



The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles



Author: Tatematsuri
Illustrator: Ruria Miyuki



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Tatematsuri / Illust. Miyuki Ruria



*“Why,
hit him,
of course.
Hard.”*

???

*“I don’t even
know what to
do anymore!”*

*She cried out
with a voice
born of all her
frustration.*

Liz



Claudia

*“You
worry
too
much.”*

*“Lavish
too much
attention on
others and
you’ll start
to make me
jealous.”*

Surtr



INDEX

Prologue

Chapter 1: Fraying at the Seams

Chapter 2: Holding Fast to Hope, Sinking into Sorrow

Chapter 3: Beyond Despair

Chapter 4: Those Who Cling to Hope

Chapter 5: Despair Forth from Darkness

Epilogue



Illust: Miyuki Ruria



Table of Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Color Illustrations](#)
3. [Prologue](#)
4. [Chapter 1: Fraying at the Seams](#)
5. [Chapter 2: Holding Fast to Hope, Sinking into Sorrow](#)
6. [Chapter 3: Beyond Despair](#)
7. [Chapter 4: Those Who Cling to Hope](#)
8. [Chapter 5: Despair Forth from Darkness](#)
9. [Epilogue](#)
10. [Afterword](#)
11. [Bonus Short Stories](#)
12. [About J-Novel Club](#)
13. [Copyright](#)

Prologue

The smell of death hung in the air. Its acrid stench pervaded, sinister and sickening and raw enough to burn. Charred corpses littered the plain, every face twisted into an agonized rictus. The wind carried the lingering heat of the battle far and wide.

“You mean to go, then?” The amethyst-haired girl spoke amid a world of silent corpses.

“I do.” The man picked up the remains of a fallen flag as he spoke. His expression was inscrutable, concealed as it was behind a mask. “This is only the beginning.”

His inflectionless voice betrayed that he was male, but beyond that, it revealed nothing. It contained no joy, no anger, no sorrow, no amusement.

He surveyed the wreckage of the battle, steeped in death and hatred. Behind the mask, the dark-shrouded pupil of his right eye glinted gold.

“For a thousand years, time has stood still, but now it has begun to move again.”

He stepped forward, crushing foliage crusted with black blood beneath his feet. There was no hesitation in his stride. Nobody in this world could stop him. In this garden of charnel blossoms, no other survivors could exist.

“A great upheaval has come upon the world—the Time of Turning.”

He spoke to nobody in particular. The tremble in his voice might have been an unspoken plea to reach someone’s ears, but nobody was left to answer him.

“And its conclusion is already written.”

He raised a hand toward the heavens and crushed the sun in his fist.

Chapter 1: Fraying at the Seams

It was early in the morning, scarcely past the crack of dawn, and a haze of gloom still clung to the fringes of the sky. Towns and villages were shrouded from view, sunken shadows in a sea of mist. The ocean of white stretched away far to the east, where snow glittered on the majestic peaks of the Grausam Mountains in the cold light of the morning sun.

A harsh noise shattered the silence of the fantastical scene, a chilling, violent clamor that set the air trembling far and wide as it passed. The storm whirled through the stately silence of the early morning, rising to the heavens in a vortex of metallic clattering.

Beneath the azure sky, where solemnity mingled with discord, sprawled a great city. Cladius, more commonly known simply as the imperial capital, was more than worthy of the word “opulent.” For a thousand years it had lasted, and still it stood strong; it was one of the oldest cities in the world.

A vibrant townscape ringed the stately palace of Venezyne, itself shielded by formidable walls that girded its perimeter. Before the main gate stood ranks upon ranks of men. Easily numbering more than one hundred thousand, they were the source of the earlier cacophony, the culprits who had polluted the morning air with violence. This would be no tranquil day. The capital was in uproar.

First came a cry.

“Mars!”

It was impossible to tell who spoke first, but the grief in their voice was plain to hear.

“Mars! Mars!”

Heat rose, enough to dispel the mist. One voice became two, then three and four. Before long, the single shout had swollen into a great chorus, shaking the world, rocking the earth, piercing the sky.

“Mars! Mars! Mars! Mars!”

The air was worse than chill; it was freezing, and yet fiery passions rang through the skies.

“Vengeance! Vengeance!”

Faced with the immensity of the chant, the heavens yielded their dominion to man. The cries shook the air, cleaving through the clouds with their fury.

“Vengeance! Vengeance! Vengeance! Vengeance!”

As the chant went on, war drums began to crash in answer.

“We fight for vengeance! Let us bring the hammer of righteousness to bear against Six Kingdoms!”

The soldiers struck their swords against their shields, sending droplets of mist spraying with every beat. Beads of sparkling dew reflected the soldiers’ irate faces as they stamped their feet.

“Silence, you knaves! Now is the time for mourning!”

An officer shouted over the din, but it would not be quelled. Like oil on a fire, his indignation only fueled their outrage.

“Let the world know our fury! Let the world know our grief!”

It was the eighth day of the third month of Imperial Year 1024. Devastating news had come to the capital. Fourth Prince Hiro Schwartz had fallen in battle on the Laryx Plains to the west. The people wept, the soldiers fumed, and a pall of mourning settled over the nation.

“Oh, great Spirit King! Bear witness to our wrath! Hold our sorrow to your breast!”

Standard bearers threaded their way through the ranks, whipping up trails of dust as they rode. Banners emblazoned with the imperial lion reached toward the sky.

“Oh, holy Divines! Light our path and drive away the darkness!”

For one thousand years, the Grantzian Empire had been the sole master of Soleil. Now, its foundations were buckling. Two months prior, Six Kingdoms,

rulers of the region known as Klym far to the west, had invaded the empire's western territories. The threat they posed grew by the day and they had already claimed countless victims. First, the people of the west had lost their homes, fleeing east as refugees; order across the land had worsened as monsters and bandits thrived. Next, the loss of two of the five illustrious high generals had weakened the nation's military. And finally, the death of the emperor, followed by other members of the royal family, had paralyzed the chain of command.

Still, despite the severity of its losses, the empire had not yet made a move. The vastness of its territories left it constantly scrambling to catch up with its foe.

"Six Kingdoms' crimes call for divine retribution! May the lightning of our wrath rain down upon their heads!"

The soldiers' fury was directed as much at the nobility and their inaction as anywhere else.

"Their crimes call for vengeance! Your Majesty, in all your glory, deliver them just punishment!"

Their voices turned to fervent prayers for the emperor's appearance as they shouted toward the capital. Eyes burning with rage, they fixed their gazes on the great castle squatting on the horizon.

The morning mist shrouding the land had dissipated now. The sun's face shone through a gap in the clouds, revealing the city in all its beauty. Yet the air over the walls seemed stagnant. Perhaps the malaise was the product of the tragic news, or perhaps the heavens had taken it upon themselves to reflect the soldiers' anger. None could claim to know either way.

Passing through the main gate led to the central boulevard, a district lined with open stalls. To call it a shell of its former self would have been an exaggeration, but with many merchants having fled in advance of the invasion, it had lost much of its former vibrancy. More than a few shopkeepers remained to ply their trade, but unlike the soldiers outside the walls, they were committed enough to a mourning silence that they didn't even raise their voices to hawk their wares.

They gazed up at the great statue of the Twelve Divines that lined the boulevard, keeping vigil over the people passing below. The most popular deity was the War God, the figure otherwise known as the Hero King of Twinned Black, who had laid the empire's foundations and ruled as its second emperor.

"Oh, great Mars..." a voice intoned. "I beg you, deliver Fourth Prince Hiro's mortal soul."

A crowd knelt before the base of the statue. The season was turning from winter to spring, but a chill still lingered in the air. Breath hung white and hands went numb with cold. To look at them was to shiver. Yet they filled the central boulevard, knees pressed to the ground as they offered prayers. Their faces betrayed no discomfort, only teary-eyed sorrow.

A short distance away was the statue of the goddess of beauty called the Valditte, the only member of the Divines never to have sat the throne. More figures knelt to pray beneath her outstretched arms.

"Your Grace...the first archpriestess... I beg you, preserve Lord Hiro... Preserve him..."

Yet as some prayed to the gods, others vented their frustrations to one another.

