.

“Then wait here you must. We shall trounce these fools bloody and return covered in glory. However...” He laid a sorrowful hand to his forehead. “As we are now in a time of war, I fear I cannot permit you to wander as you please. With my most profuse apologies, I must insist that you be supervised for as long as you remain in the palace.”

“Of course. That’s only fair.”

“Then this good fellow will watch over you.” Utgard gestured to Thorkil.

As before, Thorkil shot Hiro an insolent glare, but he otherwise remained outwardly composed as he bowed to Utgard. “I shall endeavor to ensure your safety,” he said, turning back to Hiro and lowering his head.

“Much appreciated,” Hiro replied before turning his attention back to Utgard. “I notice the palace seems busy today. May I ask what’s going on?”

“A war has begun, Lord Surtr. The riffraff must be chased from the palace so that worthier sorts might shelter behind its walls. It is nothing for you to concern yourself with.” Offering a reassuring wave, the dwarf turned around. “Now, I fear I must excuse myself. It is almost time for the war council.” With that, he and his escort left the room as hurriedly as they had arrived.

As soon as the door closed behind them, the expression fell away from Hiro’s face. “At least he’s not just picking elites, I suppose, but chasing the servants out of the palace to make room for the powerful? And he calls himself a leader.” He pushed his mask back into place, like he was closing a lid on his anger. As he did, he sensed somebody behind him and turned around. “Well? What did you learn?”

Huginn knelt before him, hands upraised. A report rested in her palms. “It’s all here, Your Lordship. I expect you’ll not be surprised.”

Hiro took the scroll and skimmed through it, then smirked. “Interesting.” He looked down at Huginn, who was awaiting further orders. “Good work. Tell your men they have my thanks.”

“Yes, Your Lordship!” A grin spread across Huginn’s face.

He tousled her hair, then set a hand to his chin and pondered his next move. The order came quickly. “Huginn, find Garda in the camp outside the walls. Tell him it’s time to set our plans in motion.”

“At once, Your Lordship.”

“We’re racing against time now. Relay the same message to Muninn.”

“As you command!” With a crisp reply, Huginn leaped from the window.

Once she was gone, Luka finally broke her silence. “Whatever was in that report, you don’t seem happy about it.”

“Don’t I?”

“You might fool her, but not me. What did it say?”

“Something very interesting...and very welcome.” Hiro smiled, but it fell far short of his eyes.

* * * * *

The twenty-sixth day of the sixth month of Imperial Year 1026

The sky was clear from horizon to horizon, with not a cloud in sight. Rainfall seemed a distant dream. Zephyrs swirled across the land, carrying birds on the wing.

In the years to come, the region called Loch would go down as the site of a decisive fork in Steissen’s history. For now, however, it was a nameless place of sparse trees and little else, and the battle was anybody’s to claim.

Across the landscape, plumes of dust rose skyward. They were collected into two camps, east and west, vying to outdo one another in dyeing the sky dirt-brown.

“We’ve picked a good spot,” Liz said. She held her hair down with a hand to keep the wind from snatching it as she surveyed the battlefield from atop a small hill.

Beside her, Tris frowned. “We’ve a good view, right enough. But there are a few more blind spots than I’d like.”

The woodland on the field was sparse, but extensive enough that there were several spots that could not be seen from the hill.

“We’ll have to send out scouts to search the area,” Liz sighed.

Tris grinned. “We should count ourselves lucky we’ve a clear line of sight to our allies.”

The Jötunheimite forces had set up one sel ahead and a little to the right. The Nidavellirites seemed to be ready for battle too; war cries issued from the hill three sel away that marked the heart of their camp. The bulk of their forces, however, lay downhill from the summit, and these were far less rowdy. Their ranks still seemed orderly, but morale was low.

“It looks like the soldiers aren’t feeling quite as positive about this battle as their commanders,” Liz observed. “Do you suppose their families are being held prisoner? Is that how the Nidavellirites have formed this army?”

“Seems likely, aye. But you mustn’t let pity stay your hand, Your Highness. You can’t free their families unless you win this war.”

“I suppose you’re right. And they’ll fight hard for their loved ones, even if they don’t care for the war itself. We can’t let ourselves get careless.”

The pair ducked into a simple tent, barely four canvas walls surrounding a patch of grass. Her aides and brigade commanders stood along either side of a long table. She returned their bows and moved to stand behind the empty seat at the head of the table, where she swept her gaze over the assembled men.

“Is anybody here hungry for glory?”

Several of the fiercer-looking officers straightened up. They were regarding the coming battle seriously, but she sensed no recklessness among them, only a healthy desire to acquit themselves.

“Good. Then we’ll begin.” Liz glanced over her shoulder, where Tris was waiting. “Tris, if you would lead the discussion.”

“Of course, Your Highness.” He stepped forward and tapped the map on the table with his commander’s baton. “Allow me to explain how matters lie. According to our allies, the Jötunheimites, the Nidavellirite forces number thirty

thousand—twenty on the front lines, ten behind in their encampment. Many of them are dwarves, so their forces skew toward heavy infantry. We can expect them to employ formations that make use of that.”

Tris laid out a pawn representing the Nidavellirite army, followed by another corresponding to the Jötunheimite army.

“Our Jötunheimite allies have twenty thousand men, and they’ll be committing them all. They have a large number of cavalry, so they’ll be looking to strike fast and hard.”

The final pawn represented the imperial army. Tris moved it eastward as he spoke.

“Now comes our part in all of this. The Jötunheimites want us to skirt the field and raze the encampment. Once we’re done, we’ll charge into the fray and strike the main force from behind.”

“So the Jötunheimites will be one pincer and we’ll be the other,” Liz summarized.

“Exactly, Your Highness. It seems they mean to give us the starring role. No doubt they hope to start our relationship off on good footing.”

Liz nodded as she traced the map with her finger. “I just have one concern. Maybe this goes without saying, but we don’t know this land as well as our enemy does. If they took advantage of that to ambush us, we’d be in real trouble.”

If the Nidavellirites were also trying to skirt the battlefield and attack the Jötunheimite core, odds were high that they would run into the imperial forces. There was also the possibility that they might leave men lying in wait in the woodland. In that case, the imperial forces would be better off taking the initiative and rooting them out.

“Before we do anything else, we need to send out scouts,” Liz continued. “If they do turn up enemy forces, we can rout them on our way to the enemy camp.”

“Perhaps the Jötunheimites could send us somebody who knows the land,” one of the aides suggested.

Liz nodded in agreement. “We should put together a unit to keep watch over our camp as well. We need to keep our surroundings secure.”

As she pondered whom to place in charge, Brutus—Beto’s handpicked aide—stepped forward. “Might you entrust me with that, Your Highness?” he asked. “Surely we cannot bother our allies for a pathfinder. I know these lands well enough. I believe I would be well suited to the role.”

Liz didn’t yet have a full grasp of his abilities, but it was undeniable that he knew more about Steissen’s geography than anybody else in the tent. That said, she sensed something dangerous in him. Given that he was an agent of Beto, it was difficult to trust him with such an important role...but then again, if not him, then who?

She thought for a while. At last, she made a decision, but before she could speak, Tris stepped forward.

“I’ll lead the unit, Your Highness. I’ve known more battlefields than anyone here.” With a pointed glance at Brutus, the old soldier looked down at the map. “I’ve a good idea of where an enemy might be hiding, but I’ll need a second-in-command to be sure of success. May I borrow Lord Brutus?”

He flashed Liz a meaningful grin. She suddenly got the sense that he had seen through all of her concerns.

“Of course. Take him and a hundred men.”

“Yes, Your Highness!” Tris seemed delighted to be of use to her at last; he sounded more enthusiastic than he had in months. He turned to Brutus and held out a hand. “I’ll be glad of your assistance, my lord.”

“Have no fear,” Brutus said, accepting a handshake. “I have lived in these lands for a long time. I know of paths that cannot be found on any map.”

“You two will be in charge of our perimeter,” Liz said. “If you see anything suspicious, send up a smoke signal at once.”

“Of course, Your Highness,” they replied, falling to one knee with their heads bowed.

Liz gave an approving nod, then assigned one of the other aides to form the

unit with all haste before turning back to the pair. “Now then, you two had better see to your preparations.”

“At once, Your Highness,” they replied. As one, they dashed from the tent.

Liz turned to the commander of the Fourth Legion. “Are the Knights of the Rose ready to fight?”

“They await your command, Your Highness.”

“Then we’ll send all two thousand and another thousand cavalry to take the Nidavellirite camp. The remaining seventeen hundred riders will stay here to defend our core.”

Liz spent the rest of the meeting giving instructions to her aides and offering encouragement to her officers. She would not take the vanguard in this battle. She would command from the back lines. Had Aura been present, she would have put herself in the thick of the fighting, but Liz’s force did not have enough military tribunes to leave the core in their care.

“This meeting is now adjourned. All officers may return to their posts. We advance as soon as the Jötunheimites start to move.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” The other attendees flew into motion. All at once, the tent was in chaos.

Liz settled back into her chair, unbothered by the uproar. “Sitting on the back lines and waiting isn’t as easy as it seems,” she mused to herself.

This was a battle to save Steissen, not the empire. Her troops were only here in hopes of using it to benefit their own power struggles. As unpleasant as the prospect was, if things turned sour, they had the luxury of pretending it had never happened.

“I owe Skadi a thank-you.”

The chieftain of the beastfolk could not be ignorant of Liz’s goals in being here, and yet she had still honored the imperial troops with a vital role in the battle. She could have let them rot on the back lines, but she was too honorable—or perhaps too generous—for that.

“But she’s ambitious too.”

Most imperials were ignorant of Steissen's terrain, but they could not fight alongside the Jötunheimite troops either. Two armies that had never trained together could not hope to coordinate their movements.

"So she split us off to use separately."

Time would tell whether the beastwoman was being bold or careless in giving the imperials such an important role. Either way, it was touching for Liz to be trusted so implicitly by somebody she had known for less than two weeks.

"I won't let her down. Still..."

Being on foreign turf made her unusually uneasy. That was why she had decided to maintain her position in the core. She looked back at the map on the table.

"While we're looking for ways to move unnoticed, I'm sure the enemy is doing the same."

The Nidavellirite forces were well-equipped but poorly trained, and their morale was low after having been conscripted. By contrast, the Jötunheimite army was motivated and keen, and although they too were lacking in training after having been assembled at such short notice, every soldier was a good fighter. Spirits were high. Liz's aides had been confident that the Jötunheimites would prevail, but the battlefield was an unforgiving place; legendary heroes had been defeated by lowly peasants. There was no way to know for certain until the battle was fought. Such was the nature of war.

"Don't let your guard down, Skadi. I wish you success."

At that very moment, a loud horn blared outside.

* * * * *

The horn's stately note echoed in Skadi's ears as she sat atop her horse. Twenty thousand soldiers stood at her back; seasoned warriors all, their bodies sculpted iron with not an ounce of excess fat. They carried a motley collection of arms. Some could have been mistaken for bandits; others were stripped to the waist as if they were preparing to bathe. Skadi herself was no exception. Her light armor left plenty of skin on display, a blatant taunt directed at the enemy. If her foes did catch her, she would not escape unscathed.

In a word, the Jötunheimite troops were restless. If the imperials were stillness, they were motion. Perhaps that was why they seemed so unconcerned about the coming conflict. Their ranks were virtually nonexistent; some were even sitting on the ground, grinning. They looked more prepared for a banquet than a battle. The imperials with their rules and their codes would have fainted to see the chaos.

At that moment, a cheer went up. Skadi had turned to address her troops. Her face bore no hint of reproach at their lack of discipline, only a broad grin.

“It’s a fine day today,” she bellowed. “I can see each and every one of your faces.”

She narrowed her eyes against the sun’s glare as she looked around. Shrill cries arose from her soldiers, and she raised a hand in answer.



“No mistakes today, my brothers and sisters. We dedicate this victory to our rightful ruler: Lord Surtr, the Black-Winged Lord!”

The humans worshipped the Spirit King. The álfar worshipped the Faerie King. And of the five deities known as the Five Lords of Heaven, the beastfolk pledged their allegiance to the Black-Winged Lord.

“Say, chief,” one of her advisors said, “didn’t Baum just get a new king who calls himself the Black-Winged Lord?”

She cocked an eyebrow. “Now that you mention it... Well, no business of ours who calls themselves what.”

“It ain’t right. A human naming themselves after our god of war? Makes you wanna laugh.”

His outrage was so comical that Skadi burst out laughing. “Hah! Like we’re any different. Who gave us the right to call him our god? The name’s anyone’s to take as they like. It’s none of our business.”

One thousand years ago, a legendary black dragon had laid waste to the continent with overwhelming might. Its wings had split the heavens, its roar had shattered mountains, and its claws had rent the land asunder. Some were so stricken by the power of the Black-Winged Lord that they had begun to worship it as a god. They were the Twelve Tribes, the forefathers of the beastfolk, and even after their lonely and terrible deity fell at a hero’s hands, their devotion had continued to the present day.

“Unusual for us beastfolk, that,” Skadi mused. “We’re quick to warm, quicker to cool, easily bored, and soon disillusioned. But that we held on to.”

The old faith was of little use in modern times, but it was in their blood.

“Course, the real question is why our great forefathers sided with the humans after their Lord bit the dust. And for a long while. They were the best of friends right up until the third emperor’s purges.”

That, too, had been out of character for the famously changeable beastfolk.

The events of a thousand years ago were lost to time, but now the beastfolk had joined hands with a human once more—and with the sixth princess of the

Grantzian Empire, no less. The prospect lit a fire in Skadi's heart.

Her aide, however, had a sour look on his face. He seemed less impressed. "If we follow in their footsteps," he said, "we'll end up chased back to the eastern isles."

Skadi took his objection at face value. "No doubt. No one's to say if the Twelve Tribes are even still around. We've gotta make sure there's a place for 'em in Soleil if they ever do come back."

As they conversed, a messenger rode up to Skadi. "Word from the imperials, chief. They say they're ready when we are."

She turned to the aide. "And how ready are we?"

The man raised his arms as if to tell her to see for herself. "We're bored of waiting, that's for sure. Waiting on your word, chief."

Skadi gave a satisfied nod and turned back to her soldiers with bright eyes. "Make your offerings to our lord, and you'll leave no regrets!"

The laid-back air that had hung over the ranks vanished in an instant. It was as though time had stopped. Those who had been laughing with their comrades now stared at Skadi with rapt attention, their mouths hanging open.

"Dedicate this victory to our lord in the heavens, and he'll show our enemies true despair!"

The soldiers rose, grips tightening on their weapons. Ferocity glinted in their eyes. The fire smoldering in their bellies had risen high, and now its searing heat rivaled the sun.

"Justice to those who stand against us! Mercy to those who bend the knee! Death to those who offer us a fair fight!"

Nobody was sitting now. The soldiers' faces had turned stern. All at once, they were standing in perfect ranks.

"And if any still breathe, ask them this..."

Nobody moved so much as a muscle. The wind ruffled their hair, but they didn't even blink. All of their eyes were trained on their chieftain.

Skadi looked over them imperiously as she spoke her closing words. ““What do you know of despair?””

With that, she turned her horse about and flung her arm out to the side. “Today we’ll show ’em what it truly means! Charge!”

She surged forward. A moment later, horns blared from all around. Skadi cast a single glance at the imperial encampment.

“Don’t let me down, princess.”

She returned her attention to the fore to see that the Nidavellirite troops were on the move. Heavy infantry took the vanguard of the first cohort, forming a shield wall that bristled with spears. A host of archers waited behind. They were like a shark with open jaws, waiting for the Jötunheimite cavalry to spit itself on their spears so they could bite down with crushing force.

“Just the kind of crude defense a dwarf would think of. Seems I was right that morale is low.”

She sensed no battle fervor from the enemy, only the fear of death. As the Jötunheimite troops bore down on them like a wave, she almost felt a little sorry for them. They weren’t living up to their race’s reputation for hardness.

“Well, if you’re giving us an opening...it’d be a shame not to use it!”

As she came within thirty paces—ninety meters—of the enemy lines, she hurled her handaxe with all her might. It crashed into the front rank and raised a cloud of dust. She stood up on the back of her horse and spread her hands wide. “Let’s settle the hunters from the prey!”

Bladed claws appeared on the backs of her hands, clear like gemstones, glinting sharply in the sun. They formed a trail of light to lead her soldiers’ way. As she bore down on the enemy vanguard, she leaped from her horse. The Nidavellirite soldiers looked up in astonishment as she soared clean over the wall of steel on the front line.

“Feel the bite of a ruler’s paws!”

She twisted in midair, sending herself into a spin. The blades tore a Nidavellirite soldier’s face to shreds as she plunged into their midst. As she

landed, she launched into a run, swiping left and right.

“Ha ha ha! Nothing like the stench of blood to get the heart pumping!”

She surged ahead with astonishing speed, gore spraying around her. No blade could touch her. Some soldiers thrust their spears out desperately, betting on instinct, only to find themselves cut down instead when her claws rent their armor like butter. Faced with an enemy they could not touch, watching their comrades torn open, terror began to spread.

Screams rose from somewhere behind Skadi. The Jötunheimite troops had plowed into the front line.

“Ha ha ha ha ha! Give me more! More! Just try to stop me!”

She set about massacring her enemy with the fury of a beast butchering its prey. The Nidavellirite troops shattered like clay before her. They descended into confusion, panic, dismay. While they marshaled their courage and raised their weapons, spurring themselves on as best they could with fierce battle cries, they only succeeded in delighting their opponent.

“Good! Good! That’s more like it!” Skadi wiped the blood from her face with the back of her hand and licked it away. Her eyes glowed with unrestrained glee as she grasped a soldier by the head. “Now this is what livin’s all about!”