"Were they mad?! They sent him out with only forty thousand men!"

"The empire's full of incompetents if they thought he could win that fight!"

"Any fool could see it was hopeless! What was the emperor thinking?"

More than a few of the townsfolk spat undisguised insults at the palace, where even now an emergency war council was being held.

"The people's anxiety grows by the day," a woman remarked as she surveyed the city from above. A shadow fell across her features as she turned away from the window. Sorrow lined the faces of the nobles who filled the chamber behind her.

Hardly surprising.

Word of the fourth prince's passing had dealt a significant blow to their preparations. An oppressive air hung over the antechamber, heavy with

unspoken wails and cries of grief. The woman breathed a small sigh and settled herself in her chair.

“Let us begin,” she announced solemnly.

Myste Caliarä Rosa von Kelheit exuded a bewitching aura, marrying pure beauty with coquettish charm, but that was not all. As the acting head of House Kelheit, she possessed a noble’s dignity. A stubborn strength of will glittered in the alluring depths of her blue eyes. At present, however, her edge was blunted by weariness.

“We have called our reinforcements from across the empire. All is ready. The only thing that remains is to decide when we depart.”

She paused for a moment to scan the nobles’ expressions, gauging the mood in the room. Her eyes came to rest on a thin-featured man with an unhealthily pale complexion.

“Might I ask a question before we proceed?” Chancellor Graeci’s empty left sleeve rustled as he raised his right hand.

Rosa gestured for him to continue.

“I cannot help but notice that Lady Celia Estrella is not present. Might I ask why?”

At that, the other nobles began to glance around the chamber. Back in the days when the emperor and his sons were hale, none would have noted her absence, but now they watched her every move.

Rosa couldn’t help but pull a sour expression. “She has taken ill, but it is nothing serious. I have bidden her rest for today.” She took care to keep her tone neutral. It would not do to have them suspect the truth.

Chancellor Graeci cocked his head as though seized by some doubt. “She is to command our armies in battle against Six Kingdoms. Ought we be concerned?”

“There will not be a problem.”

“I can only hope you are right.”

Pacified by Rosa’s sharp response, Graeci spoke no more. None of the other nobles seemed inclined to pursue the matter either. Most likely, they feared

that voicing their concerns or frustrations would worsen Liz's standing.

"I have had her assessed by a physician. A little rest ought to be all she needs to make a full recovery."

Again, Rosa tried her hardest to maintain her composure, but the anxiety in her chest grew by the second. She did not know whether Liz would recover in time to lead the march.

I had thought she was too young for notions of love and romance...and yet.

Upon hearing of Hiro's death, Liz had broken down and begun to hyperventilate. Rosa's attempts to soothe her had failed, and in her hysteria, she had struck her head and lost consciousness. At present, she was under Aura and Scáthach's care in House Kelheit's mansion. The physician attributed her continued unconsciousness to mental factors.

If it comes to it, we'll have to think of something else. A double, perhaps...

Rosa was all too aware of what her sister was going through. She herself wanted to scream and wail.

But my position won't permit it.

The day would soon come when Liz, too, would have to cast aside her sorrow. The throne she aspired to did not permit such sentiments. But that was all the more reason that Rosa wanted to give her time to grieve while she could.

Cry all the tears you need to, Liz. Mourn for every second that you can. Someday, you will no longer have that luxury.

Rosa's gaze fell to her own hip, where she kept Lionheart, the blade Hiro had given her before his departure. She curled her fingers around the hilt and sighed.

You truly are a wretch.

With that thought, she cast her gaze once more around the room. "As I was saying, the outstanding question is when we march."

"In my view, we ought to ride forth tomorrow," Graeci replied. "Aside from anything else, there is a limit to how long we can secure our reinforcements. If we prolong our departure any further, there is no telling what might happen."

“I would prefer two days hence, if possible,” Rosa responded.

Several of the other nobles groaned. Preparations for the march were already complete; there would be no difficulty in setting out the next day. That deadline, however, was uncomfortably close for Rosa, who did not know when Liz might awake. If arranging a double did prove necessary, she would need as much time as possible.

Unable to give her true reasons, she instead brought a new matter to the council’s attention. “There is something else I ought to tell you. I am awaiting a letter from Queen Claudia.”

Graeci’s brow furrowed. “Of Lebering?”

“The very same. She wrote several days ago to say that something was amiss in Six Kingdoms’ camp. I expect that her next letter will explain more.”

“And where exactly is Queen Claudia?” one of the northern nobles piped up.

It was known that she had sent reinforcements, but they had never reached the capital. Her forces had left the main roads and vanished from the reach of the empire’s gaze.

“It appears she rode west to confront Six Kingdoms alone.”

The noble gasped. “What?! But this is an outrage!”

“Quite! This is the Grantzian Empire, not her snowbound wasteland. Our soil is not those accursed zlostas’ back garden!”

“It appears they have forgotten their place. This will require harsh correction.”

Once one man erupted, the rest followed with a slew of abuse. Even after a thousand years, the humans’ fear of the zlostas was difficult to completely erase—all the more so when the zlostas in question were moving freely around the empire unsupervised.

“Gentlemen, please. I understand your reservations, but we have greater concerns.” Chancellor Graeci’s austere tones brought the chamber to order. He did not hide his exasperation that the nobles would be so easily startled by the mere mention of zlostas. “Recall that Fourth Prince Hiro and Second Prince

Selene contrived to grant them freedom of movement within imperial borders. We have not the authority to disagree.”

The fourth prince might be dead, but finding fault with him would only invite anger from the people. The second prince refused to make any appearances at council and would not be joining the forthcoming campaign, but again, the only thing to be gained from criticizing him was enemies. No matter what the nobles thought privately, they refrained from publicly disdaining either’s name.

Seeing the rest of the room maintain its silence, Graeci returned his attention to Rosa. “And you expect this letter to arrive tomorrow or the day after?”

Rosa nodded firmly.

“Its contents will likely call for revisions to our plans. Very well. We had best postpone the march to two days hence.” Graeci gave a nod of agreement. The other nobles seemed to broadly concur. He glanced around to confirm there was no dissent and continued. “That brings us to this claim Six Kingdoms is spreading of Fourth Prince Hiro’s passing.”

“Do you believe there’s any substance to it, my lord?” a southern noble asked.

“It may be fabricated, but considering that word from him has ceased, we must contend with the possibility that it is the truth.”

The noble heaved a sigh of lament. His neighbor, a fellow southern nobleman with broad shoulders, picked up the thread.

“As a result, the military is in poor standing with the people. Discontent accumulates by the day and there is no telling when it might erupt. Moreover, the central nobles’ disgraceful conduct has cost their armies dearly.”

“As you say, my lord. The people’s uncertainty must be assuaged. If the nation is not to fall apart, we must quell their dissatisfaction.” It was not Chancellor Graeci who answered, but Beto von Muzuk, head of House Muzuk of the south. His words brimmed with unshakable confidence.

Graeci arched an irritable eyebrow as his shoulders visibly sagged. “Should we not first attend to the horde wreaking havoc on our doorstep, Lord von Muzuk?”

“And why do you say that?”

“Must I explain? Six Kingdoms is running wild in the west as we speak. If we do not drive them out, the empire’s very existence will be in peril. The people’s grumblings can wait.”

“I suspected you would not understand.” Beto gave a helpless shrug. “If we are to postpone our departure, we must ease the people’s fears.”

“What will ease their fears is stability, and there will be no stability until we expel Six Kingdoms. Until then, they will simply have to wait.”

“There is one other way,” Beto said slyly.

Graeci’s gaze hardened. “And what is that?”

For some reason, Beto’s eyes flicked to Rosa. “I would have preferred not to announce it so publicly, but if she will not say it, then I shall.” Intrigued eyes converged on him, drawn by his theatrical manner. “Lady von Kelheit is with child.”

Silence fell. Mouths hung open. Astonished faces turned to Rosa as the chamber emptied of all but the sound of breathing. None, however, were more astonished than Rosa herself.

“Pardon?” The announcement was news to her.

Beto’s face was anything but calm as he regarded her. His eyes narrowed gleefully, like those of a predator that had cornered its prey. “Perhaps you ought to be the one to explain?”

“You had better explain to me first.” Rosa’s brow furrowed warily.

Beto continued, unruffled. “Please, my lady. There is no need to be so bashful. Did you not tell me that you were carrying Lord Hiro’s child?”

In an instant, the chamber ground to a halt. Everybody watched with bated breath, so shocked that they even forgot to blink. It was possible. That she was the fourth prince’s lover was an open secret. If the claim were true, the people would rejoice, and that would be the least of it. Her child could ease relations across borders.

“Is it true?” one of the eastern nobles asked, a hint of expectation in his voice.

Now that Hiro was likely dead, her child would be the new scion of the War God. All around the room, eyes flooded with relief. The extinction of the bloodline had been averted. Rosa hurriedly made to stand, but before she could speak, Beto interrupted.

“I understand your eagerness, but we must give her time. The safety of the mother is of the highest importance.” He swept his gaze over the rest of the nobles, speaking without pause. “It would not do to place her under undue stress. I trust we are all in agreement?”

The eastern nobles were supposed to have been Rosa’s allies, but even they began to settle down at that. Beto shot her a smug look as he redoubled his offensive.

“It would be best for you to wait out the coming war in the capital. If the pregnancy is not yet stable, we would risk the worst.”

Rosa’s jaw hung as slack as everyone else’s for a moment, but she soon regained her bearings. She struck the desk in angry defiance and rose to her feet.

“I have no idea where you caught wind of these rumors, but I assure you, I am *not* with child.”

A chill settled in the air, as though time had stopped. The nobles stiffened, cowed. Enough time dragged on that even Rosa began to feel uncomfortable.

“My lady,” a nobleman finally ventured, “I understand that this is a difficult time, but surely there is no need to be ashamed.”

With that, the tension broke. Calm once more filled the chamber. The force of Rosa’s denial only seemed to have underscored the claim’s credibility.

“There are dark times, my lady. The people will be glad of good tidings.”

The lie began to twist itself into truth, with or without its subject’s consent.

“Indeed. This is cause for celebration. There is no need to hide it.”

One by one, nobles—clearly planted by House Muzuk—began to congratulate her. Even Rosa’s allies among the eastern nobles looked convinced, eyes sparkling at the possibility of a child of the War God. The joyfulness of the

tidings had clouded their eyes, and they didn't even realize that they were playing into their opponent's hands. A sly grin crossed Beto's face, and she knew she had been outplayed.



All of it had been a ploy to strip her away from the army—a heavy-handed one, perhaps, but the most effective way to manipulate those who clung to hope. The council now waited on Beto’s words.

At this point, they won’t listen to anything I say.

If even one noble had been willing to voice doubts, the situation might have been different, but every last one of them had bought into the lie. The more fiercely she protested, the less she would be believed. She could only regret that she had been outwitted, and only blame herself for failing to see through her opponent’s schemes.

But what’s his goal in all of this? What is he thinking?

This would only shore up support for the eastern nobles. There was no gain for the southern nobles in that. Even if Beto managed to oust Rosa from the campaign and steal all the glory for himself, it would not outweigh the value of a child with the War God’s blood.

What in the world is he planning?

She glared at Beto, but he only shot her a brief smirk as he rose to his feet.

“In Lady Celia Estrella’s absence, I propose that we adjourn for today and resume proceedings tomorrow.” He spoke with commanding gestures, emphasizing that the room was his. “Besides, Lady von Kelheit has been dreadfully busy in recent days. I would not place any more of a burden on her shoulders.”

Compassionate glances fell on Rosa from all sides as the council came to an end. The nobles rose from their seats and left the chamber light-footed, as though they could barely contain their delight. Rosa watched them detachedly. As she did, she caught Beto passing through the door from the corner of her eye and silently followed him.

He strode down the hall, flanked by his underlings. Rosa caught up with him and tapped him, perhaps a little more angrily than necessary, on the shoulder.

“Ah, Lady von Kelheit. What can I do for you?” His smile left her in no doubt that he had expected this confrontation.

Rosa fought back the urge to scream obscenities and forced herself to maintain a personable expression. “Would you care to explain yourself, Lord von Muzuk?”

The two underlings flinched back, intimidated by the anger in her voice. Beto gestured for them to go on without him and turned back to Rosa.

“Explain myself? I thought I was doing you a favor.” Beto’s confidence never wavered for a moment. He flashed a taunting grin. “If you understood the current state of the empire, you would thank me.”

Rosa’s brow furrowed. “Excuse me?”

Beto stepped closer. “I cannot afford for the eastern nobles to fall. Not quite yet, at least.”

He raised his hands in a mocking gesture. Rosa’s nostrils flared at his theatrics, but she nonetheless waited for him to continue.

“If Lord Hiro truly has fallen, your position will soon be in peril.”

Rosa had married into the von Kelheit family through its previous head, but its blood did not run in her veins. That made her the enemy of those family members who placed stock in lineage. She had managed to retain the role of acting head through her relationship with Hiro, but now that he was gone, that station was precarious indeed.

She ground her teeth, knowing he was right. Something dangerous flashed in her eyes, but Beto let the glance wash over him as though it was nothing.

“Lord Hiro’s presence kept the eastern nobles together, but now that he is gone, the old succession question will rear its head once more.” He strode around Rosa’s side, his footsteps ringing uncomfortably loud in the deserted corridor. “And you will become an inconvenience. Not a drop of von Kelheit blood in your veins, and no inclination to seek a suitor from their number. An acting head like that is nothing more than an irritation. An obstacle to be removed.”

Hiro’s proximity to the throne, and the possibility of her bearing his child, had given her value. Now that she had lost both, the only way to go was down.

Rosa rounded on Beto. “What are you plotting, you snake?”

Beto stopped and looked back over his shoulder. “Please. I think only of the future of the empire.”

“Are you trying to separate me from Liz and seize the military? Is that your plan?”

“Hmm. An intriguing idea. Not a bad one either. Me, seize control of the military... I could do it, you know. With a grand triumph over Six Kingdoms under my belt.”

“Do you think it’s going to be that easy?”

“Oh? Then will you go to war after all?” Beto’s smile widened as he drew himself up, looking down at Rosa. “And disappoint all your poor nobles?”

While he couched it in circuitous language, his threat was clear: if she announced that her pregnancy was a misunderstanding, there was no telling how those who had staked their expectations on it might react. The rift in the eastern nobles would gain momentum.

“Does it amuse you to have me over a barrel?”

“I entertain no such notions. I simply thought that you ought to take a well-earned rest.” Beto didn’t even try to hide his mockery. He laid a hand on Rosa’s shoulder and drew his lips to her ear. “Yet exhaustion does nothing to dull your beauty. And you are too shrewd to take as a simple ornament.”

“What of it?” Rosa swatted his hand away with undisguised revulsion and took a step back.

“I place you highly in my estimation. And I believe you would make a far better ally than an enemy.” The corners of Beto’s mouth pulled into a grin as he rubbed his hand. “Would you not consider taking a husband from among the southern nobles?”

“Excuse me?”

“One among them carries the blood of House Kelheit. If you wish to retain your station, he would make a fine choice of partner. It need not be a marriage of love, only of convenience. So long as you do not divorce him, you would

otherwise be free to do as you pleased.”

The offer was clear: she would continue to enjoy her personal freedom in exchange for submitting politically to the south. Naturally, Rosa would not readily consent to becoming a puppet, and Beto no doubt expected that she would be furious—he was posing her a challenge as much as an offer. Anybody would be enraged by being treated so lightly, and she was no exception.

Anger glinted in her eyes. “I respectfully decline.” She shoved Beto away and strode past him, shooting him a furious glance as she passed. “House Muzuk will not have its way. You’ll regret making an enemy of me.”

Beto chuckled. “I shall look forward to it.”

Rosa’s shoes clacked as she stalked away, fuming. He stretched out a hand as if to stop her, although she would never in a thousand years turn around.

“I suspect this contest will come down to you and I, in the end,” he whispered, watching until she disappeared from sight. “Provided you live that long, of course.”

The news that she bore the War God’s child would be cause for celebration for many but unwelcome tidings for some. With palace security so thin in the coming days, the court could soon be more dangerous than the battlefield if one did not tread lightly.