“What are you— Agh!”

She pushed her claws through his eye sockets, sending brain matter spraying through the back of his skull. His body twitched and spasmed like a fish washed up on the shore.

She snorted. “Then again, maybe I could do with more of a challenge.”

As she basked in the sensation, she looked around in search of new prey.

“She’s... She’s a madwoman!” someone shouted.

“Now that ain’t nice. You got a woman this fine standin’ right in front of you, and that’s all you can say?” She let the body slip to the ground and tilted her head back over her shoulder. “Care to tell me what that’s about?”

An arctic chill ran through the Nidavellirite ranks. The offending soldier turned and fled, but he wasn’t fast enough. In an instant, Skadi bounded in front of him

and landed a brutal kick to his abdomen.

“Agh!”

“Heh. Didn’t hear me right, eh?” Skadi grasped the terrified man by the head and lifted him off the ground. Her lips curved into a lascivious smile. “Let me tell you something about we beastwomen. We’re ladies by day and wild by night. In peacetime we’re kittens, and in war...we’re tigers.”

“You... You filthy animal!”

“You’re damn right I am.”

Skadi closed her fist on the man’s head with astonishing force. Blood sprayed over her as his skull shattered, but she didn’t so much as blink. Her chest heaved with heated breaths that vanished into the clamor of the battlefield.

“Fighting gets our blood up, see. We get so excited that we can’t control ourselves. Ain’t just the beastfolk feel that way, ’course, but we got it special. It comes out easier.”

She strode across the battlefield unimpeded. Nothing could stand in her way. A single swing of her arm piled up countless corpses.

“We’re all a hair’s breadth away from death here. Might as well enjoy it while you can!” The flame of battle raged inside her, sending the enemy cowering. “Now, tell me, are any of you man enough to get the better of me?”

The Nidavellirite troops began to back away, but at last, the Jötunheimite front came up from behind them, battle cries rising and blood spraying.

“Don’t you bastards lay a finger on our chief!” came a shout. A tremendous force sent the nearby soldiers flying. Skadi’s guards struck with the force of an avalanche, making short work of them.

One of them approached on horseback, breathing heavily. “You’re too far out, chief! Spare a thought for us poor sods who gotta catch up!”

Skadi snorted at the aide. “Ain’t my fault if you’re too slow. Can’t catch up to me when I run?” She kicked a Nidavellirite soldier into the air and slashed him from shoulder to hip. “Hmph. Hardly got any fight left in ’em. I swear their fathers looked stronger.”

She strode forward, feet splashing in the gore that was already beginning to form an artificial swamp.

“It ain’t them, chief. You’re too strong.”

“Well, maybe. Anyway, let’s keep it up. At this rate, we’ll punch right through ‘em.”

She flicked the blood from her claws and set off in search of her next target.

* * * * *

Silence hung over the Nidavellirite camp. The Jötunheimite forces had punched through the vanguard within minutes of the start of battle and driven deep into the second cohort, which even now was on the verge of rout. Utgard watched the field for a while from the top of the hill, smirking, before turning around and returning to his tent. A grave silence had fallen over his retainers, but he flashed them a grin as he entered.

“Hah! These beastfolk certainly are a spirited lot, aren’t they? Positively unbeatable on the field.”

One of his generals shot him a reproachful look. “With respect, my lord, this is no laughing matter.”

Utgard tittered. “To see the brave General Golmo looking so haggard! Whatever is the matter?”

Golmo’s fist thumped on the table. “Our army is on the verge of defeat, my lord.”

Utgard only shrugged as he took his seat. “Is it the loss of men that worries you? We can always conscript more. If they run out, Lichtein has a vast supply of slaves. We will have no shortage of soldiers.”

“Do you understand why our army is in such a sorry state?” General Golmo’s face was growing redder by the second.

“Their own weakness, I don’t doubt. It shames me that I must call such laggards my countrymen. I ought to have killed them all when I had the chance.” Utgard chuckled to himself as he bit into a piece of fruit.

“Do you think that is the reason?! It is the way you privilege the elites! The

way you abuse your fellow dwarves as you would other races!”

Utgard pointedly ignored the outburst. The general’s face deepened to purple, and his hand went to his sword.

One of the other retainers hurriedly restrained him. “Peace, Golmo! If we turn on each other now, our defeat will be assured!”

Golmo sat back down, biting his lip so hard that blood ran down his chin.

Shooting him a smirk, Utgard rested his elbow on the table and turned his attention to the map. “That said, we would be in a terrible mess if we lost our army, but never fear. I’m sure you’re all full of ideas to turn the tide. What would you propose?”

General Golmo shook his head, as if to dispel his anger, and laid a hand on the map. “We cannot fight if we have no men, my lord. As such, we must—”

“Very well! Retreat it is.”

There was a collective intake of breath from the aides. Golmo was so taken aback, it didn’t even occur to him to be furious.

“Frankly, I never wanted to fight this ridiculous battle in the first place. I agreed to it because you promised me victory, but if that’s no longer in the cards, there’s nothing to be done.” Utgard gave a derisive sniff. “We shall fall back and take refuge in Galza.”

General Golmo’s shoulders trembled as he tried to hold back his rage. “That may work against a foreign invader, my lord, but these are people of Steissen. They will be familiar with the city’s construction. Besides, our walls have little meaning to the beastfolk.”

“So they will be able to shoot a few arrows at us. What of it?”

“As I say, they are children of Steissen. They have access to our siege technology. If they were to turn those weapons on us, we would not have the strength to hold out. That is why we chose to fight outside the city in the first place.”

Oppression and conscription had driven off many of the commonfolk. Utgard had frittered away most of the gold he could have used to buy loyalty, and

successive days and nights of banquets had left the city's food stores woefully depleted. Besides, even if the Nidavellirite army managed to flee the field, they didn't have the morale to hold out against a siege. Down that path awaited a slow death by starvation.

"What's more," Golmo continued, "I do not trust Lichtein. If we fall back now, we may buy our safety for a time, but it will mean leaving the Jötunheimites and the duchy to pick the province clean."

"Well, then, we surely cannot retreat. I trust you have a plan of some sort?" Utgard stared at the map with an air of vague bemusement. It was not clear whether he understood what he was looking at.

Golmo heaved an exhausted sigh. "I do, my lord. Although if the coward's way is more appealing to you..."

"Yes, yes, I've learned my lesson. Don't glare at me so. Now come on, out with it."

"The main body of our force is beyond saving. They would be best used to keep the enemy occupied while we circle around and attack their back line." Golmo moved several pawns across the map, speaking slowly and clearly to be certain Utgard understood. "However, the Jötunheimites will no doubt try to encircle us at the same time. So some of the soldiers we have sent through the woods—these here, on the right—must fall back and support the main force."

"Why the ones on the right and not the left? And why the main force? Should we not bring them back here to defend our encampment?"

"With regard to your first question, the imperial troops lie to our left-hand side and the beastfolk have no appreciation for subterfuge, so we need not fear an attack from the right. And we will send them to bolster the main force so that it will hold out longer."

"You mean to sacrifice them to buy time?"

"Precisely. Given the circumstances, it would be best if they did not survive this battle."

They had coerced the soldiers into serving by taking their families hostage. None of them had any will to fight. More to the point, it would be inconvenient

if they lived long enough to discover that their loved ones were no longer in Steissen.

“As you may recall,” Golmo continued, “you sold their families off to the slavers. If they returned alive, there would be riots.”

“Hah! Of course, of course. That gold went to good use outfitting our army.” Utgard clapped his hands in delight. General Golmo pulled a sour face, but Utgard didn’t notice; he kept laughing, clutching his belly. “Their families would only have been a burden. At least this way, it might save their lives. Our soldiers should have no cause to complain, don’t you agree?”

Utgard looked to his retainers for approval. Elite-born to a man, they didn’t hesitate to nod in agreement. Raucous laughter filled the tent.

At last, Utgard looked to Golmo, tears of mirth in his eyes. “Anyway, let us return to the matter at hand. What do you mean to do in the event—the very unlikely event, of course—that the enemy does approach from the right flank?”

Golmo gave a dismissive shrug. “War is always a gamble, my lord. Many battles are swayed by luck. But we may persuade fortune to favor us.”

“Oh?” Utgard’s eyes gleamed like a child listening to a bedtime folktale. “And how do you mean to accomplish this miraculous feat?”

“We have five thousand elites in reserve. We will split them in two. They will encircle the battle on both sides, striking at the imperial camp on the left and the Jötunheimite camp on the right. Those who go right will make no attempt to conceal themselves. Those who go left will move cautiously so as not to attract attention.”

“And what if those on the left encounter the enemy?”

“They will not. For that, I have a plan.” General Golmo’s eyes gleamed with cunning, his mouth pursing into a line as he stared at the map. So intense was his expression that even Utgard stiffened.

* * * * *

The melee had whipped up a fierce cloud of dust. Every intake of breath drew scouring sand into Skadi’s already-dry throat. Blood arced through the air from

who knew where. A scream rang loud, and a head came rolling across the ground. A dismembered arm splattered beneath her feet as she collided with the enemy and laid them to waste.

“There’s a foul smell in the air.”

She looked around, letting her arms hang low. The clashing of steel had grown fiercer now. Screams rang through the air, and bloodcurdling death cries shook her eardrums. Yet beneath the tang of iron was another scent, a wrongness that she could not quite identify.

“Something ain’t right, that’s for certain.”

She shook her head, sending sweat spraying, and took a seat atop a corpse with a sigh. Seeing her let down her defenses, her guard fell upon the enemy with renewed fury.

“Tired already, chief?” her aide asked.

“Me? You must be dreaming.” She looked around, yawning, and cocked her head. “No, there’s a stink in the air. And I don’t like it.”

“I smell...blood, sweat, and tears, chief. Maybe that’s it?”

A cloying tang suffused the air. The ground was so densely carpeted with corpses that there was barely anywhere to stand. Some bore tear-tracks on their cheeks that spoke of dying thoughts of family; some had expired with their faces twisted in agony; some stared hatefully back at the living with unblinking eyes. Yet nobody paid them any mind. Armored boots crushed them into mulch as the combatants pressed ever forward, desperate not to join their number. A stifling warmth settled over the battlefield, fueled by the two armies’ ambitions and the clashing of their wills.

“No, it ain’t that. It’s fouler.”

Skadi’s instincts cried out in warning. She peered around, trying to work out why, but there were only clashing soldiers as far as the eye could see. The sky above was a cloudless blue, as tranquil as she was uneasy.

“Has there been any word from the camp?”

“Nothing, chief. Haven’t seen any smoke signals, though, so everything’s

probably in order.”

“Maybe it’s the imperials, then... No, that ain’t it. But then, what?”

She stood up and ran a hand through her hair, narrowing her eyes in thought. A full helmet lay by her foot. She picked it up and cocked her head. Blood spilled from it as though from an open faucet, soaking into the earth, but she barely blinked as gore covered her arm.

“Aye, now I get it.” She cast a glance at the northern sky, eyes filling with realization, before turning to her aide. “Have we got any reserves left back at camp?”

“No, chief,” the man replied mid-combat. “We had fewer numbers, so we brought everything we had.”

“Then I’d better go myself.” Skadi whistled, and her trusty mount came cantering through the press. “You’re in charge while I’m gone. Oh, and send word to the rearguard. Tell ’em I want two hundred men following me as fast as they can manage.”

The aide blinked. “Chief?”

Skadi didn’t answer. She licked her lips as her mouth pulled into a grin. “I got some tunnel-moles to hunt.”

No sooner had the words left her mouth than she took off sprinting. Her mount changed speed to match her. In seconds, the beast was by her side.

“There you are.” She grinned. “I owe you one once this is all over.”

She leaped onto the horse’s back and settled into the saddle. Together, they sped through the enemy lines. Her troops seemed startled by their commander’s sudden change of direction, but so were the Nidavellirite troops, and their spears were slow to raise. Their half-hearted efforts could not hope to stop her.

“Out of my way!”

A swipe of her claws carved open the Nidavellirite lines. She burst out from their right flank and plunged into the woodland ahead. Her horse wove between the tree trunks, never slowing.

“There’re my men.” She couldn’t see her allies, but she could sense them following. Her aide had done as she’d requested. “Now, let’s see what’s at the root of this stink.”

The thunder of hoofbeats sent birds flapping skyward, and her fury sent animals fleeing from the undergrowth. The trees grew gradually thinner until a light appeared ahead. She was almost out of the woodland.

Her grin grew wider as she stood up in the saddle. “My name is Skadi Bestla Mikhail!” she cried as she cleared the trees. “And I’m here to kill some tunnel-moles!”

She leaped from her horse’s back—straight toward a small army of pony-mounted dwarves regarding her with astonishment.

“What in the— Agh!”

In the blink of an eye, the first fell prey to her claws.

“I see a little plume of smoke in the air, and what do you know? Here’s fire. Just goes to show you should listen to your gut. A full pack of elites—talk about luck!”

The riderless pony cantered across in front of Skadi and sped out of sight. The rest of the soldiers only stared, stunned by their comrade’s sudden death.

“Leavin’ the rest of your army to die while you sneak around the back lines, eh? That’s the elites for you. Only good for fighting women and children. Shame you got more than you bargained for.”

Skadi licked the blood from her claws. The dwarves backed away, faces frozen in terror.

“I-It’s a woman!” one cried.

Skadi bridled. “Got a problem with that?”

The dwarves gulped and reached for their swords. They encircled her, lowering into fighting stances as they raised their weapons.

Skadi, for her part, did not so much as raise her guard. The ghost of a smile flickered across her face. With her claws plunged into the earth, she looked vulnerable, but the Nidavellirites hesitated to attack. She looked over them with

exasperation, spreading her arms wide.

“Shame. That was your best chance.”

“You would mock—”

Whatever the dwarf had been going to say next, he never managed it.

“Charge! Protect our chief!”

A host of cavalry poured out of the woodland, striking the elites in the flank.

“Force them back! Heavies to the— Augh!”

The dwarves’ advantage evaporated in the blink of an eye. Before they knew it, the abyss of death yawned before them. The uncommon strength of the beastfolk crumpled their shields and sent their stocky forms flying. Hooves pounded the earth, whipping up a cloud of dust. Screams mingled with battle cries. The grisly noise of tearing flesh rose into the air, only just audible over the whinnying of horses.

“Hold until reinforcements come!” Skadi roared above the melee.

Her troops had the element of surprise on their side, but the battle was anybody’s to claim. They were up against Nidavellirite elites. Dwarves were not the most agile fighters, but they were just as strong of arm as the beastfolk, if not more so.

“Let ’em get away and I’ll have your guts for garters!”

As time dragged on, reinforcements would filter in from the battlefield—her aide was nervous enough about her well-being that he would commit as many men as he was able—but odds were high that the enemy would try to break away before them.

“Guess we’ll just have to do what damage we can.” She cut down a dwarf emerging from the dust and sprang high into the air. “Come on, you bastards. Let’s dance!”

* * * * *

Far from the field, all was still. The northern sky was mottled brown and churned by harsh winds, but the southern was calm, home to a gentle breeze

that set the leaves rustling. Small animals slept peacefully in the undergrowth and birds trilled in the trees. Distantly came the laughter of a babbling brook.

“Nothing amiss here,” Tris murmured. He guided his horse quietly onward, sweeping his gaze from side to side. Occasionally, he breathed a deep sigh—always preceded by a glance to the north.

“Is something amiss, sir?”

“Hm?” Tris turned to see a young soldier looking at him with concern. Fifteen riders followed behind him, all members of the scouting party. He had sent the other eighty-five to investigate locations he suspected enemy troops might be hiding.

“No, no. Nothing to worry about.” He shook his head, but the forlorn expression did not leave his face.

The young soldier looked north, guessing what was on his mind. “It seems they’re fighting hard,” he said.

Tris had been trying not to acknowledge that very fact. The emotions he had sealed away inside his heart began to push their way free.

“So it does,” he said, casting an envious gaze at the dust cloud in the distance. “How many men do you suppose have died since we started talking? One hundred? Two?”

The fighting was no doubt growing fierce. The heavy wind smeared the northern sky with dust. Not so long ago, he would have been there, in the thick of the battle, fighting by Liz’s side. Now, however, that was no place for an old man. He grimaced.

“More young lives will be lost, and these old bones will live on.”

“You’re still young yet, sir,” the soldier said. “You might not be on the front, but you’re still on the field.”

“The front, eh? Is that where you’d rather be?”

“Someday, maybe. But scouting is fine work in its own right. There’s plenty to learn.”

“Aye, but it won’t earn you many promotions. Don’t you want to work your

way up? Make your way in the world?”

“I do. Someday, I’ll be a high general. Or that’s my dream, at any rate.”

Tris found himself smiling affectionately. It was always a pleasure to see the young so driven. He might have said something similar himself, many years ago. He still remembered how much it had pained him to realize his dream would never come true.

“Take the vanguard, then. And make sure you survive it. Long as you can manage that, you’ll make high general in no time.”

“Is it really that easy, sir?”

“Aye, it’s that easy. Do you know who the strong are, lad? They’re whoever’s left standing when everything’s over. Ranks won’t do you any good if you’re dead.”

“I-If you say so, sir.” The soldier nodded meekly, a little taken aback by Tris’s sudden intensity.

“Or maybe you’ll be a third-class tribune for life.” Tris grinned sheepishly. He looked around, realizing they were straying a little far from the main force. “Our job’s done here, I’d wager. One last spot to check, then we can regroup with the rest and head back.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tris waved the rest of the unit over to join them. He glanced between the map and the surrounding terrain, keeping himself on track as they rode toward their destination.

“There’s no word from the other units, sir. I fear they may have been ambushed.”

“Might be, aye. Then again...” Tris peered ahead, narrowing his eyes. A curious plume of dust rose from behind a patch of woodland, too large for a herd of animals. He strained his ears. The faint clashing of steel drifted on the wind.

The location matched one of the spots they had earmarked as suspect. He folded the map away and dismounted, hanging his reins on a nearby tree. The

rest of the unit watched him apprehensively, but he seemed unperturbed as he approached the young soldier.

“There’s no telling what’s waiting. Here, lad, let me on your horse.”

The soldier looked taken aback. “If you insist, sir, but why?”

“An old man’s intuition. Something smells off.”

“Off in what— Whoa!”

The soldier pitched forward as Tris heaved himself up onto the horse’s back. The man might have been getting on in years, but he had never missed a day of training and was built like a bear. There was little space for the both of them; if anything, it was a testament to the horse’s training that it did not balk under the weight.

“Like as not, it’s just my nerves playing tricks on me, but better safe than sorry.”

“Right then, sir. Let’s go.”

The young soldier drove his heels into the horse’s flanks, and the beast set off. The rest of the unit followed along behind. With no reins to steer, Tris gazed up at the sky. The imperial encampment in the distance caught his eye, and he nodded.

“We gave Brutus the lion’s share of the men,” the soldier said. “Ought we not to have kept more for ourselves?”

“A man who knows the lay of the land will make better use of them than an old soldier trusting his gut.”

That was a lie. The real reason was that Tris did not trust Brutus. Liz seemed wary of the man as well, although vague suspicions alone were not a good enough reason to exclude him from operations—that kind of abuse of authority would invite needless discord into the ranks. As a compromise, Tris had proposed using the scouting expedition to keep him under a watchful eye. He couldn’t shadow the man personally with soldiers to command, but assigning him a large complement of men was the next best thing; word would come quickly if he did anything suspicious.

“I’m probably jumping at shadows,” Tris muttered. “I hope I am, at any rate.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“That’s nothing for you to worry about, lad!” Tris clapped the man on the back, knocking the air from his lungs.

The soldier turned around, face pained from the blow. “Wh-What was that for?” he spluttered.

“Just making sure you’re keeping your eyes peeled. We’re here.” Tris brought the horse to a stop, dismounted, and looked up at the trees. “You five, keep watch. The rest of you, with me.”

With that, he stepped into the woods, ten men in tow.

“After me, and try to be quiet.”

He sensed the men nodding behind him but kept his eyes forward. The woods were sparse enough that he could see light on the other side, but the trees were tall and blocked the sun, rendering the air dank and humid. There were no signs of life in the foliage. Any creatures that lived here must have felt the tension in the air and fled.

“Could cut this bloody air with a knife.”

Tris took a deep breath, filling his lungs with oxygen. Sweat beaded on his forehead and trickled down his cheek. He wiped it with a sleeve before it could drip from his chin.

They made their way through the undergrowth until the trees began to clear. As they saw what lay ahead, they hurriedly shrank back into the cover of the wood.

“What in the blazes?”

More than two thousand horsemen were marching past not thirty paces from where they stood. Judging by their direction, they were heading straight for the imperial encampment.

“That’s trouble,” the young soldier said. “Curse these woods. We should have spotted them sooner.”

“Aye,” Tris replied. “We’ve got to let Her Highness know.”

The enemy was clearly trying to sneak up on the imperial core. The encampment needed to be warned, but a smoke signal might not do the job—not only would it be obscured by the trees, the fierce wind might disperse it before it could be seen. More to the point, if the enemy noticed, Tris and his men would be slaughtered before they could convey their message.

“Nothing for it but to fall back and—”

Before he could finish his sentence, blood sprayed from the head of the man next to him. As crimson splattered over him, he realized what was happening and dived sideways.

“Scatter! We’re under attack!”

Several arrows rained down on the spot where he had been standing. He hit the ground, rolled, and forced himself to his feet, drawing his sword as he rose. His eyes widened as he took in the sight before him. A pervasive unease swept over him, setting his hairs on end.

“What are you doing here?” he whispered. There stood Brutus, grinning with unhinged glee. Suddenly, agony speared through him. The inconceivable pain drew his eyes to his side, and the cause: a naked blade driven deep into his flank, dripping blood. “Ngh!”

“Aha... Ha ha ha ha ha!” Brutus stepped closer, pressing into Tris’s chest as he drove the longsword in deeper.

Tris gripped the man’s shoulders with trembling hands, fighting back the urge to throw up. “Brutus... What is the meaning of this?”

“Do you recall House Nikkel? The poor noble family that took the blame for the empire’s failures in Lichtein?”

A face flashed through Tris’s mind: General von Kilo, the man who had been known as von Loeing’s shadow. His reckless forced marches and failure to heed Liz’s counsel had seen him stripped of command by Hiro under the emperor’s decree. It had been discovered that he had been ordering his soldiers to pillage, and he had ill-advisedly attempted to field captured slaves in battle, resulting in not only the destruction of his unit but his own ignoble death. Responsibility for

his failures had fallen on his house, House Nikkel. After losing their land to pay extensive reparations and suffering commonfolk riots incited by other houses, they had forfeited their noble rank, lost all their assets, and collapsed in disgrace.

“You were one of them,” Tris said.

“That’s right. And all this time, I’ve been waiting for the chance to have my revenge!” Brutus glared back with bloodshot eyes. “If it wasn’t for her... If it wasn’t for Lady Celia Estrella, my house would still be standing!”

He stepped closer, shunting Tris back. Blood poured from the old soldier’s side with every step. Brutus’s nostrils flared like a beast as he tried to drive the blade clean through Tris’s flank. Blood dripped from his sword hand as his nails broke the skin, but in his fury, he didn’t seem to notice the pain.

“She took all the credit and let us take all of the blame for my father’s misdeeds! How is that just?!”

“If it wasn’t fair, why did you not appeal it?”

“Chancellor Graeci didn’t let me! Time after time, I asked for an audience, but no, he was always engaged with more pressing business!”

“That’s hardly Her Highness’s fault.”

“She’s a royal! She could have done something if she’d cared!”

Brutus yanked his sword free, sending blood spraying from Tris’s side. Crimson droplets dyed the forest floor a gory red.

“Guh!”

Tris’s head tilted back as his body teetered. He managed to keep hold of consciousness, but he fell to one knee as the strength left his legs. He glared up at Brutus, face pale, one hand clapped to the wound in his side.

“What did you do with the others?”

“They were getting in the way, so I had my friends here take care of them.”

Brutus spread his arms wide. Three dozen figures stood behind him, short of stature and broad-chested. They were built almost like children, but any who

confused the two would quickly regret their mistake. They were dwarves, and despite their appearance, they were far stronger and tougher than normal humans.

“If you were hoping to keep me constrained, I have to say you were naive. Perhaps you were expecting me to be working as Beto’s agent?”

“So that’s where all those riders came from. You led them here.”

Tris looked around as he spoke. Four imperial soldiers were lying still on the ground, blood oozing from the arrows that had pierced their vitals. The surviving six had drawn their blades and were staring the dwarves down fearlessly. None of them were unharmed, Tris included. It would be a great challenge to break free from the ambush. But if they did not find a way to, the force advancing past the wood would fall upon an unsuspecting imperial core.

“No doubt you thought Beto sent me to waylay you, but no. Working with Nidavellir offered me a far better chance of having my revenge.” Brutus forced Tris’s chin up with the tip of his bloodstained blade. His eyes glinted with glee. “Rest assured, once I have cut your wrinkled head from your shoulders, I will be certain to deliver it to Lady Celia Estrella. I cannot wait to see what she makes of the death of one of her oldest allies.”

Tris’s patience gave way. Eyes wide with fury, he withdrew his hand from his side and grasped his sword.

“As if I’d let a cur like you take my head!”

He drew his blade and swung, but the pain of his wound dulled its edge. It slowed enough for Brutus to catch it with ease. Sparks showered.

“Give up, old man,” Brutus said smugly. “Struggling will only make this harder.”

Tris glared back as their blades grated together. “Hear me, you layabouts!” he cried. “Break through their lines and take the message to Her Highness! It doesn’t matter who does it! Tell her there are two thousand men headed her way!”

Brutus snorted. “Foolishness. Kill them all!”

A storm of clashing steel erupted behind him. The dwarves had engaged. Valiant cries met furious bellows and raced together through the trees. Yet a numerical advantage was not an easy thing to overcome. The imperial soldiers might have been well trained, but they were few against many, and they quickly found themselves on the back foot. That was even less of a surprise given that they were humans against dwarves.

“Yield, you senile old fool!” Brutus shouted. With the dwarves on his side, he was free to face Tris in single combat, and since the old soldier was wounded, all the odds were in his favor. Yet he still found himself hard-pressed.

“I’ll not be bested so easily!” Tris snarled.

Steel clashed against steel. Tris’s bladework had grown sharper. A slash lifted Brutus’s feet from the ground and sent him flying back. A flicker of disbelief crossed the man’s face.

“By what sorcery...?” He launched a kick at Tris’s wounded side, but the old soldier batted it away, knocking him off-balance.

“I’ll let no man insult Her Highness. And I’ll hear no more from you!” Tris swung with all his might, his face beet-red with rage.

“Give up, I said! What can one old man—”

Brutus’s death came with little fanfare. The fierce stroke split his longsword in half and clove his head from his shoulders. The head bounced across the ground, lips still fixed in a victorious grin.

“Wait for me in the afterlife, boy. I’ve still more to teach.”

Tris wiped the sweat from his forehead and turned his attention to the dwarves. The corpses of two soldiers lay at their feet, both a picture of agony. Nearby, the remaining four men still held out, but they were clearly on their last legs. Defeat was only a matter of time.

“Out of my way, little men. I’ve a message for Her Highness.”

Tris surged into the fray, his wound forgotten. His body moved almost as easily as it had in his prime. The dwarves were taken aback by his speed, but they raised their weapons and moved to stop him.

“He’s a dead man walking, but there’s nothing so dangerous as a wounded beast,” one cautioned. “Keep him surrounded. Finish him slowly but surely.”

Tris scowled. He had been hoping they might let their guard down against a wounded man, but even with their greater numbers, they were unexpectedly levelheaded.

“Raaagh!”

With a bestial roar, he raised his sword and charged. His blows bounced away, blocked or deflected, but he kept swinging, undeterred. He made no attempt to lock blades and overpower his foes. He was surrounded; if he stayed in one place for too long, somebody would run a sword through his back and that would be the end of him.

“Out of my way!”

His blade bit deep into a dwarf’s neck. An axe slipped from the dying man’s grip, and Tris picked it up and hurled it. The curved blade shattered another dwarf’s skull, sending brain matter flying in all directions. The circle began to collapse before his bearish might.

Tris took the chance to dash to the surviving imperial soldiers. “Are you hurt?”

“Still alive and ready to fight.” The young soldier grinned, although his chest was heaving. “I’m not planning on dying here, sir. I’m going to be a high general someday.”

Tris couldn’t help but smile. “If you can talk to your commander like that, there must be life in you yet.”

They set their backs together and raised their weapons, keeping the dwarves at bay.

“How’s that wound faring, sir?”

Tris’s face was pale, but he grinned nonetheless. “Well enough. You should be worrying about how we get out of this mess.”

There were still twenty-three dwarves left standing—too many for five men to defeat by themselves, and they all knew it. It was a situation that even the young soldier would struggle to make light of.

“You know what has to be done, I trust,” Tris continued. He didn’t need to explain further. Behind him, the others nodded. He expelled a short breath, wrapped an arm around the young soldier’s neck, and whispered into his ear, “You’re the youngest and spryest man here. Run and warn the camp. We’ll open the way.”

The horses they had left outside the woods had most likely already been slaughtered. None of the sentries had come in response to the uproar; it was not difficult to guess what had happened to them. But the distance to the camp was too great to cover on foot. A wounded man would pass out before he got halfway, whether or not he was being pursued.

“Take my horse, lad. I trust you remember where I left it.”

“Did you expect this to happen, sir?”

“Like I said, just a gut feeling that I’d hoped would come to nothing. Of all the times I could’ve been right... I daresay I’ve gone and cursed us all.”

“That’s not true! You can’t talk about yourself like that, sir. If it wasn’t for you, we never would have discovered what they were planning.”

“Sorry about this, lad.” Tris drew away. “Don’t get yourself killed, now. Not before you get word to Her Highness, at any rate.”

He could sense the soldier’s lingering glance, but he didn’t turn to look, casting his gaze over the imperial corpses on the ground before addressing the other survivors.

“Forgive me for taking you with me to the grave.”

They said nothing. There was nothing to be said. But they nodded resolutely, their fighting spirit serving as well as any answer.

“Forgive me,” he said again. It was perhaps the truest apology he had ever spoken. Then he drew a deep breath and shouted at the top of his lungs, “We’ll drink together in Valhalla!”

He bounded toward the enemy. His face was already as pale as a corpse, but his body radiated strength, infusing him with vitality.

“Wha—” one of the dwarves cried out in surprise.

Tris lopped off his head before he could finish, not slowing for an instant. All at once, it was utter mayhem as a brutal melee broke out. The imperial charge sent the enemy reeling, and the circle fell apart. Tris drew as much attention to himself as he could, hoping to buy the young soldier a chance to escape.

“Go, lad! Warn Her Highness!”

“Yes, sir!” The man sprinted away, eyes straight ahead as he hurtled through the trees. Not once did he look back.

“He’s getting awa—”

The dwarves tried to follow, but Tris’s bearish bulk repositioned to block them, forcing them to abandon their pursuit. The old soldier moved with surprising dexterity, ensuring that the fleeing soldier was kept well covered.

“The boy’s not running away. He’s got a mission to fulfill.”

Tris spread his arms wide, forcing his opponents back. His entire bearing emanated determination not to let them pass. Dwarves were slow; if the young soldier managed to escape the fighting, he would make it back to the camp with little incident.

“Stupid old fool,” one of the dwarves spat.

“On those stumpy little legs, you couldn’t catch him anyway.”

Of all the five peoples of Aletia, dwarves were the most prideful. They went red with rage. “Don’t be so full of yourself, human!”

“Tunnel-moles like you should stay underground where you belong!”

The clash of steel rang loud. Tris deflected his opponent’s blade rather than catching it, then stepped in, grabbed the dwarf’s shoulder, and delivered a fierce headbutt. He followed up with a sideways slash that sent one arm flying before ramming his sword through his foe’s portly belly. He left the blade where it was, snatched the axe from the dwarf’s hand, and fell upon the next.

Forgive me, Your Highness, he thought. It seems I won’t be able to walk with you to the end.

Still, he smiled despite his regrets. His ailing body had found a way to serve her once more, and that was enough.

I might not be there beside you, but I'll be watching over you. Always.

He fought with a demonic snarl. A dwarven axe sank into his arm, but he kept pressing forward even as the blade bit deeper and his arm spun free.

"I'm not done yet, you curs!"

He did not stop, even as the other imperial soldiers fell around him. A spearpoint took out his eye, a blade laid open his flank, but he refused to fall.

"Killed in an unlucky encounter out on patrol, eh?"

No doubt some would mock his death in the days to come. He would be cut down in a place where the sun did not shine.

"No glorious end on the battlefield, to be sure, but a fitting final act for an old man past his prime."

So he fought on, never slowing, never stopping. Pride swelled in his breast, raising him above the fear of death.

"If this is where I fall, then so be it!"

The pain had dulled now. His senses were fading. It was a wonder that he was even still alive. Yet he fought as though possessed, gritting his teeth as he swung his sword with all his might. Every second he stood was another second bought for the young man carrying his message. Even as the last of his comrades fell, Tris pushed on. The dwarves swarmed him like ants around a dying cicada.

"Where's this strength coming from?" one of them cried.

"I'm not done... Still...not done..."

He braced his back against a tree, swinging his blade weakly. His hair had grown disheveled and impeded his vision, but life remained in the eyes beneath.

"Come on, you cowards. I'm not dead yet!"

His guts spilled from the gash in his side, and his once-clipped goatee was torn and bloody, but he still possessed the power to intimidate. The dwarves hung back, unwilling to attack.

“We shouldn’t take chances with a monster like him,” one of them said.
“Keep your distance. We’ll finish him with arrows.”

The dwarves raised their bows. A dozen or more arrows pointed at Tris from point-blank range.

“Kill him!”

As the order fell, Tris beheld a strange sight.

“Eh?”

All the noise and desperation of the battlefield had vanished, leaving only white.

“Is that you, whelp? What are you doing here?”

A black mantle billowed in the world of white. The boy turned to face him, and...and...

And reality came crashing back. A hail of arrows loomed over him. A smile spread across his face.

“Hah. I see, I see.”

It was said what when men died, their lives flashed before their eyes. This must have been something similar. A miraculous meeting on the brink of death with a boy who was not there.

“Well then, whelp. Hiro. Seeing as you’re here...”

Only one task remained: to entrust him with everything left undone.

“Her Highness is in your hands now! Don’t you dare let her down!”

* * * * *

“Hm?”

A gust of wind blew through the room. Hiro looked up from the map.

“Sorry, Your Lordship. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Hiro turned toward the voice. Huginn was perched on the ledge of the open window, pale-faced and frozen stiff, mortified by the idea that she might have disturbed his concentration.

“Don’t worry about it. I was just thinking it was time for a break, anyway.” He flashed her a smile as she alighted on the floorboards, before standing up from his chair. “You’re soaked. Is it raining out there?”

“Yes, Your Lordship, but not for long, I don’t think. It’s just a passing shower.” She brushed the water from her arms.

Hiro looked around the room, searching for something he could use to dry her off, but there was no need. Luka approached with a hand towel and wordlessly set about wiping Huginn’s hair.

“I can do it myself, Miss Luka! You really don’t gotta—”

“I want to. Now sit still and let me work.”