“I do hope she keeps watch for knives in the dark. I would hate to see a repeat of the tragedy in the rear palace.” Beto clapped a hand to his forehead as though lamenting the situation he himself had caused. “My, the pain that would cause Lady Celia Estrella. To lose first her mother, and then her sister... Heh heh heh... Ha ha ha ha ha!”

His back bent almost double as his laughter echoed through the deserted corridor.

“And she will surely need someone to soothe her broken heart. Oh, how busy I will be...”

Chapter 2: Holding Fast to Hope, Sinking into Sorrow

The world was awash with blood. Screams echoed through a waking nightmare painted crimson as far as the eye could see. A rain of arrows fell without mercy, wreaking cruel slaughter on the men below. Yet there was no sense in feeling pity. This was a battlefield, where monsters lurked and demons stalked. Kill or be killed—that was the rule. All that stood between its participants and calamity was the strength of their own arms. This was no place for the weak of heart; each and every one knew that a moment of sympathy would make them corpses, and Liz was no exception.

“What is this place?”

Agony exploded through her skull like a hammer blow. She grunted and staggered. As she fell to her knees, she noticed something strange. Rain poured down all around, but it made no sound and produced no splashes as it struck the mud. As her suspicions grew, her eyes strayed to Lævateinn at her hip. The crimson sword was wreathed in azure fire.

“Did you do this? Have you brought me back again?”

At last, her mind began to comprehend. Lævateinn remained stubbornly silent to her questions, but its blue flames flared brighter, as though imploring her to engrave the ghastly scene into her mind.

“Wha—” She started and looked up as something caught her eye. “Ah...”

There stood a boy—a boy she knew. His face was tilted toward the pitch-black sky, bathing in the pouring rain as though offering confession. Something squeezed painfully in Liz’s chest. It seemed for all the world as though he was trying to hide his tears.

“Hiro...”

The boy seemed to hear her voice. He looked down from the sky and turned his gaze toward her. The moment she saw his black eyes, cold fear lanced up her spine. There was nothing there—nothing at all. No perception, no identity,

no emotion whatsoever. Only nothingness.

“Ah...”

Hiro stepped closer. As Liz watched, dumbfounded, he drew a black blade from his belt.

“So you still live.”

“What?”

Surprise flooded her mind for a moment, and then the blade swung down. She instinctively squeezed her eyes shut. However, no pain came. Before she could even process what had happened, a grunt issued from behind her. Gingerly opening her eyes again, she turned to see a lilac-skinned man sprawled on the ground, the black blade protruding from his cloven skull.

“Lord Schwartz! Lord Schwartz!”

A man came running, shouting as though fighting to be heard over the hiss of the downpour. He sank to one knee and bowed his head as Hiro turned.

“The enemy has raised the white flag. We believe they mean to surrender.”

“And?” Hiro’s voice was as cold as a block of ice forced down Liz’s throat.

“There is no meaning in any further battle, my lord. If the enemy desires peace...surely we must...send an emissary...” The man’s voice quavered as he spoke. He kept his head bowed, as though he feared what would come next.

His fears proved unfounded, however. Hiro’s reply was devoid of unpleasant surprises. “Very well. I accept their surrender.”

The soldier’s face lit up like a clearing sky, but it clouded over again just as quickly. He blanched at the sight of Hiro’s emotionless face peering down at him, framed against the rain.

“Still, it’s a terrible shame.”

“My lord?” the soldier asked with trepidation.

Hiro swept around and began to walk in the opposite direction. “It’s hard to see any distance at all in this downpour.”

“My lord...what are you suggesting?”

Hiro came to a stop again after a few paces. A row of prisoners knelt before him, bound with chains.

Zlosta?

Liz thought so, at least. Their faces were obscured by the rain, but from their brawny physique and lilac skin, it was easy to guess.

“We never saw any white flags. And by the time we realized our mistake, it was all too late.”

Liz gulped. She might well have forgotten how to breathe, so shocking was what happened next.

“That’s how it played out, don’t you agree?” Hiro turned his attention to the prisoners, his voice soft. The blade in his hand flashed, and one of their heads toppled from their shoulders with horrifying ease. The gory lump smacked into the mud and rolled toward Liz.

“Eek!” Liz flinched back. She had seen her share of corpses—she was no stranger to the battlefield—but the severed head was beyond anything she had experienced. Its face was twisted in agony, the eye sockets were two empty hollows, and there was a hole in the forehead where a manastone had been gouged out. The beheaded body was crisscrossed with scars, clear evidence of torture. What kind of fury could have fueled so much cruelty? She clapped her hands to her mouth, seized by the urge to vomit.

“If you want to live, tell me where he is.” Hiro’s face remained devoid of emotion. With callous strokes, he set about lopping off more heads. “Tell me, please. I beg you.”

How many tears must he have cried? How many times must his heart have broken? How many failures must he have endured to smile so desperately as tears trickled down his face?

“Hiro! Stop this!”

Liz reached out toward him, but it was no use. Even if she somehow caught hold of this phantom, she could not grasp Hiro’s heart.

“Ah... Aaahhh...!” A wordless cry forced its way from her throat.

“It wasn’t easy at first. I lay awake for nights on end, trying to deny the reality that I had taken a life.” Tears mixed with blood as he wiped the red spatters from his cheek, smiling awfully all the while. “But in time, I realized that there’s no good and evil on the battlefield, no matter what pretty words you string together to pretend otherwise.”

He radiated no anger, no intent to kill. But his sword fell again and again without a shred of mercy.

“It’s hard *not* to understand, once you lose someone you care about. And once you do, you shed all your reservations.”

Liz didn’t want to look, didn’t want to see him like this. But although she tried to close her eyes, the scene lingered; although she tried to block her ears, the grisly sounds never ceased. A wail slipped from her lips, but she had no way of stopping him. There was no changing the past. It was already written.

“So I abandoned my ideas of justice.”

Her heart swelled to bursting with sorrow. Explosions wracked her chest, threatening to split it apart. Brain-crushing sorrow and unbearable hatred pressed down on her like a giant hand...and all at once, the scene shifted.

“War breeds both beauty and ugliness.”

The sky shattered like glass, fragmenting into glittering snowflakes. A pulse sped across the ground as the earth bucked and broke apart. People, flora, fauna—the swell reduced all life to dust. The world fell away, and what was left was whiteness, an empty space suffused with blinding light.

Liz said nothing. She only looked steadily ahead with red-rimmed eyes.

“What do you feel, child, now that you have seen its ugliness? What emotions does it stir?”

There was no need to look for the source of the voice. It was right before her, its presence immense. The figure sat upon a chair lavishly decorated with gold and silver, a singular throne covered with treasures from all corners of the world. Strangely, she could not tell who it was. Despite the light, his face was covered by shadow.

“Tell me your answer, child.”

The voice hung oddly in the air, rich with both the depth of the onset of old age and the vigor of an adult in his prime. His slender frame radiated both the gallantry of a proven youth and the green freshness of a plucky young boy. Liz knew at a glance that this was no ordinary man.

“Were you disillusioned? Did you despair? Were you filled with righteous fury?”

A blush of wonderment came to her face at the sight. Although her brain was still struggling to catch up, somehow, her mouth knew what to say.

“I felt...sad.”

She touched her fingers to her lips, startled by how easily the words had come, but before she could regain her composure, the figure asked another question.

“And why is that?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know, but...I wanted to help somehow.”

The figure chuckled, long and low. “I see. To help, indeed. A curious answer.”

“Hiro... He looked like he was in so much pain...” Liz’s lips pressed together bitterly. “But I couldn’t do anything for him. I couldn’t...”

A mask of dreadful grief had lain on Hiro’s face, which he had struggled to maintain lest tears seep through. Yet she had failed to offer him any words of kindness, any small comfort. There was no telling what feelings lay behind his choice, but she knew that it was not the answer he had truly hoped to give.

“Such is the instinct of all living beings. The fear of loss results in overcompensation. The fear of regret leads one to measures they would otherwise disavow. One’s reason might protest, but it cannot resist the urgings of primal dread.” The figure’s tone was matter-of-fact, but his sigh seemed regretful. “Human beings are covetous creatures. They chase grand ideals only to despair when they fall short, and the further they fall, the harsher the landing. Hence, they turn to one another for support, for with no shoulder to lean on, they would soon topple beneath their own weight.”

How much torment would one have to endure at the hands of solitude, Liz wondered, to end up like that?

“I was powerless. To bring him salvation, to bring him succor, I could do naught but pile more weight upon his shoulders.” The figure raised a finger. “But one hope yet remains.”

“What hope?”

“It was not chance that brought you here, child.” The figure lifted his finger to the sky. “It was fate.”

Liz looked up to see an enormous gate floating in the air above her head. It was oddly lacking in grandeur for its size, covered in intricate patterns but otherwise unadorned. In a word, it was plain, a circular wooden portal without decoration or embellishment. Yet its distinctive air was as arresting as the greatest beauties of the natural world.

“The Time of Turning is coming. You must prepare.”

“The Time of Turning?” Liz sounded out the weight of the words in her mouth and felt her tongue go dry. At once, the figure fixed her with a piercing gaze, and she stiffened.

“If you would seek your own justice, if you would hold high your own ideals, nurture a strong heart.”

With her current knowledge, Liz could make no sense of the words...but then, perhaps there was no need to try. She got the impression that the man did not expect her to understand.

“All I have left undone, I leave to you.”

And the sky screamed.

“Wha—”

Liz looked up in shock. The door was falling, its mouth yawning wide. It plummeted toward her, streaming motes of some kind of dust, roaring as it came. She reflexively shut her eyes and crossed her arms over her head. A gust of wind sent her hair whipping wildly as it blew down over her, but that was all. No matter how long she waited, no impact came.

She uncrossed her arms and tentatively opened her eyes.

“Are you all right?” asked a voice.

There was no door before her, but a human face. She issued a bemused squeak. It was someone she knew. Working automatically, her memories connected the features with a name.

“Scáthach.”

“In the flesh. Forgive me if I startled you.” The bed creaked beneath the woman’s weight as she drew away apologetically.

Liz shook her head as she propped herself upright. “And Aura too...”

Over Scáthach’s shoulder was a petite, silver-haired girl. She was seated in a chair by the wall, the book she had been reading still wide open in front of her.

Liz heaved a sigh, more out of regret than relief. She still had a mountain of questions she had wanted to ask the man in her dream.

Seeing her deflate, Scáthach frowned. “You were moaning in your sleep. A bad dream, perhaps?”

“No. Just a sad one.”

That, Liz could say for certain. Even now, thinking back to it made her chest ache so fiercely it might burst. She wrapped her arms around herself.

At that moment, the doorknob rattled. The trio spun around to face the entrance, eyes sharp and faces taut with alarm. A few seconds passed and the door swung open, letting in a chill breeze from the corridor beyond.

“Rosa?”

The woman nodded. “I have returned just in time, I see.”

Something was clearly weighing on her mind. She seemed subdued, her usual confidence nowhere to be seen. Her hair had lost its luster and her skin its rosiness. The other three regarded her transformation with surprise.

“Rosa?” Liz repeated. “What’s wrong?”

“Forgive me!” Rosa exclaimed. No sooner had the words left her mouth than she fell to her knees and bowed her head.

“What are you saying? I don’t understand!”

Liz tried to hurry to her sister’s side, but rising so quickly caused her to lose her balance and she started to topple. Only the timely extension of Scáthach’s hand saved her from falling.

“You must not move so suddenly,” Scáthach warned. “You have only just awoken.”

“Thank you,” Liz said shakily. She stepped closer to Rosa, but her sister made no move to raise her head. “I can’t hear you if you’re talking to the floor. Could you tell me what happened?”

“Ah... Yes, of course.”

Rosa smoothed herself down and launched into an explanation. Bitterly, she described how the head of House Muzuk had outplayed her at the war council, how her own lack of foresight had let him take control of the assembly, and how, as a result, she would no longer be able to accompany Liz to war.

“He was more ruthless than I expected. I have only my own ineptitude to blame, of course, but...curses. Regret is a bitter draught. To be made a fool of in this hour of crisis...” She pounded her fist against the floor. “It’s humiliating.”

A silver goblet appeared before her eyes. “Here. Drink this. It’ll calm you down.”

“Of course. Thank you.” Rosa took the cup from Aura and drained it in one before licking the remaining drops of water from her lips. “I realize that I am the last person who ought to be giving this advice, Liz, but still, be wary of him.”

“I cannot imagine you intend to take this lying down,” Scáthach remarked.

Rosa nodded. “Of course not. I have already come up with several plans. While he is away at war, I will build my strength. He will live to regret trying to make me his pawn.”

“Now that’s more like the sister I know,” Liz said. “Although I still think you need to get some rest.”

Hiro’s death was clearly weighing as heavily on Rosa’s mind as Liz’s own. It was plain to see in the exhaustion lining her face and the swollen eyelids she

had tried to conceal with makeup. Liz understood her pain only too well.

“Come on,” she said, extending her sister a caring hand. “Let’s get you some sleep. As rich as that probably sounds coming from me.” She smiled to accompany the attempted joke.

Rosa’s eyes widened for a second. A long moment passed. At last, with an exhausted sigh, she took her sister’s hand. “Out of the woods for now, at least,” she murmured as she allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. “You march in two days.”

“All right.” Liz nodded.

Rosa raised a hand to brush her sister’s hair. “Queen Claudia’s letter will arrive tomorrow. Our final plans will hinge on its contents. Until then, you should get some rest...as will I.”

With that, she flung herself onto the bed that Liz had just vacated. Soon, she was fast asleep. Liz and Scáthach glanced at one another and exchanged strained smiles.

“I can’t slack off either.” Gazing fondly back at her sister, Liz took a deep breath, as though resetting herself. She and Rosa were not the only ones suffering. Aura and Scáthach bore the same pain, and yet they both strove to maintain a calm exterior and do what they could. Letting her own grief get in the way would only squander their efforts. It was not as though they had seen Hiro’s body.

It’s not certain. For all I know, he might be safe and well somewhere.

She chose to believe that he was still alive. The thought of him still brought tears to her eyes, but weeping and wailing would do no one any good.

I can’t let everything he left me go to waste.

She clenched her fist tightly and resolved, for the time being, to face forward.

“Don’t push yourself too hard.” Scáthach’s hand clapped down on her shoulder.

“It’s fine. I’ll be fine.” Liz nodded, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Seeing was believing. She would not give the rumors any credit until she could confirm

them for herself.

* * * * *

The wild winds had subsided, and a tranquil lull hung in the air. The black specks of soldiers' tents dotted a sunset landscape. Cookfire smoke carpeted the evening sky. After the previous day, it was strikingly quiet. The land was so still, no one would have believed it was occupied by more than a hundred thousand soldiers. The atmosphere within the city walls was similar; the merchants' cries lacked energy, and the people walking the streets seemed listless and leaden-footed. A melancholy had descended upon the imperial capital of Cladius.

As the palace of Venezyne looked down over the city, bathed in the comforting hues of sunset, a war council was taking place in the throne room's antechamber. Liz, Rosa, and their allies were in attendance. The land's richest and most powerful nobles filled the rest of the seats, and they made no secret of their ambitions to ingratiate themselves to whoever would ascend the throne. Now that Hiro was gone, they had fixed their eyes on Liz, pledging their forces to the cause in hopes of winning her favor. With the central nobles fallen from grace and the western nobles in decline, the war was no longer about expelling Six Kingdoms from the empire—it was about staking a claim to the land the enemy would vacate. The greater a house's contribution to the war effort, the more lavishly they could expect to be rewarded.

Profit was a powerful motivator. Without it, the nation would stagnate, the nobles would revolt, and the people would refuse to work. The more a position contradicted someone's interests, the more scheming was required to win their support. Conversely, the more a position aligned with their interests, the less one would have to rely on trickery. Anything past that point, however, hinged on individual caliber.

She'll need to cultivate the qualities of a ruler, but that's a problem for another day. Right now, she has a war to win.

Rosa sighed. Liz had a great many ordeals in her future. Sooner or later, she would have to come face-to-face with the ugly side of politics—such was the path of all who aspired to the throne.