Hiro laid his hand on the window, smiling fondly at their exchange. “Rain always puts me in a strange mood,” he murmured. Something stirred in his chest as drops splattered onto his cheeks, carried by a gentle wind. “A little nostalgic, a little sad. And it brings back bad memories.”

The distinctive scent of sorrow filled the air, flooding his chest with grim resolve.

“Liz is probably fighting right now...”

High in the western sky, white clouds streamed across the blue. They looked so calm and peaceful that nobody would ever imagine a battle was being fought beneath them.

“Don’t worry, Your Lordship. She’ll be fine, I’m sure. I bet she’s slicing her way through the enemy as we speak, with Tris at her side yelling, ‘Come back, Your Highness!’”

“No doubt.” The sight was easy to picture. Hiro found himself smiling.

Huginn continued, evidently pleased to have cheered him up. “He’s a strong one, that old man. I’d wager he could punt a dwarf a full five rue.”

The conversation seemed to attract Luka’s attention. “I knew that red-haired brat was strong, but him? Truly?”

“You bet he is! There’s even more muscle on him than my oaf of a brother. I’ve sparred with him more times than I can name, but I could count the fights

where I've beaten him on one hand. He taught Miss Liz most of what she knows! He's no slouch!"

"Indeed." Luka nodded to herself, a little taken aback by Huginn's intensity. "I shall have to fight him myself someday."

"They'll be fine," Hiro said, as much to himself as to the others. He tore his eyes from the rain and shut the window before turning to Huginn, who was wrapping the hand towel around her neck. "So? Have you managed to find anything?"

At once, the air stretched taut. Huginn fell to one knee and bowed her head. "Yes, Your Lordship. It's as we suspected. Most of the hostages have been sold off to Lichtein."

"There really is no limit to how low they'll stoop, is there?" Hiro sat down on the bed with visible disgust. "Tell Garda there's no need to wait. He can go as soon as he sees the opportunity."

"Got it, Your Lordship. What about Utgard's treasures?"

Utgard had his own vault separate from the palace treasury, hidden in an underground room accessible from his chambers. He had concealed a great deal of gold and jewelry there—imports from other nations, gifts from merchants, and doubtless illicit takings from those who had resisted his rule.

"As we planned. We'll use it for ourselves."

The existence of the vault was a secret known only to Utgard and his closest confidants. Hiro and his allies would never have found out about it if not for a stroke of luck. One of Huginn's subordinates had sighted Thorkil taking advantage of Utgard's absence to sneak out some of the wealth for himself.

"Thanks to the greed of others, we won't want for coin for a good long while."

Huginn nodded. "I'll get it out tonight, Your Lordship. Shouldn't be so hard to sneak in."

Satisfied that their conversation was done, Hiro returned his attention to the map.

Luka leaned over beside him, head cocked, features expressionless. "What's

the use in poring over what's happening past the horizon? You worry needlessly, nothing more."

"Call it cabin fever. When I'm all cooped up, I need to occupy my mind somehow or I get anxious."

He glanced out of the window once more, but the rain had ceased.

Chapter 5: The Rose and the Midnight Sun

The sun was sinking into the west. In another hour, it would pass below the horizon, ushering in the cool of the evening. For now, however, a searing wind raged unabated. The stench of blood and sweat mingled in the air, a nauseating reek that permeated everything.

With the battle approaching its tipping point, the imperial camp was in mild chaos. Messengers raced in from the battlefield, delivered their reports, then left just as quickly. The camp aides scanned the reports and moved the pawns on the map accordingly before handing a summary of their contents to the woman at the head of the table.

“The bulk of the battle seems decided, Your Highness. The Jötunheimites’ victory appears certain.”

Liz took the newest report from the aide’s hands, brushing her hair back behind her ear as she scanned its contents. The man’s cheeks reddened at the gesture. He hurriedly looked away, focusing his attention instead on the white wolf at her feet.

“Good work,” she said. “Have our forces reached their camp?”

“Not yet, Your Highness. According to the reports, they stumbled across an ambush. They dispatched the enemy without incident, but reforming their ranks took some time, so they’re a little behind schedule.”

“I see. That’s no problem. We’re still on track to finish before the day is out.”

In a sense, it was impressive for a battle with fifty-five thousand participants to conclude in a single day. The Nidavellirites’ low morale was partially responsible, of course, but it was the Jötunheimites’ martial prowess that had truly tipped the scales. They had broken through the famed Nidavellirite shield wall like so much dry timber. The reports described Skadi claiming the heads of commander after commander, sending her soldiers’ spirits soaring, before discovering and routing an enemy force that was attempting to sneak around

the left flank, tipping the odds further in their favor. Regrettably, the enemy commander had managed to escape and the Jötunheimite forces had briefly encountered resistance on the main field, but Skadi's return had immediately restored their momentum—a testament to her prowess as a leader.

“The beastfolk are a warlike people,” Liz mused. “It’s like they were born to fight.”

They tended to charge straight at their problems, for better or worse. In that sense, they were not given to compromise. That was apparent even in the ongoing battle. They had committed almost all of their resources to the field, leaving only a light guard behind. Thanks to Skadi's sixth sense, they had intercepted the Nidavellirite troops bearing down on their camp, but they had come a hair's breadth from disaster. By contrast, the dwarves might have been natural artisans, but they were also blessed with business acumen. Admittedly, that trait had invited corruption, but for most of Steissen's history, the two peoples had balanced one another's strengths and weaknesses to create a stable nation.

“Still, there's no telling what the future holds.”

The age of the dwarves was coming to an end, and there was no way to know what kind of path the beastfolk would walk in their stead.

“The senate is supposed to keep things under control. I can only hope it does its job.”

Hopefully, the Jötunheimites would fill the senate with diverse and fair leadership rather than attempting to control it like the dwarves.

“But we can't count our chickens just yet. First, we need to win this battle.”

Liz returned her attention to the map on the table. It would be difficult for the Nidavellirite troops to rally now. The Jötunheimites' momentum would not be easily halted. That said, the Nidavellirites would not go quietly to their graves. They could still fall back behind the walls of Galza and try to incite the rest of Steissen to rise up, although it was hard to believe their oppressive rule would find much support.

“Still, if it turns into a siege, this war's going to drag out.”

That would be inconvenient for the empire. With the throne empty and most of its heirs dead, Liz couldn't afford a prolonged absence. Ideally, she wanted to capture Utgard here, today, and bring the fighting to an end as soon as possible.

She sighed, smoothing out the wrinkles between her eyebrows, and turned to the closest aide. "Has there been any word from the scouting party?"

Tris had been slow to return, and she was starting to get worried.

"Not yet, Your Highness. I can't imagine they will take much longer."

Knowing Tris, he might just have been checking farther afield than necessary out of an abundance of caution, but he would never have neglected to send word. Liz tried to ignore her vague unease as she considered the merits of assembling a new scouting party.

"Urgent word! I bring urgent word!"

At that moment, a soldier stumbled into the tent, covered in dust and matted with mud and blood. All eyes converged on him as the aides stopped and stared.

"Enemy troops sighted on the right flank, making for the camp! They number about two thousand! I repeat, two thousand!"

"An ambush?!"

The aides shot to their feet, quaking in astonishment. Liz remained seated, but her eyes widened. Cerberus sprang up at her feet, disturbed by the commotion, and Liz reached down to stroke the white wolf's head as if to distract herself from her fears.

The aides had clustered around the map and were beginning to question the soldier.

"How long ago did you see them?"

"Not more than twenty minutes ago, sir."

"Then they can't have gone far. I'm sure you must be tired, but could you point out their location?"

The man nodded and approached the map, leaning on a nearby aide's

shoulder for support. “I saw them here, near these woods, maybe two hundred paces from the camp. They numbered around two thousand, all cavalry.”

“Someone send the lookouts to check. There aren’t many routes the enemy could take and stay unseen. Tell them not to miss a single speck of dust!”

Several men scattered at the order.

“We still have nineteen hundred men here at camp. That’s enough to fight.”

“Tell the officers to be ready to move at a moment’s notice. There’s no telling where they’ll come from.”

So far, nobody had said anything about Tris, but Liz only closed her eyes and listened. Blood dripped from her hands where her nails had cut into her palms. Cerberus nuzzled her leg, sensing her distress. She smiled gently at the white wolf. A commander could not afford to lose her composure. If she wanted to be worthy of the throne, she could not prioritize her personal concern for Tris over the ongoing discussion.

“Why are you alone?” one of the aides asked. “Where’s the rest of your unit?”

The soldier’s face crumpled. “It seems Brutus was in league with the Nidavellirites, sir. He ambushed us not long after we discovered the enemy force. I don’t know what happened to the other unit, but I can only assume they didn’t survive.”

The aides were flabbergasted. For the empire to offer its aid to a foreign nation only to send a traitor was an unmitigated embarrassment.

“I was lucky, sir. I never would have gotten away if Tris hadn’t held them off.”

Silence fell over the tent. The aides went stiff, like they had been struck by lightning. A roomful of sympathetic gazes turned to Liz. They all knew how much Tris had meant to her. He might not have been high in rank, but soldiers at every level whispered that he had stood by her when nobody else did. They could only stand and stare. There was nothing to say.

At that moment, more bad news arrived.

“The Jötunheimite camp calls for reinforcements! They’re under attack!”

The aides blanched. Groans rose from their ranks. Their hearts might have leaped from their mouths in shock. For a moment, they seemed entirely stunned, but Liz's presence rallied them.

"If it's not one thing, it's another," one man spat. "Where did the enemy come from?"

"From the left-hand side of the camp, sir. To the fore."

"Ridiculous. Did the Jötunheimites let them get away? Did they not even check whether they had routed the enemy?!" He struck the table in anger before rounding on the messenger again. "How many are there? We've only just gotten word of an attack ourselves. We have no men to spare."

"Only around six hundred, sir. But the Jötunheimites have committed most of their troops to the field. The few men they left won't be able to hold out for long."

"Two thousand on one side, six hundred on the other..."

Although there were only nineteen hundred men left in the imperial camp, there was nothing for it but to split them in two.

"We could leave the Jötunheimite camp to its fate," another aide suggested.

"And let it be said that the empire abandons its friends? Don't be a fool."

"The battle is already won. Would losing their camp truly do that much harm? Their commander is on the front line. They will quickly recover."

"But what if that leads to bad blood between us? We don't want to risk antagonizing our future allies."

Opinion remained undecided. The battle had been going so smoothly that the aides were struggling to adjust now that things had gone wrong. What was more, with the pressure of time bearing down on them, panic was beginning to cloud their judgment.

"This is no argument at all!" one man cried. "The enemy is bearing down on us as we speak! We ought to ride out and rout them! What dishonor would be worse than losing our encampment?!"

"Perhaps it seems simple if you only care about shortsighted victory," another

replied. “But if we forsake our allies, we will be the laughingstock of the continent.”

The tent was growing more and more heated. The argument seemed on the verge of coming to blows.

“Enough.” Liz’s voice doused them like cold water. Her glare was so icy that their breath caught in their throats. “This is no time to be arguing among ourselves. Any more of this foolishness and you will undermine our troops’ confidence.”

“B-But, Your Highness—” one man spluttered.

“Enough.”

“Yes, Your Highness. Forgive me.”

Her displeasure cut sharper than any blade. Sweat broke out on the man’s forehead.

As silence fell over the tent once more, Liz stood up from her chair and began to move pawns across the map. “Send one thousand men to the Jötunheimite encampment,” she commanded. Surprise spread across her aides’ faces, but she continued unperturbed. “Four hundred men will stay here. I will lead the remaining five hundred to deal with this army at our rear.”

She turned, her mantle fluttering, and began to walk toward the exit. Cerberus followed on silent paws. The aides’ eyes bugged as they watched her go. Soon, they were in an uproar.

“Your Highness, I beg you to reconsider! You are placing yourself in far too much danger!”

Liz stopped before the entrance and looked back over her shoulder. “If our allies’ camp falls, the enemy will come straight here. They will strike at the same time as the force to our rear. We’ll be surrounded.”

“Then why not make our stand here?” one of the aides protested.

Liz turned to face him. “If the Jötunheimite camp falls, the war in Steissen will drag on.”

At this stage, the Nidavellirite army’s goal was to turn their defeat into a

stalemate. They might be losing the war, but razing their enemies' encampment—and damaging the imperial camp, to boot—would provide fertile ground to promote their cause. With the help of a few creative liberties, Utgard would no doubt find new supporters in no time. Miraculous victories drew admiration from listeners of all stripes.

“Besides,” Liz continued, “the fighting isn’t over yet. We’re in a strong position, but a mishap on the back lines would be a disaster for morale.”

The sun would soon set. If the Jötunheimites had no camp to return to, it was not difficult to imagine what would become of them if the war wasn’t over by then. That said, while Liz’s aides seemed to understand her assessment, their expressions showed that they were having difficulty accepting it.

“I have a plan, if you would put your faith in me.” She turned to face them and offered a smile. “I know that I can overcome any trial so long as I have you by my side.”

A gust of wind blew through the tent. It caught the entrance flap and lifted it aside, showering her in the brilliance of the sunset. The aides stared, struck dumb by her majesty. After a long moment, they straightened their backs and sank as one into imperial bows.

“As you command, Your Highness.”



Bit by bit, she was cultivating a ruler's presence. Who could have imagined that the child nobody had expected to amount to anything, the runt of the royal family, would mature so remarkably? Nobody called her a little girl anymore. Certainly, the aides seemed to realize afresh that they were looking at their next empress, and they hurried to their tasks with a newfound urgency.

"Send word to the officers and get those units assembled, sharp. We're sending aid to the Jötunheimites!"

"Have we heard from the lookouts? Have they tracked down that force to our rear?"

They had always been capable. When given a task, they spared no effort to see it done; that was the imperial way. Liz nodded to herself contently and turned back to the exit.

"What about the scouting party, Your Highness? We know where they engaged the enemy. There may be survivors—"

"Don't worry about that. Focus your efforts on the enemy."

With that, she left the tent.

* * * * *

"Looks like we're almost in view," Keight murmured to himself. He was a dwarven youth, twenty-four years of age, but already with a lustrous beard. He was also a member of the elites and the vice-commander of the force currently bearing down on the imperial camp.

"I think we're as close as we can get, my lord," he said to the commander beside him.

Andh nodded. "It's close enough. The only question now is how badly we take them by surprise." He smiled as he gazed at the encampment atop the hill from beneath the cover of the trees.

"Word has come from our own camp, my lord. They say the battle is still undecided."

"I should hope so. We would be in a spot of trouble if it finished without us. Well, most of those men are fighting for the families Utgard has taken prisoner.

They won't give in easily." The dwarf chuckled in amusement.

Keight smiled too. "I can only imagine how furious they'll be when they learn their families are now slaves."

"I suppose I'll have to return those humans in our keeping," Andh muttered.

Keight thought back to when he was last in his commander's mansion. He did not recall having seen anybody resembling a hostage. "Which humans, sir? I don't remember anything like that when I visited."

"We put them underground." Andh pointed down toward the earth.

Keight nodded to himself. "Underground quarters. I can see the reasoning. Otherwise, they might run away."

Andh waved a hand. "No, no. The shrews wouldn't stop their wailing, so we buried them." A grin spread across his face.

Keight's mouth hung slack. As a member of the elites, he had no love for other races either, but neither did he particularly despise them. He certainly wasn't a sadist like his commander.

Andh didn't seem to notice his revulsion. "So you see, they can be as furious as they like. Their loved ones won't be coming back to meet them. Not that they were ever going to last that long in the first place, of course. If anyone deserves their ire, it's their parents for not giving birth to dwarves."

With a smirk on his face and derision in his voice, he looked positively deranged. Keight had little sympathy for their enemies, but he feared for his sanity if he listened any longer. He hurriedly changed the subject.

"Oh, that's right, my lord. Word came that our men wiped out an imperial scouting party a little while ago."

"Did they? Excellent work. I doubt those imperials even suspected we had an informant in their ranks."

"Unfortunately, my lord, it appears that informant perished in the battle."

"Bah. That's humans for you, frail as they come." Andh said nothing more. He did not seem especially perturbed by the loss.

“I also hear that General Golmo is trying to force this battle into a stalemate.”

Andh nodded sagely. “An attempt to salvage the failures of our army, no doubt. I can imagine his frustration. That said, between finding this informer and using the main force as bait, it’s an ambitious plan he’s come up with.”

“The beastfolk are impulsive. I am sure they will fall for it.”

Andh snorted. “A pack of fools, the lot of them. They bite their master’s hand when they would be far better off accepting their collars. This war will be a fine opportunity to teach them who’s really in command.” He reached for the axe on his back. “We’d better get going. Any longer and we’ll earn ourselves a reprimand.”

The dwarf’s eyes gleamed with battle fervor as he licked his lips. Warfare truly seemed to delight him. He had won many accolades without ever tasting defeat.

“Kind of these imperials to come all this way just so I could win glory from their destruction.”

This battle would be a chance to prove his strength. Bounteous rewards awaited success. How could he not enjoy the bloodshed? He was second only to General Golmo in skill. These human imperials stood no chance.

“My arm’s itching to hew some human necks.” He gave his axe a few practice swings before resting it on his shoulder. “It’s time. We’ll charge from the treeline and strike the camp hard and fast.”

“Understood, my lord. I will relay that to the others.” Keight signaled with his flag.

Andh held his axe high. “Raise our banners! Proclaim our glory! Show these imperials the strength of the dwarves of Nidavellir!”

As soon as the last syllable left his mouth, the Nidavellirite forces surged out of the woodland toward the camp. The thunder of horseshoes swallowed the silence, shaking the ground in their fury. Arms and armor gleamed as they scattered the sun’s light.