“Countess von Kelheit.” Chancellor Graeci’s voice pulled her back to reality. “Has Queen Claudia’s letter arrived?”

Rosa nodded. “Unfortunately, it seems that she has been unable to ascertain what has become of Lord Hiro.”

She produced a small piece of parchment and read its contents aloud. A number of nobles frowned as she concluded. They were the ones who had never given Hiro their support, and the ambiguity of his status left them in an uncomfortable position. No doubt they would have much preferred to hear definitively that he had died in the field.

Hiro’s existence was unwelcome to those who venerated the Grantzian royal family. In accordance with the first emperor’s will, Emperor Greiheit had acknowledged his status and furnished him with a title, but that did not change the fact that he was a stranger of uncertain origin. More than a few nobles balked at the idea of seating someone like that on the throne, seeing it as a threat to the divinity of the von Grantz bloodline. But they could not criticize him publicly—not when he was acknowledged as Mars’s descendant and backed by the powerful House Kelheit.

“Then his and Third Prince Brutahl’s fates remain unknown,” Chancellor Graeci said. “Six Kingdoms claims to have the bodies. We may revisit this matter after we begin negotiations for their return.”

Rosa nodded in agreement. There was no objection among the rest of the nobles.

“And what does she say about Six Kingdoms?”

A new voice interrupted, attempting to seize control of the conversation. It was Beto von Muzuk. Rosa’s hackles rose, sensing another plot at work.

“Some manner of discord appears to have arisen between the commander and vice-commander.”

“Anything else?”

Rosa gave a dismissive shrug. “Nothing of note.”

Beto made no attempt to conceal his disappointment. “Then it was hardly

worth delaying our departure.”

“Do you think so?” Liz had been watching the conversation thoughtfully, but at that, she interjected. “If we start ignoring intelligence, we’ll end up losing battles we could win.”

Beto’s face stiffened as he came under attack from an unexpected quarter.

Liz’s eyes narrowed as sharply as bare steel. “There’s a rift between the commander and the vice-commander. That’s valuable information. If it’s part of some plan, we’ll have to work out what that plan is and counter it. If it’s the truth, the enemy army is on the point of splitting in two, and we’ll have to act fast to stop them from regrouping.”

She spoke her mind clearly and without hesitation. The nobles watched, wide-eyed, taken aback by her confidence.

“Let’s send out scouts to monitor their army. If we’re lucky, we might be able to guide them into doing what we want. Besides, any information we can gather will be useful for taking back the west.”

The chilly air flowing through the room took on a new heat. An authority settled over the nobles, flexible and yielding, yet powerful all the same. Something was changing, and everyone could sense it.

Beto raised a hand. A malevolent light glinted in his eyes as he fixed Liz with a searching gaze. “More likely, we have wasted a precious day. The sooner we liberate the west, the sooner the people will be free of their suffering. Do you disagree, Your Highness?”

“Rushing our troops to produce results won’t do anybody any good. If we plunge blindly into battle, we’ll bring worse tragedies to the west. Only certain victory will set the people free. There aren’t any shortcuts.”

Both had a point, but Liz had the audience’s hearts. A brief smile spread across Beto’s face before vanishing from view. As to what amused him so, the uncanny aura he exuded made his true intentions impossible to discern.

Still, Liz won that bout. She’s grown.

She must have been watching Hiro closely. Her rhetorical style was very much

like his. She saw the situation clearly and articulated herself plainly while denying her opponent any opening to object. Beto, meanwhile, had resorted to emotive arguments that came across as lacking in substance. He had likely hoped to lure Liz into supporting his position, but he had been too circumspect about baiting her and suffered for it. Surely he had no intention of dragging the war out any more than she did, but being argued down had made him look like the fool. Trying to protest now would only lose him the support of other nobles in the future. His only option was to fall silent.

“Then our plans will proceed unchanged.” Graeci’s voice took command of the chamber once more. “We will march west along the agreed-upon route. Are we all in accord?”

Liz nodded.

“Good. We depart tomorrow morning. Those with positions of command, please attend to your posts before the day is through.”

With that, the council came to an end. As various nobles hurried from the room, Rosa approached Liz’s chair.

“Garda departs today. I had intended to say goodbye, if you would like to join me.”

“Oh, of course! I need to say goodbye to Huginn and Muninn too.”

As Liz rose from her chair, a nobleman approached apologetically. “Might I have a moment of your time, Your Highness?”

He was only the first. Before long, a crowd had her surrounded.

“Me as well, Your Highness!” another man cried. “I was hoping to discuss some points of our strategy.”

“What? Huh?” Liz looked around in confusion. The nobles encroached upon her, asking to consult her thoughts on troop movements and various other excuses to get close to her. She looked from them to Rosa, back to them, and finally back to Rosa, pleading with upturned eyes.

“You can send a letter later. I will give Huginn your best wishes.” Rosa flashed a strained smile and gave Liz several encouraging pats on the shoulder. Turning

down the nobles' offers would only sow needless resentment.

"All right. Please do."

With a defeated nod, Liz turned back to the crowd. As she surrendered herself to their clamor, Rosa left the chamber, bound for House Kelheit's mansion where Garda and his troops awaited.

Their departure will be quite the blow to our forces.

They had received word of Hiro's passing, but that was not the only reason they were leaving the empire. Hiro's final letter to Garda had spurred their departure. Rosa had no idea what the letter contained. She wished that she had read the contents, but she also knew that Hiro had entrusted her with it because he knew that she would not.

You know how to use people like no other.

Scowling internally, Rosa exited the corridor and passed through the heavily guarded front doors.

* * * * *

Rosa returned to House Kelheit's mansion to find Garda and his subordinates at the door, ready to depart. The zlostá was at their head, clad in fluted plate armor to hide his lilac skin. A man—a traveling merchant, perhaps, going by his dress—was kneeling before him, handing over a letter. Something about the scene struck her as odd, and she tilted her head as she approached.

Garda and his subordinates bowed as they heard her coming. The merchant took off, running past her and out of sight. She shot him a curious glance as he fled before turning back to Garda. As usual, the zlostá's expression was inscrutable behind his helm, but Huginn and Muninn's faces were downcast, their gloom on full display.

"Leaving so soon?" Rosa asked.

Garda raised his head to the sky. "We've no more reason to stay."

"I see. A pity."

On that count, Rosa had to concede. Their feelings would not change, and she could think of nothing to offer that might convince them to remain. There was

one thing she wanted to know before they departed, however: the contents of Hiro's letter.

"Was that a spy? That man in peddler's clothing?" Her voice was probing, hoping to glean what she could from Garda's answer.

"No. Merely one of the merchants we shall be guarding. The Crow Legion were sellswords once. So we shall be again, now that we are free."

So they were returning to mercenary work, and the first job they had taken on was guarding a merchant caravan. A credible enough story, but not quite enough to shake Rosa's doubts.

"Have you decided where you're bound?"

"East, my lady. A small nation on the eastern shore."

"Baum?"

"The very same. Founded by the One-Eyed Dragon's forefather himself."

So they were heading for Baum. Perhaps that was merely coincidence, but it felt strangely like something Hiro would have commanded.

Rosa hesitated to ask her next question, but if she allowed Garda to get away with an evasive answer, all would be for nothing. Something simple and straightforward would be the best way to gauge his reaction, not to mention the most effective way to knock him off-balance if he did indeed have something to hide.

With a deep breath, she cut straight to the point. "Was that by his order?" she asked, straining every nerve to scrutinize his reply.

Garda gave a small shrug. He looked her straight in the eyes, seeking perhaps to conceal some flicker of emotion. "Who can say? But times are changing. That much is certain."

Some sort of mental turmoil lurked beneath his words, that much Rosa could detect, but they held so many possible meanings that it was impossible to identify. Did it pertain to Hiro's death, the state of the empire, or even Six Kingdoms? Perhaps another question would help her narrow down the possibilities.

“True enough, and not only for the empire. Does that go for Baum as well?”

Garda didn't answer. He drew his horse close by the reins and swung himself up into the saddle. Abruptly, he spoke again. ““By the black dragon's roar is the world's fabric warped, and by the lion's roar is order restored.””

The quotation was the final line of both the White and Black Chronicles. Prevailing opinion among historians was that the first half referred to the Hero King freeing the people of Soleil from zlosta oppression, while the second half described the Lionheart guiding humankind to peace and prosperity. Put together, the complete stanza brought their story to a close.

“Give my regards to Lady Celia Estrella.” With an ominous grin, Garda turned his horse about. “I eagerly await our next meeting.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Rosa raised her voice after him, confused. Was he suggesting that he expected to return to Liz's camp someday? Or perhaps he meant something else entirely...

The zlosta waved back over his shoulder, but otherwise gave no reply. The clatter of hoofsteps grew thinner between them, and Rosa could only watch in stunned silence as he and his company rode away.

* * * * *

The ninth day of the third month of Imperial Year 1024

Beyrouth, in the northwest of the western territories

After withdrawing its forces from the Laryx Plains, where it had fought Fourth Prince Hiro, Six Kingdoms reestablished a front line in Beyrouth, where the Grantzian Empire met Faerzen. The reason was simple: it had suffered unexpected losses. While morale was high after slaying the War God's scion, a great many officers had perished in the battle.

“What to do, what to do?”

Lucia tapped her iron fan against the surface of the desk, a report of the damage in her hand. Her army of two hundred thousand had been reduced to around one hundred and sixty thousand. She leafed to a second sheet of paper reporting that the empire had marshaled its defenses. One hundred and thirty

thousand; less than she had feared, but a formidable number nonetheless. If they could manage that in two scant months, they presumably had a great deal of strength left in reserve. Six Kingdoms' long-term position was weakening.

“‘Twould be prudent to withdraw to Faerzen.”

As entertaining as it would be to remain in the western territories and wreak havoc on the imperial economy, growing too fixated on retaining their current gains would lead to defeat. On top of that, Lucia's interest in the empire had faded. “We must call Faerzen a victory and be content with that.” She let out a tired sigh as she massaged the wrinkles between her eyebrows. “Our own safety comes above all. The next battle shall be fought on a different stage.”

Everything had started to fall apart with the Lord of Eld's escape.

“Punishment, perhaps. For indulging my desires like some foolish maiden. A queen has responsibilities. I ought to have remembered that.”

She leaned back in her chair and gazed up at the roof of her tent, reliving the moment. The blade had fallen toward the black-haired boy's neck—and everything had come undone.

The soldiers watched with bated breath, waiting for the moment that would carve their names into history. The desperate cries of enemy resistance had long fallen silent. All that remained was to slay a living legend. Yet the battlefield was unforgiving of complacency, even when victory seemed certain. Buoyed up by uncharacteristic excitement, Lucia let herself forget this most basic and vital of truths.

First came the whinnying of horses, then the drumming of hooves. By the time she noticed the disturbance, a large cloud of dust had shrouded the field before her eyes. The air seemed to creak under some great strain, which distracted her for a fatal moment from noticing that something was wrong with Luka.

“Agh... Gyaaah!”

Luka fell to the ground, rolling around in agony. Even in her throes, she clutched her sword and glared hatefully at the Lord of Eld, but in vain. Her blade did not have the strength to bite. Her entire left side had been frozen solid.

A female voice giggled. "Dear me. You seem to have been caught unawares."

Lucia's instincts flared in response to danger. She spun around, lashing out to the left with her fan, but an impact knocked the blow upward, forcing a grunt from her lungs.

As grit and dirt obscured the surroundings, one of the Vulpes riders leaped down from their horse and cast aside their helmet. A shake of their head sent amethyst locks tumbling skyward, and a woman's face came into view. Outwardly she looked pure and dignified, but her composed exterior was betrayed by the bewitching aroma lurking beneath. Her beauty was cold to the point of sharpness, and no less striking to a woman's eyes as to a man's.

"Unfortunately, this man's death would inconvenience me greatly." She flashed a dainty smile as she stepped in front of the bloodstained Lord of Eld. "So if you wish to have him, you shall have to go through me."

With that, she picked him up with ease in her slender arms and tossed him onto the back of an approaching horse.

For a moment, Lucia was stunned, but she soon sprang to action. "Halt!" she commanded, spreading her fan wide. As she made to pursue, however, a wall of ice sprang up to block her path. An ominous premonition seized her as she drew close, and she stopped dead. Cold mist assailed her, coiling around her limbs.

"What—?!"

A swing of her fan split the mist in two like a waterfall, but a chill wind blew through, freezing the ground where she stood.

"Surprised?" The amethyst-haired woman's lips pulled back in delight as she ran her fingers down a sword translucent as crystal. "Behold, the fiendblade Hauteclair."

Lucia knew at a glance that the sword was no normal weapon. It emanated a baleful might strong enough to warp the air around it. Mana poured from the blade in fearsome quantities. Its power was so vast and so dense, it could swallow her mind whole. Every hair on her body stood on end.

"How vexing." She clicked her tongue in annoyance. The horse bearing the Lord of Eld was close to escaping the dust cloud, but if she diverted her attention

from the woman with amethyst hair, her death would be swift and sure.

“Now who, pray tell, are you?”

This was no ordinary woman. That much was clear from the searing mana she radiated. But how had somebody without one of the Noble Blades come to wield such formidable power?

“I am Claudia van Lebering, the queen of the Kingdom of Lebering.”

“Ah, the royal line. Zlosta blood, close to pure... And from the hue of your skin...you are an auf, are you not?”

Claudia stifled an amused giggle with the back of her hand. “You are well read, I see.”

Lucia’s eyes took on a steely focus. “A bearer of King Lox’s blood... You have come far from the frozen fringes of the north.”

So she did not only possess a zlosta’s formidable constitution; she was an auf, and a descendant of a member of the Black Hand besides. With all that, perhaps she could indeed stand on par with the Noble Blades. Certainly, her mana reserves were great enough. Yet one question remained.

“What twisted mana is this?” Lucia’s brow creased. “’Tis as though many were contained within one.”

“That is the power of my forefather’s relic restored to its full glory. The power of Devouring.”

Lucia dimly recalled the term from her own forefather’s writings. Unfortunately, a great many historical records had been destroyed in the third emperor’s great purge and the memoirs she had read went into little detail, so she had never marked it as worthy of special note.

“The Kinslaying Blade. ’Tis a wonder such an ancient relic has survived at all.”

“Many texts were lost in the great purge...or perhaps it would be more apt to say that they were intentionally hidden? In any case, now you know how it survived undetected. Who would suspect that it was hiding in plain sight?”

What writings existed described a cursed blade that slew zlosta by the score, its power swelling as it gorged itself upon their manastones. How potent that

ability might be, Lucia could not say, but if she could sense the enormity of the sword's mana so clearly just by standing in its presence, it had to be a dangerous instrument indeed. Still, she was not so weak-willed as to fall back.

"I fear I have no time to play with you. I must pursue the Lord of Eld."

There was still time. The soldiers who had snatched him away might have disguised themselves as Vulpes cavalry, but it would still not be easy for them to make their way through a battlefield teeming with Six Kingdoms troops. If she pacified Claudia quickly and gave chase as fast as her legs would carry her, she could recover him.

Claudia glanced around before returning her gaze to Lucia. *"Indeed. Time grows short. I must away."*

For all the nonchalance in her voice, she could not possibly hope to break through over thirty thousand soldiers unscathed. A single order from Lucia would push her to the edge of a sheer precipice. Lucia frowned. There was something odd about the woman's manner.

Why is she so concerned with what lies around her?

After moving to block Lucia's path, Claudia had taken no further action. Indeed, she seemed to be avoiding taking the offensive, as though she was being exceedingly cautious about her impact on her surroundings. But why was that foremost on her mind?

"So that is your ploy..."

"My. You realize at last."

Claudia waved a hand as though stirring the air. A sudden wind began to disperse the dust cloud.

"And you believe you shall get away? Just like that?"

"Had you been quicker to notice, I may not have made good my escape so easily." Claudia's lips curled in amusement. At that moment, the timbre of horns blared across the battlefield. Lucia looked around in alarm.

"Now, I have given you time enough. What comes next is for you to decide." Claudia grasped the reins and sprang into the saddle. A wave of her hand

cleared the dust from her path. She glanced back at Lucia. "Of course, if you value your honor, you have no choice at all."