“Hah!” Andh bellowed. “Victory is in si—”

“Charge!” came a cry.

“What?”

A stunning impact struck the dwarven force in its right flank. A flame-wreathed sword carved Andh’s head from his shoulders, eyes still wide with surprise. It spun through the air, skin melting, flesh burning, blood boiling. By the time it struck the ground, it was nothing but a charred lump that dissipated on the wind.

As the dwarf’s headless torso toppled from his horse, Keight returned to his senses. He raised his sword to catch the blade rushing toward him.

“What the— Agh!”

A second head soared high, burning to ash. The upper half of Keight’s sword fell down to stick into the earth, severed cleanly from the rest.

As the two commanders fell, the soldiers behind them grimaced in dismay. Riders in unfamiliar colors were pouring out of the woods to the right. At the rear of the force, countless golden lion standards billowed in the wind. The fear of death took hold of the dwarves as they saw they were outnumbered.

To add to their misfortune, they had already committed to a full-speed charge toward the imperial encampment. They could not change direction easily. Caught in the flank by a vicious blow, their force of two thousand quickly found itself split in two.

“About face! And be quick about it! We’re under attack!”

In an instant, the ambushers had become the ambushed. There was nothing so terrifying as believing oneself the hunter only to abruptly find the positions reversed. Their minds refused to comprehend the situation, rejecting reality in order to preserve their pride, fatally slowing their response.

“Out of my way,” said a cold voice.

A mounted figure tore through the Nidavellirite ranks, crimson hair streaming, scarlet flame trailing behind her. The dwarves stopped and stared. She looked like a goddess on horseback. Even amid the carnage of the battlefield, it was impossible not to be left stricken by her beauty; her very presence drew the

eye, turning the blood and gore around her into the vermillion petals of a rose.

Her blade was as gentle as a spring breeze, but it brooked no resistance. None could stand before its crimson steel. Storied swords shattered, and sturdy armor gave way. A trail of Nidavellirite bodies lay in her wake, eyes wide with astonishment. Corpses piled high in an orgy of carnage.

“Bloom in splendor, Lævateinn.”

A maelstrom of fire whipped up around her, reaching to the sky. The dwarves winced in pain as a scorching wind blew over them.

“What are you?!”

One soldier bore down on her, propelled by terror, but his lifetime of training cut only empty air. He scowled and made to strike again. The chance never came. His headless body slumped to the ground, blade still in hand.

The crimson-haired woman brought her horse to a stop. Immediately, her royal guard converged around her, protecting her with a wall of steel. A standard bearer raised a lily high—the livery of the sixth princess—which was quickly joined by a golden lion. There was no mistaking the command.

“Leave none alive.”

Liz raised the Flame Sovereign skyward before sweeping it down. Screams rose across the battlefield in answer. The imperial troops numbered only five hundred and the Nidavellirites two thousand, but it was from dwarven throats that the cries issued.

“Victory to the Rose Princess!” the imperials roared.

With its commanding officers slain before the fight had even begun, the Nidavellirite force descended into confusion. The troops had been deceived by the volume of imperial flags and went to their graves believing they were outnumbered. No matter how superior the dwarves’ physical prowess, with their chain of command shattered, they were no better than a mindless mob—a headless snake that could not hope to best the imperial lion. Their ranks fell apart as they descended into panic, caring only for preserving their own lives.

The melee was a desperate place at the best of times, but the imperial

soldiers fought without carelessness or overconfidence, dispatching the Nidavellirites swiftly and thoroughly. They struck like lightning, leaving their opponents helpless before their advance. The dwarves' last hope was their remaining officers, but with even individual units losing cohesion, these superiors were easily picked out and cut down.

“Ah... Aaahh...”

Some began to wail in despair. It did not take them long to realize that victory was impossible. Their dignity meant little next to their lives. They cast down their weapons and began to flee.

“Stay away, curse you! Stay away!”

Swords and shields alike struck the earth as they turned their horses about and galloped away. Broken spirits let terror seep in. The enemy was coming, and they had to flee. The valiant few who refused to run were left to be crushed beneath the imperial boot. The two-thousand-strong force shattered in an instant, and worse still awaited.

“After them,” Liz commanded. “Don’t let them escape.”

It was an easy decision. The best way to ensure the Nidavellirites would not rise up again was to sow the seeds of fear in their hearts. She raced ahead over the carpet of corpses, leaving her troops with no choice but to follow. They plunged once more into the fray, cutting down the dispirited dwarves where they stood.

“They’re coming after us! Run for your lives!”

The Nidavellirites fled in screaming confusion, and the imperial soldiers hounded them like lions pursuing their prey. The soldiers fought with strength far beyond their usual limits. Perhaps they wondered to themselves what filled them with such vigor; more likely, they had no time to entertain such useless questions. All they knew was that a flame filled their breasts, compelling them to cut down their commander’s enemies.

“Foolish dwarves! Bow before our Rose Princess!”

Their spears lashed out with stunning force. Having cast down their shields and weaponry, the dwarves had only their armor to rely on, and it made for

poor protection. They toppled from their steeds, run through from behind.

As the would-be ambush scattered like ants, a victory cry sounded in the distance. Only then did the crimson-haired woman abandon her chase.

“That sounds like Skadi’s won the battle.”

Liz cast a glance at the sunset-hued sky to the north and expelled a long breath. The cloying stench of blood pricked at her nose as she filled her lungs with air.

“I’m calling off the pursuit,” she said to her aides. “Tell the men to focus on securing the area.”

She urged her horse forward, surveying the field. The ground around her was a sea of blood strewn with unidentifiable lumps of flesh. Riderless horses cantered past her, whinnying sorrowfully. At last, the color of the ground returned to a familiar brown.

“Come on, Cerberus. Time to head back. That’s enough fighting for today.”

She turned to the white wolf, her little sister since her early youth. The beast’s fur was matted crimson with blood, dyeing her almost black in the amber tones of sunset.

“Cerberus?”

The white wolf squatted on the ground, nose in the air. She made no move to answer Liz’s call. For a moment, Liz wondered if she might be injured, but then the wolf suddenly took off running.

“Cerberus? Come back here!”

With her fearsome speed, Cerberus pulled away from Liz in an instant. The princess drove her heels into her horse’s flanks and followed.

Her guards cried out in surprise. “Your Highness? What’s the matter?!”

She could hear them chasing after her, but she kept her attention on the white wolf. They were far from the battlefield by the time her companion finally slowed.

“Is this...?”

The rest of the question hung in the air. A patch of woodland rose before her. From the corner of her eye, she saw Cerberus vanish into the undergrowth.

“Your Highness! Please, wait! Where are you going?” The soldiers brought their horses in as they finally caught up with her. “Is something wrong?”

Liz did not reply. She only stared wordlessly into the trees. As she came to the edge of the woods, she dismounted.

“Your Highness, you must return. It isn’t safe.”

She ignored them and strode in. Not once did she look back. Her feet led her straight onward, as though something were calling her in.

The woods were not particularly deep, the trees sparse enough that light was visible through their trunks. It made for easy going. She pushed through a patch of foliage and came to a stop at last. The air was stagnant here, and the verdant scents of the woods gave way to the stench of blood. Bodies littered the undergrowth, all clearly dead.

“Your Highness... Is this...?”

The clatter of armor broke the silence as Liz’s guards caught up. They beheld broken swords, axes protruding from tree trunks, blood-slicked grass crushed beneath the tread of armored boots. Every step produced an unpleasant squelch, and they tried not to wonder whether it was mud or blood.

One thing was clear: a great battle had been fought here. A nameless struggle far from the battlefield, one that had gone unseen and unnoticed, one that would never be written about in any history book. Here, brave warriors had challenged impossible odds to allow one man to deliver a vital message.

Liz offered a silent prayer for the deceased. None of them were men she had known, but Cerberus’s mournful howl echoed through the wood, putting paid to any faint hopes she might have nurtured.

One tree stood alone in a patch of amber sunlight. An old soldier leaned against its trunk, Cerberus nuzzling his arm with her nose. Liz walked closer, her footsteps quiet, as if she feared disturbing his slumber.

“I had so many things I wanted to tell you,” she said, kneeling down and

gazing into his eyes. Holding back tears, she reached out to cup his cheeks in her hands. “But now... What am I supposed to say now?”

Tris had passed away with a smile on his face.

* * * * *

The twenty-seventh day of the sixth month of Imperial Year 1026

A cold wind blew beneath a canopy of stars. The sun had long set, leaving Galza bathed in darkness. Once, it had been a thriving metropolis known as the capital of smithing, but years of oppression and forced conscription had seen its population decline dramatically. Now, Utgard’s palace was the only beacon of light that remained in this fading city, but with Utgard on campaign in the west, the building stood masterless, occupied only by the nobles he had left behind.

As ever, while the town was quiet, the palace was bustling. Cheerful singing echoed from its confines. Another banquet must have been in progress. The dwarven sentries on patrol cast resentful glances up at its walls before returning to their duties.

Hiro lay on his bed, listening to the clamor filtering in from the corridor. “They’re rowdy tonight,” he said, stifling a yawn. With an irritable scratch of his ear, he turned his attention to Muninn.

The scar-faced man kept his head bowed as he spoke. “Seems like Nidavellir’s lost the battle, chief.”

That came as no surprise. Hiro had predicted as much before swords were ever drawn. The Nidavellirite nobles, however, had not been so prescient; the city they had believed a safe haven would now become a battlefield, and the lavish banquets they had held in Utgard’s absence had ravaged its food stores. Judging by the fact that yet another feast was in full swing, they must not have received word of the Nidavellirites’ defeat.

“What’s happened to Utgard?” Hiro asked.

“Our agents say he managed to make himself scarce, although General Golmo and the rest of his advisors weren’t so lucky. Meanin’ they’re dead, that is. That news is three days old now, so Utgard should be back soon. Assuming he’s not managed to get himself caught in the meantime, of course.”

The capable had perished on the battlefield, while the incompetent had survived—a common tale, but no less pleasant to hear for its familiarity.

“I don’t have much sympathy for Golmo either, judging by what I’ve heard,” Hiro remarked.

Utgard was unlikely to be able to steward the city through a siege at the best of times. With the parasites in his palace draining his storehouses, holding out for any length of time would be next to impossible. On top of that, the soldiers’ morale was at rock bottom; they were only begrudgingly attending to their duties and beginning to openly voice dissent. If push came to shove, they would not hesitate to hand Utgard over to the Jötunheimites. Even Galza’s high walls could not hold off an assault if the city collapsed from within.

“Nidavellir is finished, I think.”

In that case, Hiro had no more business here. One last meeting with Utgard and he could return to Baum, his purpose accomplished.

“There’s one more thing, chief. But...” Muninn trailed off, looking a little like he had something stuck in his throat. Whatever it was, he seemed reluctant to say it.

Concerned, Hiro prompted him to continue. “Is something wrong?”

“It’s Tris, chief. Seems the old man didn’t make it through the battle.”

Hiro’s breath caught in his throat. The shock was so great that for a while he couldn’t speak. A tangle of emotions swelled inside him as the meaning of Muninn’s words permeated his mind, and something in his chest broke under the strain.

“That ain’t true!” A figure sped into sight from the side, lunging at Muninn. “It ain’t! Tris, dead?! Never! You must’ve made a mistake!”

It was Huginn. She had arrived to report to Hiro just before her brother. Her face was almost blue, like she had been flung into the frozen north, and her eyes were wide open in disbelief.

“He can’t be dead! He’s too strong to be dead! You know what he’s like!” She grasped her brother by the shoulders, her hands visibly shaking.

Muninn looked sideways, trying to get away from his sister's furious glare. "Aye, I know. I checked, more than once. But it's the truth. No gettin' around it."

"No... It can't be true... He can't be gone..."

Huginn sagged to the ground until her forehead touched the floorboards, shoulders trembling as she held back sobs. Luka crouched down beside her and softly stroked her head.

Hiro looked up at the ceiling and collapsed back onto the bed. "I see. So he's dead, then."

The man had been stubborn as a mule but kind for all his gruffness. Hiro had often trained with him alongside the new recruits.

"By all rights, he should have been a general."

He had accomplished countless feats of valor—well enough to have been rewarded with rank, if not for the fact that he had served Liz. It was widely known that Liz's fellow royals had looked upon her with disdain from an early age, and their scorn only became more acute when she was chosen by Lævateinn. Her political rivals, threatened by her rise, had conspired to ship her off to a backwater province, and their machinations had continued to threaten her life. As her direct subordinate, Tris had been squarely in their line of fire, and yet he had continued to serve her faithfully.

"Tris, dead..."

Once, Liz had told him a little of her childhood. After losing her mother, she'd had nobody left to play with. It had been Dios and Tris who reached out to her. Knowing their actions would earn the nobles' disapproval, fully aware that they were forfeiting their careers, they had taught her how to wield a sword—and through it, how to live.

When it rained that day...was that you, coming to see me?

Hiro looked at the window, where the full moon hung solemnly upon the night's dark canvas.

What were you trying to tell me?

That was a question that could never be answered. The minds of the dead were not for the living to know. Hiro knew that better than anyone.

What are you thinking now as you look down on me? Do you feel anger or sorrow...or are you smiling?

He lowered his head to the window, pushed his mask back into place, and stood up from the bed.

“This ends tonight.”

At once, the air in the room shifted. The change was not natural but forcible, the atmosphere twisted out of shape by Hiro’s raw fury. All eyes converged on him as a baleful darkness began to flood the chamber.

“Chief?” Muninn blurted out.

Hiro gazed at the ceiling, saying nothing. After an uncertain amount of time, bathed in nigh-infinite silence, he took a step forward. “It’s raining,” he murmured.

Muninn glanced outside the window, where the stars shone bright and clear, and cocked his head. “Raining, chief?”

Hiro approached the door. “For days now, the sun has been hidden.”

As the door crashed open, the Nidavellirite guards rushed up to him, alarm on their faces. “Lord Surtr, you must return to your chambers. You cannot leave without Lord Thorkil’s permission.”

Hiro leveled a cold gaze at them. “Out of my way.”

In one fluid motion, he drew his black blade from its sheath and lopped off both of their heads. It quite literally happened in an instant. The guards’ heads parted from their torsos before either knew what had happened. Two heavy thuds echoed along the corridor as their bodies collapsed to the ground, spraying blood from their severed stumps. A gory stain spread across the red carpet.

Huginn and Muninn cast the corpses no more than a glance as they knelt behind Hiro. “What are your orders?” Muninn asked.

Hiro strained his senses for a moment, making certain that nobody else was

around. “Spread the word. We’re putting our plan into action.”

“As you command.” Muninn vanished without a sound.

“Huginn, you’re in command of our collaborators in the town.” Seeing her look up with red-rimmed eyes, Hiro softly tousled her hair. “I’m counting on you.”

“Of course, Your Lordship!” She bowed deeply before vanishing as quietly as her brother.

A gentle weight pressed against his back: Luka. “And what of me?” came her voice in his ear.

“We’re going to the throne room.” With a smirk, Hiro strode ahead, treading on the decapitated bodies as he went.

A troupe of Nidavellirite soldiers converged on them, drawn by the noise. There were six in all. Hiro stared down the ones in front, while Luka turned to guard him from the ones behind.

“Come, Dáinsleif. It’s time to awaken.”

Blackness flooded the corridor, deeper and more cloying than night. Air, space, the very world itself split, rent, shattered. Eternal darkness poured forth, deep and black, bubbling like stagnant mud. So transformed, the darkness devoured all within view, birthing despair and ambition in equal measure.

The sight stopped the Nidavellirite soldiers in their tracks. “What’s going on?!” one cried. “Lord Surtr has lost his mind!”

“My concerto has only just begun.” Hiro pressed a finger to his lips, straining his ears to their limit. “So hush now and listen...to my requiem for a dear friend.”

His eyes narrowed like a snake’s beneath the shadow of his mask.

* * * * *

A full moon hung in the sky, elegant and solemn as it cast its maiden light upon the land—a graceful sight belied by the thunder of horseshoes in the dark and the clatter of armor ringing loud in the night air. A man tore across the prairie as fast as his horse would carry him.

“How many of you are left?!” he bellowed.

It was Utgard. After his defeat at the hands of the Jötunheimites, he had barely escaped the battlefield with his life.

“Three, my lord! The rest fell by the wayside!”

“Damn and blast! How could General Golmo deliver this failure?!” Utgard slowed his mount a little, spitting bile as he caught his breath. “I’ll see his lands burned for this! I’ll send his family to the scaffold!”

“Please, my lord! Recall that General Golmo stayed on the field to buy you time to escape! To repay his loyalty by executing his family would be—”

“Silence!” Utgard spun around, eyes burning with indignation, and cut down the offending aide. Now riderless, the dwarf’s horse sped off into the dark. He watched it go, chest heaving, before turning to the other two. “Do you plan on lecturing me as well?”

“N-No, my lord,” one stammered. “We would never be so presumptuous.”

“Splendid. But be warned—if you ever have a change of heart, I won’t hesitate to cut you down as well.”

Utgard flicked the gore from his blade and returned it to its sheath before holding his hand out to one of the soldiers for water. He snatched the canteen from the dwarf’s grasp and drained it dry.

“A little warm, but still refreshing.” He sighed. “Why must I suffer this ill fortune?”

“We can still turn the tide, my lord,” one of them said. “The nearby nobles are still hale. We could levy troops from their lands. And Lord Surtr remains in Galza. He could help us to acquire coin from our neighbors.”

Utgard smiled as he looked up at Galza’s moonlit walls. He nodded to himself. “Indeed. He shall be of great use to us. I can see it now—we shall retreat to Galza and stall for time while we rile up our nobles, then pay bandits to burn the lands of any senator who dares side with the Jötunheimites. We shall show them where their interests lie.”

Time was all he needed to recoup his losses. With the first emperor’s necklace

and the king of Baum to lure in more coin, he could quickly refill his empty coffers.

He chuckled to himself. "Heaven has not forsaken me yet. I shall watch from atop my impenetrable fortress as all my woes resolve themselves."

Gazing admiringly up at the walls, Utgard approached the gate. However, it was not long before he noticed something amiss.

"Hm? Why is the gate open?"

"Strange," one of the soldiers mused. "I see no guards."

"One of you, go and see what's— Whoa!" All of a sudden, Utgard's horse reared up, pitching him to the ground. "Oof! What the...?"

The dwarf barely had time to register surprise. His horse toppled over, coming straight for him. He scrambled sideways, only barely avoiding it as it collapsed into the dust.

"What in the world was that?"

Again, he was given no time to process what had happened. A loud clamor arose behind him. He turned around.

"What are you doing here?"

A large crowd of other races stood before him, holding a motley variety of swords, spears, and axes. Some of them were dressed in rags and wielding hoes. They glared at him, eyes gleaming like beasts. At their feet lay the wretched corpses of the two soldiers, struck down before they had even had a chance to scream.

"Another dwarf, and he looks like a wealthy one besides! Get him!"

With a cry, they surged toward him.

"Stay away from me, you mongrels!"

Bewildered but realizing his life was in peril, Utgard drew his sword and ran the closest through. He pulled it out and hacked off another man's arm. The mob backed off, surprised by his swordsmanship.

"Bastard!" one yelled.

“If you peasants think you’ll get the better of me, think again!”

Utgard brandished his sword wildly until the mob flinched back, then took his chance to flee through the gates. He cast them a mocking grin as they howled behind him. When he looked ahead again, however, his face paled.

“What happened here?”

The town was full of people, but their appearance was uncanny. They were roving the streets in packs with bloodstained swords in hand, carrying food or bottles of drink and draped in jewels. Their attention converged on Utgard as they noticed his presence.

“Look, there’s one left. And he’s dressed real fancy too.”

Utgard paled. He looked down to see his golden armor glinting in the torchlight.

“Decked yourself out real pretty in the coin you stole from us, eh?”

The loathing in their eyes pierced his breast. He tried to ward them off with his sword as they converged around him, but none faltered. They seemed more resolved than the others.

“How could this happen? What have those fools in the palace been doing?”

“Feasting all day and all night, that’s what. Didn’t you know?”

Utgard looked up at the palace on the hill. “Feasting?! Why, I— Oof!”

A fist struck his cheek, sending him sprawling. One of the commonfolk had punched him. As he lay on the ground, a boot came down on his face.

“Aye, that’s right! Feasting! With our food and our drink!”

“Stop this at once! Do you know who I— Argh!”

Utgard tried desperately to shield himself as the blows began to rain down, but before the violence of the mob, his resistance had little meaning.

* * * * *

In the palace throne room, the feasting continued in blissful ignorance of the events outside. Nobles and worthies quaffed goblets of wine, arms around the shoulders of one prostitute and the waist of another. They were red-faced,

staggering, and entirely submerged in the pleasures of drunkenness.

“Senator Phalaris! You’ve acquired a new hostage to serve you, I hear.”

“I had little choice. Used my last one a little too sorely, I fear. I sold Senator Perillus’s family to the slavers and kept the son for my own. Now the boy serves in my mansion.”

“Imagine returning from the battlefield to find that only his son remains. I pity the man.”

“Pity? Bah. He should be grateful that his heir still lives!”

Similar conversations repeated all around the chamber. Elsewhere, a group of nobles had gathered together the daughters of reputable houses and were auctioning them off. Some buyers took pleasure in torturing their new toys, while others dragged them away to the corner of the room to “break them in.” Drunkards knew little restraint. No doubt several corpses would need to be carted from the room by the time dawn broke.

There was no voice of reason. Thorkil, whom Utgard had left in charge of the palace in his absence, listened to the screams and cries with what looked like contentment on his face.

“Let them call us corrupt if they please. None of us will blush. These indulgences are the privilege of those who rule.”

The strong reveled in tormenting the weak. That was the way of the world, and this sight represented its natural state. The only escape was to remain on top, never once falling beneath another’s boot.

Thorkil leaned over to whisper in Phalaris’s ear. “I trust you recall our agreement, senator?”

The man nodded heartily. “Of course, of course. I have not forgotten. Once Lord Utgard returns in triumph, I will recommend that he find you a place in the senate.”

“I am pleased to hear it. By way of thanks, I will make sure to supply you with more durable slaves.”

Phalaris chuckled. “I look forward to it. Still, you needn’t worry so.” He gave

an exasperated shrug. “When have I ever broken a pro—”

“Eh?”

Something warm and wet sprayed across Thorkil’s face. He lifted a stunned hand to his forehead.

“What in the...?”

His hand came away sticky and red. He looked down to see Senator Phalaris’s head destroyed, leaking brain matter.

A cloud of dust filled the room, and screams began to echo from all around. Plates crashed as they hit the floor. The squelch of food crushed underfoot mingled with groans of pain.

“Curses,” Thorkil spat. “Guards! Where are you?!”

He dived to the floor just as something swished above his head. He couldn’t see what was happening through the dust, but he could hear clearly enough. From all around came the sounds of dwarves staggering around in confusion. By far the loudest noise was the screaming, which only heightened his unease.

“Got to do something about this blasted cloud...”

Steeling himself, he stood up and began to run, relying on his mental map of the throne room. His goal was the large window leading to the balcony. If he could open it, he would at least be able to see what was going on.

He barged past figures that loomed from the dust, trying to ignore a variety of unsettling sensations underfoot, and barreled toward the window with such force that he crashed into it. The doors swung wide, but the impact shattered the glass, sending him tumbling out onto the balcony.

“Now, let’s see what this is all about...”

He peered back into the throne room. The dust swirled like a tornado as the air currents pulled it outside. The sweet aroma of splattered wine mixed with the iron tang of blood encrusting the floor, producing a nauseating stench that stung the nostrils. And as the air cleared...

“What are you doing here?” Thorkil blurted out in surprise.

The throne room was strewn with bodies, every face contorted in despair. In the middle stood a man carrying a blade as black as a piece of living night, shrouded in a fluttering white mantle that the carnage around him could not stain. It was like watching the sun rise in the dark of midnight.

“The Lord of the Midnight Sun...”

Thorkil’s eyes widened as he beheld the figure amid the sea of corpses—a lord reigning over an ocean of blood and flesh.

“Lord Surtr... Have you lost your mind?!”

His anger earned only a smirk. Surtr gave a theatrical shrug, spreading his arms wide. “I thought I might attend this banquet you’re having, but as you can see...”

He cast his eyes around the room. Thorkil followed his gaze. The surviving attendees were cowering behind pillars and tables, their faces smeared with tears and snot. Surtr smiled gently at them, but his expression was somehow unsettling, like its kindness concealed something cold and hard.

“Your hospitality is as rotten as your nation’s heart. I can’t very well take part in this.”

“Do you mock me?! You know well this was your doing!”

There was no need to press Surtr for an explanation. From his composed demeanor and the clean wounds on the corpses, it was clear what had occurred. Thorkil’s rage swelled. He crushed a fallen apple underfoot as he whipped his sword from its sheath.

“Why so upset? Is it because I spoiled all this food and drink you prepared?” There was no mistaking the taunt, for all that Surtr posed it as a question.

“You cut down my countrymen and that is all you have to say for yourself? You truly must be mad.” Thorkil sank into a fighting stance. His feet slid across the floor as he crept closer to Surtr. The technique was meant to disguise his approach, and it was an impressive show of skill.

“‘My countrymen,’ you say. And what have you done to all those hostages who weren’t dwarves? Come to that, what about the ones who were?”

Surtr produced a sheet of paper from his pocket and began to read it aloud. It was a list of all of the crimes the elites had committed to preserve their power: their purges of their fellow dwarves, their oppression of other races, their dealings with slavers, and the victims claimed by every one.

“Silence! What do you know of us?!” Thorkil glared back hatefully, froth flecking the corners of his mouth. “You know nothing of our land. The rule of the elite is law in Nidavellir. You are an outsider! The rest of Soleil will not stand for this! Your actions will see your pathetic nation wiped from the map!”

Surtr returned a cold smile. Black contempt flitted across his face. “The rest of Soleil isn’t going to hear you, I’m afraid. If it’s any consolation, I only sped things up. It was just a matter of time before the people put you on trial, burned your homes, and slaughtered you and your families.”

Thorkil’s brow furrowed. It sounded like Surtr was talking past him.

With a disdainful snort, Surtr put a hand to his ear. His eyes closed behind his mask. “Can’t you hear it? Here they come...”

The air shuddered with a violent explosion. A thunderous *boom* ripped through the chamber—but it had not come from inside the palace.

“The footsteps of Nidavellir’s ruin.”

Another explosion followed—two, three, four, and they showed no sign of stopping. Thorkil spun around and rushed back out onto the balcony. The surviving attendees surged after him to see what had happened.

Galza was burning. Great tongues of flame sprouted from the city buildings, briefly dispelling the dark before fading away. The dwarves watched in confusion, visibly lost for words.

Behind them, Surtr—Hiro—spoke. “An armed uprising orchestrated by the townsfolk who escaped conscription. Nobody will suspect my involvement. After all, you had it coming.” He strode forward until he came to a stop before the throne. “You lit the flames of hell, and now you will burn in them.”

He settled himself in the lap of the chair and turned to the woman by the door.

“Luka, kill the rest.”

The gaggle on the balcony heard him. They spun around, eyes bulging, but Luka was already in front of the window with Vajra raised. She swung the greathammer with prodigious strength, striking the unfortunate handful at the back of the crowd. Air whistled. Bones crunched. Several screams trailed away as the blast wave sent several more dwarves sailing over the railing.

The swing took Luka off-balance herself, but she planted her feet and reined the hammer in before bringing it back with redoubled force. Terrible shrieks filled the chamber before rising skyward. Finally, she raised the hammer overhead and brought it down with crushing force.

“You wouldn’t—”

The dwarves whimpered as cracks shot through the balcony. They looked back up at Luka with half smiles, their minds addled by terror.

A broad grin spread across her face. “Die.”

Their footing crumbled, and they vanished into the darkness below.

“Oh?” Luka cocked her head. She walked up to where the window met the sky and looked down. Thorkil clung desperately to the pane, the wind threatening to tear him free at any moment.

His expression crumpled as he saw delight fill her eyes. No doubt he expected to be cast into the abyss. Instead, she set Vajra down, grabbed his wrist, and hauled him up.

“Your plaything yet lives,” she called over her shoulder.

Thorkil struck the floor hard enough to drive the air from his lungs. He whimpered in pain, but Luka only picked him up like a ball and flung him deeper into the room. His head struck the ground several times, eliciting a series of grunts. At last, he came to rest before the throne, whimpering in agony. Luka came up behind him, footsteps ringing loudly on the stone, and seized his leg.

“Gyaah!”

One look at his face was enough to see the terror Luka’s expressionless visage inspired in him. He stretched out his arm as far as it would reach, the fear of

death overpowering his pain as he clung, teary-eyed, to Hiro's boot.

"Lord Surtr...help me, I beg you..."

"Give me a reason and I'll consider it."

"M-My lord?"

"I'm offering you a trade, Thorkil. If you want to keep your life, offer me something of equal value."

"I-I can secure you safe passage from Steissen! The palace guards will be on their way now. Let me live and I'll talk our way past them!"

"Look outside. Do you see the city burning? Do you think the palace guard has any time to check on your ridiculous little gathering?"

Thorkil fell silent for a moment. "Then...then I'll give you wealth! I know where Lord Utgard hides his treasures. There's so much gold, you could buy a whole city and still have enough left over for another!"

"Not anymore, there isn't."

"What?"

Hiro gave a disdainful snort. "How do you think I funded this coup?"

That was not wholly true. He had sequestered a portion of Utgard's wealth away in his treasury for future use, but there was no need for Thorkil to know that.

Spoils for the victor. I'll make sure they go to good use.

"You stole that wealth from the people," he continued. "I only returned it."

A kick to the face shook Thorkil free. The dwarf's nose broke, sending blood spurting. As he cradled his face, groaning in pain, he realized Luka was dragging him away. He scrabbled at the floor, but to no avail. Ten bloody streaks trailed behind him as his fingernails tore off.

"I'll do anything! I'll turn over a new leaf, devote my life to serving the people —"

The rest of the sentence caught in his throat as he saw Hiro glaring down at him, his face chillingly blank.

“Save your repentance for the abyss.”

“N-No... No, no, wait! Please! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to—”

He vanished into darkness, where neither moonlight nor firelight could reach him.

“Have mercy, I beg— Agh! What...? Gyaaah!”

Shrill screams gave way to the crunch of bone and the tearing of flesh. Through it all curled a woman’s laughter, a cheerful humming like a housekeeper preparing a meal.

Hiro turned to the shadows on the other side of the chamber. “You, trying to hide. Come out.”

There was no reply, but something trembled fearfully in the darkness.

“Come out or I’ll cut you down.” His voice left no doubt about his intent.

A group of dwarves stepped forth, several young women and a middle-aged man. Hiro frowned but beckoned them closer to the throne. The women—barely more than girls—were dressed in grimy sacks, while the man was encrusted in so many jewels he could only have been a noble.

“Well, there’s a whole family of you. Are these your daughters?”

The male dwarf nodded furiously, but the women blanched. That in itself said enough.

“I see.”

At a banquet this lavish, some nobles would undoubtedly have brought prostitutes, but these women seemed to be something else. They wore no makeup and seemed unfamiliar with courtly manners. Most likely, they had been kidnapped from somewhere or other. It stood as further testament to the elites’ depravity that they would do that to their own kin.

Hiro beckoned the middle-aged dwarf closer. When he approached, he seized him by the neck, eliciting a choked cry.

“I’ll let you live,” he said.

The dwarf’s eyes gleamed despite his pain.

“However,” Hiro continued, “I have a condition. The palace guard should be coming soon, wondering what all this noise is. I want you to stall them. Could you tell them they’re needed to keep the peace in the city?”

The dwarf nodded again.

With a sudden squeeze, Hiro snapped his neck. “Never mind. I lied.”

He released the dwarf’s throat, letting him fall to the ground like a broken doll. Small screams arose from the female dwarves, but they fell silent and covered their mouths as Hiro turned to them.

“The rioters will be focused on the north gate,” he said.

The north gate was where the nobles’ mansions were located. No doubt the mob was ransacking them at this very moment. It was clear what would happen to the women if they went that way.

“Go south. The gate should be open. You’ll be able to make an easy escape. Take whatever you like from the bodies here and bring it back to your families. Oh, and use the rear exit from the palace. There won’t be any sentries on watch.”

He gave a dismissive wave. The dwarven women took off with whoops of joy, stripping jewels from the nearby corpses on the way out. Some of them seemed to care more for coin than their lives, scrambling to collect all they could carry on their way to the door. Hiro’s eyebrow rose at that, but it would not be his fault if their greed hindered their escape.

Once they were gone, the room fell quiet again, but for the night wind plucking vainly at the plundered corpses. In time, Luka returned to his side. Her tongue ran across her lips as she wiped the blood from her cheek, her allure on full display. She took a seat by Hiro’s feet and rested her head on his knees.

“Happy now?” he asked.

“Very much so. He proved quite robust in the end.” Her dull eyes gazed at nothing while she spoke.

Hiro smiled ruefully and looked around the hall. A fallen candlestick had set the bodies aflame, and with the aid of the wine spilled across the floor, the

blaze was spreading quickly. Firelight danced across his mask, casting deep shadows.

“Two years now since you flew the nest.” He spoke to empty air. In a world of blood and moonlight, he stretched out a hand toward the growing flame. “What kind of person have you become, I wonder? One who smiles, perhaps? Or one who weeps?”

Surrounded by silence, he leaned back in the throne and gazed up at the ceiling.

“Liz...are your skies still clear?”

Nevermore would his eyes reflect the cloudless blue, only a dark and stagnant world. A gust of wind blew in through the broken balcony window, carrying away the stench of blood and fanning the flames higher.

“I’d like to see how you’ve grown someday.”

His smile widened amid the crackling sparks. The possibilities at her feet were boundless. But soon would come a convulsion of eras, and an age of bloodletting would descend.

“Blood will flow on the battlefield, and the world will begin to turn once more.”

Thousand-year-old gears were creaking into motion. Every race of Soleil would have its part to play. None could afford to stand on the sidelines—not even gods.

“Again and again, this chance has come. Every time a failure.” Hiro reached out as if to grasp the spreading blaze in his hand. “The Time of Turning is upon us.”

Luka gazed up at him with empty eyes as he began to chuckle. He sensed something sorrowful in her stare, but he could not afford to stop now. He could only forge ahead. From the moment he had chosen this path, there was no turning back.

“Look at me. What am I doing, I wonder...”

His laughter fell away and he sank back into the throne. For a moment, he

thought he saw a hand before him: a lingering memory of the promise he had made with Liz so long ago.

“Liz...I’ll wait for you on the highest heights.” His formidable demeanor melted away and sorrow fell over his face. For once, he looked his age. “And there...”

He had only one desire. One he had held for a long time. Keeping it hidden would force a bitter choice upon her, he knew. But if he was to walk this road, there was no other way.

A crash echoed through the throne room. Dancing sparks scoured away the roiling darkness as they set new fires alight. Yet through it all came another, quieter sound. Hiro turned his attention to the ruined doorway.

“We’ve got Utgard, Your Lordship. Some of my instigators found him being beaten half to death.”

Huginn entered, grimacing at the heat. Two of her subordinates followed. They carried a dwarf between them, his arms restrained: Utgard.

“Fine work,” Hiro said.

He extended a hand. Recognizing the instruction, Huginn brought Utgard closer. The dwarf glared up at Hiro as he fell to his knees before the throne. There was outrage in his swollen face, but the gag in his mouth prevented him from putting it to words.

“Utgard. It’s been too long. You’re in good health for a deserter.” Hiro raised a hand, indicating for Huginn to remove the gag.

“What is the meaning of this?!” the dwarf spluttered. “Did you not come to Steissen to forge an alliance?!”

Hiro laid one hand on the arm of the throne, looking down at him scornfully. “Nobody ever said anything about an alliance. I said I was here to negotiate.”

“What?”

“I wanted you to undam the River Saale. The people of Lichtein are crying out for water.”

Utgard repeated the words dumbly, eyes wide. “Undam the River Saale?”

That's all?"

"That's all." Hiro gave a helpless shrug.

Utgard flushed a deep crimson. "That is why you did all this? For a river?!"

"Not just for that. Don't worry. I have some questions for you as well."

Luka withdrew her head as she sensed Hiro rise. He stepped down from the throne and approached Utgard.

"Lord Thorkil! Lord senators! The commonfolk are revolting! What are your orders?!"

Panicked voices echoed from down the hall. Overwhelmed by the events in the city, a group of soldiers burst into the throne room, only to find it littered with corpses and awash with flame. They froze where they stood.

"Help me, you fools!" Utgard bellowed. "Do something about these faithless blackguards!"

His voice brought them back to life, and they drew their swords. "What have you done to Lord Utga—?!"

Utgard's hope was short-lived. A hail of arrows from Huginn found the soldiers' throats with fearsome precision. The blood drained from his face as he realized that he was once more at Hiro's mercy.

"Have you gone mad? Do you mean to go to war with Nidavellir?!"

"You are a king with no castle, no army, no power. What is there to go to war with?"

"There are still those who support me! They will gladly give coin—"

"To a man with no nation?" Hiro's presence magnified in weight, forcing Utgard to swallow whatever he had been planning to say next. "Nobody will stand with you. You have nothing left. Give up while you still can."

"Then I will trade the River Saale for a peace agreement with Lichtein and use the slave markets to—"

Hiro's shoe clacked on the floor, cutting Urigard off. "I regret to tell you that the river has already been freed. Ten thousand soldiers from the ducal army

have seen to that.”

“What?”

“It doesn’t take more than five hundred men to bring a wall down from the inside.”

By now, the five hundred members of the Crow Legion who had accompanied Hiro into Steissen should have breached the border. Confident in the border wall’s reputation, Utgard had placed Thorkil in the palace to keep an eye on Hiro and recalled most of the guard to assist with the defense of Galza, leaving it with a skeleton crew. They would have quickly crumbled when attacked from behind. Once the wall was breached, the ducal army would have swept in like an avalanche, and it would have been over.

“That was your goal, all this time?”

“Well, not my only goal. But you don’t need to know about the rest.” Concentrated darkness bubbled forth from Hiro. His white mantle danced on the wind. “I can’t stay any longer. I don’t have any intention of burning alongside you.”

He signaled with his eyes for Luka and Huginn to go ahead. They exited the room, unhurried despite the raging flames. Once they were out of sight, he looked back down at Utgard.

“Now, then. I have one last question for you. It’s about your backers in the empire.”

“How do you know about that?” Utgard spluttered.

“Call it a happy accident.” Hiro reached out toward the dwarf’s neck, where a lion necklace glittered in the light of the flames. “I stumbled across it while I was looking into this. I couldn’t afford the chance, you see, no matter how slim.”

With a gentle touch, he removed the necklace and stowed it away carefully in depths of the Black Camellia. Once he was done, he grasped Utgard by the neck and lifted him up.

“And what did I find but that you don’t have any ties to Artheus at all?”

With a mirthful, mirthless smile, he raised his black blade.

* * * * *

The thirtieth day of the sixth month of Imperial Year 1026

Even as the Jötunheimite forces marched on Galza, the thought of its impregnable walls remained in the backs of their minds. They knew that the city would not fall easily. That said, after dealing the Nidavellirites a sound defeat and routing the despicable elites, spirits were high. They felt confident that no fortress could hold out against them for long.

For all their zeal, however, the attack on their camp during the battle had reminded them of the importance of restraint. They would not be so careless a second time. A fleet of siege weaponry trundled by their sides as they bore down on the city.

They did not expect what they found.

The city of Galza, unbreakable stronghold of the Nidavellirites, was burning. Pillars of black smoke arose across the town. Screams and cries swirled into the sky, where the wind carried them away.

The first word that came to mind was *pillagers*. Anyone who had spent long enough on the battlefield had seen this sight many times before. But this was no country village with only a fence to ward off bandits, or some town without a protective wall. It was Galza, safeguarded by the collective genius of its forefathers.

“What’s going on here?”

For a moment, Liz was overwhelmed by the scale of the walls, but her astonishment soon turned to confusion as she recognized that something was amiss. There was no sign that the city had been attacked from the outside, but its gates were wide open. The screams and bellows resounding from within only added to her bewilderment.

“Quite the mess, eh, princess?”

Skadi rode up from the Jötunheimite ranks. Her guards were grave-faced. The uncertain situation was putting them on edge.

“Skadi? Do you know what’s happening?”

“No more than you do. I’ve sent a few units in to scope things out. Better safe than sorry.” Although she seemed to be suggesting the possibility of a trap, her eyes said she didn’t understand what the point would be.

“Could Utgard have burned the city himself? Maybe he’s decided to move elsewhere?”

Skadi shook her head. “Where would he go? Ain’t nowhere better to hunker down than Galza.”

“Then the duchy, maybe? Could they have done this?”

“The border walls don’t quite compare to these, but Lichtein’s in no shape to go attacking it. And even if they did break through to Galza, they’d need at least a hundred thousand to take the place. Two hundred thousand, probably.”

Just then, a rider approached, with a cloud of dust trailing behind him. The red banner at his back identified him as a Jötunheimite messenger.

“Word from the scouting parties, chief. They say there’s no sign of enemy troops in the city, but the townsfolk are rioting. They’re the ones looting the place.”

“Bit noisy for that, don’t you think?” Skadi said.

Liz immediately understood what the beastwoman was getting at. Galza was mostly occupied by dwarves; any members of the other races had either fled conscription or been cast out for daring to resist. Either way, the city’s population had drastically fallen in recent weeks.

The messenger could not have realized what they were both thinking, but he replied anyway. “Seems the ones who ran to the neighboring towns got word of what was afoot and came back to the city. Eventually, they outnumbered the dwarves. That was when the looting took a turn for the worse.”

All the rage and frustration they had accumulated had been unleashed at once. Hatred could be a terrifying thing. It robbed people of their rationality, removing any reluctance they might have had to employ excessive violence. Left alone, they might come to after a while and descend into self-loathing, but

when those around them were doing the same thing, it was all too easy for mob mentality to numb their faculties and push any guilt to the backs of their minds.

Skadi scoffed. “I don’t blame ’em for hatin’ the dwarves’ guts, but they ain’t any better themselves if they’re gonna burn and pillage.”

She brushed her hair from her face as she surveyed the city. Sadness filled her eyes, although whether it was for the townsfolk who had descended into brutality or the dwarves who had been unable to escape their violence, Liz could not say.

“We’re marching in. Someone’s got to put a stop to this. Tell the soldiers no looting, period.” After issuing orders to her aides, Skadi turned to Liz with an apologetic expression. “Sorry about all this, princess. War’s over, but my countrymen ain’t exactly making a good account of themselves. Never meant for you to deal with this, ’specially when you came to help.”

“Don’t worry about it. If there’s anything we can do to stop the violence, we’d be glad to lend a hand.”

“Appreciate it. Could you handle the humans? They’ll listen to their own kind better than to us.”

The riots would die down in short order. The townsfolk had already exacted their vengeance. Now that the Jötunheimites were here, they would no doubt make themselves scarce, fearing punishment. The bigger problem was the bandits and brigands taking advantage of the confusion to ransack the city.

“What do you plan to do if we find Utgard?” Liz asked.

“He’s powerless without Galza. ’Sides, even if he did make it back here, just look at the place. I wouldn’t bet on finding him alive.”

Skadi and Liz rode side by side as they followed the Jötunheimite vanguard into the city. The closer they came, the more intimidating its walls seemed—yet now, after what had happened to the city, their magnificence felt vain and hollow.

“How awful...” Liz whispered as they passed through the gate. Shattered glass lay strewn across the street, glinting in the sun. Blood ran between the cobblestones like water down a drainage gutter. The ground was dotted with

dwarven bodies, all showing marks of violence. Other corpses lay nearby, covered in stab wounds, cut down fighting over spoils, most likely. The shops lining each side of the street had been gutted by fire, their insides picked clean. It felt like she had wandered into a war-torn ruin.

Shouts of anger rose from nearby, accompanied by the faint clashing of steel. The Jötunheimite troops must have engaged a group of bandits.

“It’s worst around the north gate. Seems that’s where the nobles had their mansions.” Having heard all of her troops’ outstanding reports, Skadi brought her horse back alongside Liz’s. “The bandits have taken it over. Lots of dead.”

“I can lend you soldiers if you need them.”

“No need. It’s only the dregs left now. Most of ’em scarpered the moment they heard we were on our way.”

The beastwoman grinned, but Liz could see that it was forced. Of course, forced smiles were likely to be necessary in the face of the trials to come. It would be next to impossible for the city to recover after being so thoroughly razed. Both financial challenges and peacekeeping difficulties lay ahead. It might have been better if the Jötunheimite troops had sacked the city instead; some of the soldiers may have run amok, but at least they would have claimed the spoils themselves. Now, however, there were no noble assets left to seize, and most of the pillaged goods would have already made their way outside the walls. Rebuilding a city took a vast amount of coin—coin they had hoped to take from the Nidavellirite upper classes, although the only candidate left now was Utgard’s palace, and even that did not look promising.

“Even this place didn’t escape the pillaging,” Liz murmured.

The palace’s iron gate had been torn from its hinges, and the ground inside was piled with Nidavellirite dead. The walls were splashed with blood. White smoke hung thick in the air; the fire must have reached even here.

As Liz and Skadi picked their way past the demolished gate, a Jötunheimite soldier came running out of the palace. “We’ve searched the inside, chief,” he said. “The treasury’s safe and sound.”

Skadi looked surprised. “It’s what?”

“Seems the fires only just died down. The looters mustn’t have had time to get to it.”

She fell silent for a moment. “Well, that’s a stroke of luck. Tell the soldiers to cart it out, and double the guard around the palace while you’re at it.”

“At once, chief.”

Relief filled Skadi’s face as she set about issuing orders to her soldiers and aides. Liz, however, felt more skeptical. How had the treasure survived unclaimed? Looters typically set fires after their work was done. Why had the palace been set ablaze before the treasury was ever opened? She was beset with doubts as she followed Skadi through the doors.

“It looked worse from outside,” she commented.

The entrance was miraculously devoid of scorch marks. It was only as they made their way deeper that the true extent of the fire became clear.

“Aye, you’re right. Something stinks.” Skadi’s nose twitched as she sniffed the air. She seemed to have noticed the same thing: the fire had spread outward from the heart of the palace.

“What in the hells?”

They stepped inside the throne room to find it littered with corpses, none of them intact.

Skadi squatted down in front of one of the bodies. “Clean cut. Someone lopped the poor bastard’s head right off. Looters? No, couldn’t be. Still got all his finery. Then why...?”

The palace was still littered with valuables. It seemed increasingly unlikely that it had been attacked by thieves. There was only one remaining possibility: whoever was responsible had specifically wanted to take the residents’ lives.

As Skadi rooted through the bodies, pondering, Liz approached the throne. On the way, she sensed the faintest lingering trace of a spirit. She reached out into empty space and grasped hold of it. It slipped through her fingers and vanished into thin air, but for just a second, she felt it—a baleful power, fearsome in might but laced with heartrending solitude. It was a power she had

sensed once before, from the black-haired boy's blade.

"You were here, weren't you?"

Her steps resumed. Before the throne lay a prostrate corpse—a dwarf, judging by its size. Its clothes were burned half away and its skin was charred black. An acrid stench pricked at her nostrils, soothed only by the wind blowing in through the ruined window. Then she saw what lay upon the throne, and she quickly closed the rest of the distance.

"A lion in silver and gold... This must be it. The first emperor's necklace."

She looked around as she picked it up. Curiously, while the rest of the room was charred black, the vicinity of the throne was untouched.

"What were you doing here, Hiro?"

There was nobody to answer, only the gentle breeze through the window caressing her cheek.

"Throne got spared the fire, eh? Ain't that a thing. Damned strange, though..." Skadi peered at the seat, evidently perplexed.

Liz could guess what had happened, but she was only able to offer a noncommittal smile. At that moment, a messenger burst into the chamber.

"Word for you, chief!"

Skadi brushed back her hair as she turned around. "What? And do you gotta shout so loud?"

"Lichtein's crossed the eastern border! They're invading Steissen!"

Skadi's eyes widened. Her hand stopped mid-stroke. Her paralysis only lasted for a moment, however. She marched up to the messenger. "If it ain't one thing, it's another. How many?"

"Ten thousand, chief! But they've stopped at the River Saale!"

Skadi halted, crossing her arms beneath her voluptuous breasts. "The river? Why?"

The messenger nodded. "Seems the Nidavellirites were damming it, chief."

"Course they were." Skadi sighed. "Bastards just had to pick now, eh? Almost

like they knew what was coming.”

Liz’s eyes took on a distant look. “I think they did.”

She pressed a hand to her chest as her heart began to race. A black-haired boy had been here—a natural schemer, adept at deception. The thought of how close he had been filled her heart with fire.

Skadi peered back over her shoulder, oblivious to what was going through Liz’s mind. “What did you say?”

“He knew the Nidavellirite soldiers were going to leave the province, and there was going to be no one left to lead whoever was left behind. He watched, waited, and when the time came, he plunged the city into chaos.”

It was nothing less than impressive. How or why he had come to be here, she did not know, but where Galza could have fended off two hundred thousand soldiers, he had managed to take it with a single clever plan. His means had been brutal but undeniably effective.

“He took advantage of their confusion to wipe them out in one stroke. It’s one of his favorite tricks.”

Still, there had been compassion amid the cruelty. He had left the treasury untouched, no doubt to give the Jötunheimites the opportunity to rebuild. There was still kindness left in his heart—all the more reason that his broken soul was worth saving.

She cast her mind back to the promise they had exchanged. Emotions swelled in her heart, tender, kind, bittersweet.

“Hiro...”

Her fingers closed tight around the first emperor’s necklace, and she gazed at the throne as if she could still see him there.



Epilogue

“You could stand to stay a little longer, y’know,” Skadi said.

Liz smiled. “Not this time. I want to bring him home.”

She glanced over her shoulder. A coffin sat in the bed of the roofless carriage behind her, with Cerberus curled up mournfully beside it. Within it lay Tris, in a deep slumber from which he would never wake. She would have to give him a lavish funeral once she returned to the empire. In the meantime, she could only hope that he was sharing a drink with Dios on the other side.

Seeing Liz cast a fond glance at the coffin, Skadi gave a shrug of resignation. “That so, eh? Well, if you ever need anything, just send word and I’ll come running.”

“Won’t you have your hands full with the duchy for a while?”

“Give us a chance to sit down and we’ll talk it out. Neither of us can take any more bloodshed.” Skadi grinned. “But we beastfolk don’t forget our debts, and by the looks of the empire, you could do with whatever help you can get. If you ever need us, don’t think twice.”

Liz’s smile had a wry edge to it, but she nodded. “I appreciate it. If the time ever comes, I’ll be counting on you.”

“I’ll probably pay you a visit before too long, anyway. I’ll be representing Steissen soon.”

“Then I’ll be the one treating you to dinner next time. I’ll show you a proper imperial banquet.”

“Will you, now? Well, maybe I’ll bump that state visit up a few weeks.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it.”

With a parting wave, Liz turned her horse about. She glanced up at the sky as she rode away. It was clear and blue, without a single cloud.

Tris von Tarmier had not lived a blessed life. Despised by the nobility for his

support of an unwanted princess, he had been denied his rightful rank and died a third-class tribune. Once, she recalled, she had tried to take a despotic noble to task, only to draw criticism in turn. As she had lamented her own powerlessness, Tris had addressed her with a stern gaze and a kind voice.

“If you’re so angry you could cry, if you want to change their ways, there’s only one thing to do. You’ll have to get stronger. But that’s a hard road, Your Highness. Harder than you can imagine.”

Liz, burning with self-righteousness, had instantly replied that she didn’t care, that she would be stronger. Tris had tousled her hair and smiled wryly.

“You’re still a child, Your Highness. Some things you can’t do yet. But until the day you can, I’ll be your sword and shield, and I’ll serve you until my bones are dust.”

With those words, he had fallen to one knee, taken her hand, and bowed his head. “I will weep with you. Smile with you. Fight with you.” At the last, he had broken into a grin. “I’m your most faithful servant, after all.”

Many years had passed since that day, but the memory remained deep within her heart, as fresh as the day it was made.

“Come on, Tris. Let’s go home.”

There would be no time to rest once she returned to the empire. The liberation of Faerzen was about to begin in earnest. If she spared any effort, her most faithful servant would frown down at her from the halls of Valhalla. There was no time for grief. Had he been there, he would have said the same thing.

She gripped the reins tighter. “Just watch me. I’ll be empress one day, I swear it.”

Her childhood dream was coming closer to fulfillment with every passing day. The sun blazed in the sky above, lighting her way ahead.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up this copy of *The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles Volume 8*. If you're returning from the previous volume, welcome back. Now that we're moving into part two, we have a world map, character bios, a timeskip's worth of growth, new introductions... Things have really changed a lot since part one. Are you all enjoying yourselves? If I could hear a "hell yeah!" then I'd be extremely happy.

Now, I'm certain you can all guess what I'm going to say next. If you look at the cover or the insert art, you'll see what I'm talking about. That's right! Liz sure is gorgeous this time around, isn't she? She's gotten so beautiful, it's kind of moving. What caught your eye first, dear readers? Her chest? Her butt, perhaps? Both good choices, but that's not me. I'm built differently. The part I want you to focus your attention on is...her back! Look at her shoulder blades—not too hard, not too soft, just the perfect amount of muscle to form an elegant curve. She makes the perfect compliment to Hiro's coolness on the cover. I could stare at her forever. She really is the best.

But we mustn't forget about this volume's big new introduction: Skadi. That older sister vibe is pretty great in its own way, don't you think? I can't go into any details just yet, but she'll get to strut her stuff with Liz in the next volume, which I'm sure you'll enjoy. Scáthach and Aura will be making their long-awaited returns as well, so please look forward to that too.

Anyway, I'm running low on my line count, so I'll get to the thank-yous.

To Ruria Miyuki-sama, from the earliest roughs to the finished product, your gorgeous illustrations are fuel for my chuuni soul. Another volume or two and I might awaken to new powers.

To my editor, I-sama, I sure caused you a lot of trouble again this time, didn't I? I know it won't be the last time, but I hope I can count on your continued support.

To everybody in the editing department, the proofreaders, the designers, and

everyone else who helped to make this book a reality, it's been a pleasure working with you. I look forward to doing it again.

Last but not least, to you, the fans of this series—it's no exaggeration to say that I've only gotten to part two thanks to your support. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

I'm going to leave the chuuni rays on full blast over here, so please keep on supporting me.

Until we meet again.

奉 (Tatematsuri)

Bonus Short Stories

A Fallen Princess's Request

"I would ask for your aid in restoring Faerzen," Scáthach said.

Both Liz's and Aura's eyes widened. "Excuse me?" Liz asked.

Scáthach nodded. It was only natural that she would be taken aback. "I have no reason to remain in the empire. My purpose was to ensure the Resistance and the empire did not come to blows, but now that Faerzen has fallen to Six Kingdoms, that purpose is no more."

She had also sworn an oath with Hiro, but she thought better of mentioning that. In any case, she had little value as a hostage anymore. Six Kingdoms was the conqueror of Faerzen now. Indeed, skirmishes were already breaking out across the nation in defiance of their rule. However, she did not want to plunge her people into war a second time, so she had ordered the Resistance to refrain from antagonizing them unduly. The force had taken refuge underground where they continued to work toward the liberation of their homeland, although so far they had accomplished little; if anything, they had grown weaker with time.

"Some of my subordinates disagreed with my approach and took matters into their own hands," Scáthach explained. "They tried to start uprisings of their own, only for Six Kingdoms to crush them one by one. It has left our strength woefully depleted."

Her subordinates had begun petitioning the empire to let her return home if she served no more purpose. They seemed intent on casting out Faerzen's oppressors once and for all; no doubt they hoped that with her as a figurehead and liberation as their call to arms, the people would flock to their cause. Scáthach, however, knew they had no chance of victory with or without her. The scales were tilted far enough in Six Kingdoms' favor that one Spiritblade would not tip them back.

“My people have known too much war already. They have no strength left to resist Six Kingdoms. I would not send them to the battlefield again. I understand that I ask a great deal, but please, would you help me in this?”

Liz made to reply, but Aura’s hand interrupted her. “That wouldn’t be wise,” the silver-haired girl said. “The empire is a conqueror too. Your people won’t welcome us. You might only hurt your standing at home.”

It would be far better for the people to rise up on their own behalf and drive out their oppressors themselves. Another nation’s intercession would skew the balance of power, inevitably sowing more discord. And aside from anything else, the empire had no *casus belli*. The people of Faerzen would not want the aid of their former conquerors. It had no excuse to intervene. Aura’s eyes told the truth, plain and frank: there was little to be done.

Scáthach bowed her head. “It is for restoration that I mean to fight, not liberation. Again, I know the weight of what I ask. I will not deny there may be no profit in it for the empire at all. I can only beg your assistance.”

For a long time, she had advocated for the liberation of Faerzen. To now pivot to calling it a “restoration” was only a semantic distinction—except in one important respect. While the people of Faerzen would certainly rejoice to see their nation rebuilt, there was little in it for the empire, unless...

“Once my nation is whole again, I will relinquish my claim to the throne. The empire may select the next monarch of Faerzen. That should make for suitable recompense.”

“But then your people won’t be free,” Liz said.

Scáthach shook her head. “It would be easy enough to claim your choice has royal blood. My family was scattered during the battle with the empire. It would not be unthinkable for another to have survived. Besides, my people will accept a male ruler more easily than me.”

Both Liz’s and Aura’s breath caught as they saw the extent of her resolve. She meant to relinquish her birthright to see her nation restored. It was the act of a knight, but also the act of a martyr.

“If that’s what you want...” Liz said finally, “we’ll think of a way.” She looked

at Aura.

Aura sighed in defeat. “I’ll do what I can.”

“You have my gratitude.” Scáthach bowed her head once more.

A single tear splattered on the floor. In her heart, she whispered an apology to her siblings, her father, her mother. She had condemned the royal line to extinction, and she prayed for their forgiveness. Still, that was a small price to pay to see Faerzen flourish once more. She fought not to restore the crown, but to reclaim the nation that she loved.

She looked out of the window as she raised her head again.

Besides, my spear is pledged to another.

Its Lord was gone now, but the connection still held. They had sworn an oath, and as such, they were tied by an unbreakable bond—an unbreakable curse.

When will the day come, my Lord, when the heavens have need of my spear?

The Black-Winged Lord and the Vengeful Goddess

She woke with a start from a nightmare she had experienced many times before, a dream she could not escape. Night after night, the memories plagued her—visions of the moment she had lost her beloved brother.

“I’ll kill you... I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you...”

Every night, it was always the same. She growled like a beast, spitting hatred in the eye of a world that had forsaken her, and began to haul herself across the floor, inching toward the bed as though fleeing the dark.

This was the bedchamber of Surtr, the king of Baum, and the woman was Luka Mammon du Vulpes. She had lost her brother to Surtr and her left arm shortly after. She hated him from the depths of her soul. Murderous glee danced in her eyes, too fierce to ever gutter out. The thought of exacting vengeance upon her nemesis was all that gave her life meaning.

She grasped the edge of the bed and dragged herself up. Her foe’s form came into view, chest rising and falling softly as he slept. She slithered up his body like

a snake until she was poised to gaze into his eyes. They were close enough for their breaths to mingle, but there was no warmth between them, only loathing.

In sleep, the boy looked so gentle that he wouldn't hurt a fly. Compared to the composed expression he wore on the battlefield, he was fatally lacking in caution.

"I'll kill you, I'll kill you, I'll kill you, I'll kill you..."

From her position atop him, Luka reached out with her one remaining arm. Her fingers brushed his chest, crawled up his throat, caressed his cheek—and stopped. She withdrew her hand and stared at it. Her fingertips, now wet, glistened in the growing light of dawn.

"Tears? From you?"

Intrigued, she looked back at his face. Her tongue snaked from her mouth, trailing a string of saliva, and dragged up his cheek. She licked up his tears like a beast lapping water. A heated sigh spilled from her lips once she was done, and a smile spread across her face as the tang of salt filled her mouth. A maddening mixture of emotions pricked at her palate—sorrow, hatred, fury, and more.

For a while she savored the taste, making no attempt to conceal her fascination as she lapped at his cheek with single-minded fervor. The loathing in his tears was nothing short of rapturous.

"Whatever could torment you so? What sorrow could draw tears from eyes as dry as yours?"

It was delicious to see her nemesis in pain. Her excitement would not be contained; his suffering was simply delectable. She wanted to cut open his belly and churn up his organs. Her ecstasy spilled over into sadism, whispered in her ear to take his life, but she only kept licking with increasing zeal.

She would see him suffer. She would see him grieve. She would see him wail, and scream, and weep.

Wresting her murderous urges back down, she withdrew her head. Her tongue moistened her lips as she gazed at the trails of drool, falling deeper into her fugue.

“You’ll never get away. Never, never, never, never, never...”

They would be together forever. She would stay by his side, watching over him until death tore them apart, and to ensure he kept her there, she would give him all he desired. Her strength, her body, her heart—all of it was his for the taking. She would grant his every wish, his wife, his lover, his slave, his whore. Her dearest nemesis—the one tie still holding her soul to this world.

“Give me greater ignominy, my dear. Force me to more wretched depravity.”

She would nurse her hatred for the day it would be needed. The flame of vengeance called for kindling. One day, her brother’s murderer would taste despair; one day, she would smile as she lopped his head off his shoulders. But until that day, she would follow him to the grave, obeying every order and suffering every disgrace.

“And then I too shall die. With your head in my arms, your blood on my tongue, your guts between my teeth, my gorge clogged and ravaged with your blood and flesh, I shall bid this world farewell.”

That would be just punishment for failing to save her brother. She leaned back until she was looking at the ceiling, a drunken smile spreading across her face. Her shoulders began to shudder with mirth as she pictured the future to come.

“Ahh... Ahh! Die, die, die, die, die, die, die!”

As the cry burst from her lips, the boy stirred beneath her. Luka’s eyes narrowed as she saw his eyelids flutter. He had woken. He had heard her shameful moans. Flushing as red as a maiden, she summoned her greathammer to her hand.

“Die for me, die for me, die for me, die for me, die for me!”

The hammer whistled through the air as it swung toward his chest.

The Vernesse and Her Pursuit

A bolt of white streaked across the field, spilling forth a sea of blood. A cacophony filled the air—bellows of rage, screams of pain, agonized cries from

those who were dying in despair. Through it all, the white light remained pure, yet painted over with deepest black. The crossing of the hues bred more corpses, an unstoppable advance that reaped lives like grain.

In a hideout nestled in the mountains of Baum, three hundred bandits were fighting five hundred of the Crow Legion.

“What a one-sided battle. It’s positively dreary to watch.” Claudia sipped from her teacup as she gazed down on the battle from the Crow Legion’s camp atop the cliff. “Lord Surtr shines brightest when great armies clash. His talents are wasted on a field such as this.”

She turned from his battle toward the depths of the gully. There, in the heart of the enemy stronghold, a woman fought like a rampaging lion.

“What a pitiful sight you make. Born heir to a throne, yet now you spend your days in a foreign land, letting a man you despise keep you on a leash. I shall never understand what pleasure you find in it.”

The former princess had fallen into Lord Surtr’s keeping during the battle with Six Kingdoms. Now her empty left sleeve flapped in the wind as she swung her greathammer in her liege’s defense, keeping the enemy from his back.

“How simple these bandits must be,” Claudia murmured. “Had they only ventured south, they would have found far less risky pickings in Lichtein.”

The bandits were holding out for all they were worth. Judging by their numbers and the uniformity of their gear, they were ne’er-do-wells who had filtered in from the empire; hired by some noble to harass Baum, perhaps. Whatever the case, Claudia could only pity them. Why they had chosen this place, she could not for the life of her comprehend. The gully made a fine location for a stronghold, nullifying the numbers of a larger force, but even a single warrior of elite caliber would turn it into a deathtrap, let alone the two or three that the Crow Legion could field. The vanguard must have shuddered as they saw what they faced.

Claudia giggled. “You’d love to turn tail and run, no doubt, but he won’t let you.”

She could not make out the bandits’ faces from the clifftop, but she could

imagine their expressions all the same. Anybody could. It was all too easy to understand what they must be feeling. To face Surtr was like standing against a storm. Resistance was hopeless. Victory was impossible. Strength? Weakness? The gulf between him and these bandits was nothing so easily overcome. Before the wrath of nature, they had no choice but to lay down their lives. That was what it meant to face the Black-Winged Lord; to stand in his way without understanding that was unthinkably naive.

“Storms are fickle things. They bestow blessings as easily as they wreak destruction.”

And the wise knew to learn to live with them rather than challenge them. An enemy that could not be defeated was better not provoked.

“Die knowing you were fools who did not realize who you faced—fools who gave no thought to how my lord might be overcome.”

She likened him to a storm, but he was still a man, possessed of a human heart. That was the key to victory over him. Those who ignored that stood no chance.

“His flaws are not visible to the eye, but spend long enough by his side and you cannot fail to notice them. Lord Surtr is contradictory to his core.”

He was kind to those he cared for. Callous to the rest, yes, but kind to them—a tenderness like cloying honey, so sweet that it was tempting to brand him a failure as a ruler. Yet that was his privilege, a distinction that he alone was strong enough to uphold.

“It is his allies, not his enemies, who turn his head. And once you have worked your way into his good graces, he will willingly bleed in your name. That is his failing: that he is kind. So very, very kind.”

Yet if she did not offer equal love, his would quickly shatter. Their interests aligned, she had said, but in truth, their arrangement was less an alliance of convenience and more akin to a suicide pact.

“I mustn’t allow myself to be lured too deep...but my, if that is not a difficult line to draw.”

Fighting by his side was like wading into a bottomless mire. Once it caught

hold, one's fate was sealed; they could only watch themselves slowly sink deeper, like water seeping into wool. There was a clear and present danger of being caught in her own web, and her mind begged her to withdraw with almost paranoid urgency.

"He is simply marvelous."

Lord Surtr—a man who was both sides of the coin of life and death. He frustrated her, but that was all the more reason to want him. That was her goal. That was her reason for joining forces. The zlostas would never rise again without him—he alone in this world had the power, the authority, the renown. To kill him would be a waste. Far better to make him her plaything and let him wait forever on her hand.

"I will have you, Lord Surtr. And I will stop at nothing to make you mine."

A sigh spilled from her lips as she watched the last of the bandits fall by his hand.

Meeting Fate With a Smile: The Final Moments of the First Archpriestess

Embers danced in the air. Heat-scorched rubble crashed to the ground as the world came tumbling down. The rush of wind from their impact only fanned the flames higher, sending more sparks fluttering forth. And there was the sound, a high-pitched keening that rang on ceaselessly. A storm of steel raged through the fiery maelstrom, hundreds, thousands, millions of strokes.

"Hah!"

In the heart of that hell danced a solitary figure. The first archpriestess traced a streak of light through air heavy with malice, unleashing a barrage of blows upon her foe at extraordinary speed.

"You're fast for a pretender," her enemy said. "I see why no zlostas could best you."

He foiled her attacks with ease, dodging this, parrying that. Not once did his composure falter. A tempest swirled forth from his weapon, a buffeting gale

that sought to lock her in place. Levelheaded to the last, she leaped back, putting some distance between them.

“A Lord is a fearsome foe indeed,” she said.

Despite the calmness in her voice, her face was beginning to show signs of strain. The Lord had not moved a single step since his arrival. She raised her blade in a fighting guard, straining her senses to their limit as she stared him down.

“What is it that you cling to, Demiurgos? The age of the zlostas is over. You cannot hope to—”

Abruptly, she stiffened as though she had been locked in iron fetters. An uncanny pressure had issued from the Demiurgos. She sensed no anger from him, however, nor malice, nor hatred neither. He possessed no emotions at all. It was the sheer weight of his gaze that bored into her soul, filling her with a dread that made sweat break out across her brow.

“You would presume to know my designs? The designs of a Lord? What insolence.”

At last, he took one step forward. That simple motion caused the air to groan. Space shuddered beneath the weight of his passage. His every footfall landed with crushing force that wore down her spirit.

Rey tensed her legs and breathed a small sigh. “Come, Excalibur. It’s time to end this.”

As the words left her lips, a brilliant light drowned out the glow of the flames. Radiance filled the chamber, astounding in its purity. Rents appeared in the air behind her—one, four, six, expanding without bound. Blades issued forth, formed from the remnants of spirits—innumerable spirit weapons manifested at her command. Yet the Demiurgos showed not a hint of concern. If anything, he seemed amused by the sight.

“You transcend the domain of mortals...just like your false Lord.”

Rey hardly heard him. She turned the glittering sword around in her grip and raised it before her eyes, setting her left hand against the blade. A ripple spread out from the point of contact and she brought her lips to it.

“All is nothingness, light’s rightful claim.”

And she unleashed Liegegrazalt—Divine Lightning.

In an instant, she vanished, along with her entourage of blades. Streaks of light split the air, a blistering assault unleashed at supersonic speed. Hundreds of strikes bore down on the Demiurgos, thousands, millions, a storm of violence that left him with no choice but to defend...or so anybody would have thought.

“A futile effort.”

The battle ended in one stroke. A single spear thrust, precise and merciless, exposed the width of the gulf between them as the Demiurgos’s weapon ran her through. He wrenched the spear back out. She stared, stunned, at the blood that poured forth.

“I could not even land...a single blow...”

“And so you die. Writhe in pain and wail in terror, for you have earned a Lord’s wrath.”

Even as she crumpled, she bit her lip against the pain, but blood burst from her mouth. The spirit weapons surrounding her began to disappear. A silver blizzard swirled around her, motes of light falling to the floor like powder snow.

Forgive me, Lord Hiro. It seems my path ends here.

It would be a lie to say she had no regrets. She had left him no parting words. But that was all she had left undone.

But I know... I have faith...that my soul will wait...

She had failed to seize the future she had planned, but she had glimpsed the one she had dreamed of. That knowledge—the knowledge that her truest wish would be granted—lifted her above the fear of death.

I will wait for you, Lord Hiro. For ages, for aeons, until the end of time.



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The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles: Volume 8

by Tatematsuri

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