With a disdainful smirk, she took off across the battlefield. "Hiro Schwartz von Grantz is dead!" she cried as she plunged into the dust. "Victory to Six Kingdoms! Send word across the field! Unfurl the banners! Raise your voices high!"

Her voice receded into the distance, mocking to the last.

Lucia scowled, realizing that she had fallen into the enemy's trap. She looked around frantically for a corpse, spotted a fallen soldier nearby, and cut off his head. Smacking the gory lump against the blood-soaked ground dyed the hair black enough to pass at a glance. As the dust cloud cleared, she raised it high.

"Hiro Schwartz von Grantz is dead!" she cried.

What humiliation. What disgrace. To have the enemy's back pressed against the wall, only to be forced to watch them slip away, coerced into doing their own work for them. It was so farcical she could laugh. She had been so confident in her schemes going into the battle, but evidently the Lord of Eld had been planning this from the start. Most likely, she had been dancing to his tune before steel was ever drawn.

She had thought herself clever when she plotted the western and central nobles' betrayal, and had been delighted when it seemed to proceed as planned. When the Lord of Eld had knelt before her, she'd flattered herself that she had surpassed the War God. Yet all the while, he had been the one pulling the strings.

"What a pitiful showing. I fancied myself far-sighted, but I could hardly see beyond the end of my own nose."

She had come close—so tantalizingly close—to victory, only to allow a moment's complacency to snatch it away. This disgrace would be avenged. There would be no mercy for those who denied her. Those who sullied a queen's dignity could not be suffered to live. Blood trickled from her mouth as she bit her lip in shame, but her anger was far stronger than her pain.

“I shall see you dead for this. I swear it.”

The tent swirled with murderous rage.

“Excuse me.” At that moment, a woman’s voice cut through the stagnant air.

A figure stepped through the tent flap without waiting for Lucia to give permission. Her left arm was gone—indeed, the entire left side of her body was grievously wounded, pitiful to look at. Even as she projected hostility, she looked as fragile as a glass sculpture. There was no trace left of the princess who had once been heralded as a great beauty. Anyone who saw her now would say the same thing: she was unsettling to look upon, her eyes clouded and dead, her skin pale as a vengeful wraith’s and just as chill. She was Luka Mammon du Vulpes, leader of the forces of Vulpes and vice-commander of the Punitive Army.

“Forgive me for being late. I was taking care of Igel.” She didn’t look the least bit contrite. Her eyes contained no emotion at all.

Luka’s younger brother had perished in the battle with the empire, his head lopped off by the fourth prince, but she refused to acknowledge his death. She had taken his remains back to her tent, where she dined with his head, slept with it, and had even been sighted laughing as she conversed with it. The eerie, whispered conversations that issued from her tent night after night were beginning to unnerve the sentries, to the point where Lucia had received multiple requests for a change of post. Igel’s death had caused her mind to unravel, and she now lived her days on the border between reality and fantasy.

“His wounds haven’t healed yet, you see. I must attend to him. If you have business with me, I ask that you make it quick.”

With a wordless sigh, Lucia gestured to the chair with her fan, but Luka refused the invitation to sit, remaining near the entrance. Lucia’s shoulders slumped in defeat, but she continued anyway.

“There is nothing to be gained by staying here. I mean to withdraw to Faerzen.”

Luka strode closer and glared down at her commander wordlessly.

“Does that displease you?” Lucia asked.

Luka gave a slight nod. “Of course. Need I remind you that you allowed the fourth prince to escape? He is surely hiding somewhere nearby. We must flush him out and take his head.”

“We need concern ourselves with him no longer. He is dead, and I, for one, have no more interest in this land.”

“You may tell yourself that if you like. But once the soldiers realize the truth, once our homeland learns of this disgrace, neither of us will be able to escape punishment.”

“True enough, but see how he makes no move to announce his survival. ’Twould seem that being dead is as convenient for him as it is for us.”

As galling as it was to admit, across the boundaries of friend and foe, their interests aligned. Lucia had no choice but to continue playing the fool and pretend she had slain the Lord of Eld.

“I have no intention of falling back. I will stay until I take his head, no matter the cost.”

“A little selfish for the commander of a hundred thousand men to say, don’t you think?”

Retreat was the wiser choice. Open combat would be challenging with the chain of command in disarray. More to the point, they had succeeded in their goal of pacifying the western territories; they ought to be content with that. The Grantzian Empire now faced the task of rebuilding the west—it would need to punish its treacherous nobles, keep its displaced population from running riot, and tackle a great many other problems besides. A wise commander would wait until it was overburdened and then take advantage of its distraction to deal a decisive blow.

“For your late brother’s sake, if nothing else, you ought to—”

“Late? Late?! Igel is *not* dead!” Luka’s expression twisted demonically. “He is resting in his tent! He is biding his time!”

She wore the face of a hate-bound spirit, a monstrous aspect that a human being would not—could not—ever wear. For a moment, Lucia pitied the War God.

“If you say so. But what of the soldiers you will take to their graves to have your vengeance?”

“Enough. I am their commander. They will do as they are bidden.”

“And what of the throne you so covet?”

“I would gladly give it up to take his head.” Luka bit at her thumb in frustration. Her head abruptly hung. “I will take his life with my own hands, I swear it. He deserves an eternity of torment.” A dark light gleamed in her eyes.

Lucia flicked open her fan and raised it over her mouth.

“Every night...” Luka continued. “Every night, Igel weeps like a child. ‘Save me, sister,’ he says. ‘My neck. It hurts.’ ‘My arm... Where is my arm?’ And tears of blood fall from his eyes as he begs me to avenge him.”

Luka’s breathing grew ragged, like a feral beast. Her eyes bored into Lucia, pleading. A noxious aura arose around her like a miasma as she burned with hatred.

“So I have to help him, don’t I? I’m his sister, after all. Yes, that’s right...once I get my hands on the fourth prince, I’ll chop off his arms, carve open his stomach... Aha ha! And then I’ll take his entrails, wrap them around his neck, and pull them tight until I twist it off!”

She stared wildly into space, muttering to someone who was not there. Her face was devoid of emotion; while her voice had a gleeful tinge, her words rang hollow.

“Yes, that’s it. That’s the way. I’ll kill him...kill him? Kill him, kill him, kill him...”

Her hatred brought forth a curse deep and vast enough to invite despair.

“Kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him...”



The fit came over her without warning. She stared at the ground, stamping her feet feverishly, neck jittering like a broken doll. Abruptly, she jumped as though startled. “Ah... Ah! I’m sorry! Forgive me! Please, don’t—”

She retreated into a corner of the tent, wrapping her arms about herself. Her eyes flew wide in surprise as she looked around fearfully.

“Ah... Lucia. If... If that is all, I must excuse myself. Igel is calling.”

She fled through the tent flap as though trying to escape something unseen. Lucia cast a concerned glance at her retreating figure and closed her eyes.

“How cruelly she has broken. Far more so than I expected.” She expelled a sigh heavy with lament. The corners of her mouth pulled upward. “Now, how best to make use of it?”

* * * * *

The aide’s report cut through the clamor of the tent. “General Macrill, the scouts have found the Lebering army’s encampment.”

At the head of the table, Macrill du Pius, general of the Kingdom of Vulpes, heaved himself to his feet. “Good, good. Where are they hiding?”

“At Fort Veritas, sir. A small fortress in the center of the western territories.”

“Quite the distance. Could we dispatch a task force to sack the place?”

“We don’t know their numbers, sir. I believe it would be prudent to wait for more information.”

“I see.” With a sigh, General Macrill settled back down into his chair. “A fine mess. We can’t go home empty-handed or Lady Luka will be bound for the block.”

Of all the kingdoms, Vulpes had suffered particularly heavy losses. Not only had their force of twenty thousand been routed at the town of Severt, the defeated troops’ arms and armor had been appropriated by the enemy and used against the Punitive Army in the battle against Fourth Prince Hiro. The other kingdoms were already sharpening their tongues. If they demanded reparations, Luka would not just be stripped of her honors, she would likely lose her life.

“I cannot let that happen, or I’ll never be able to look Lord Kratos in the eye.”

The king before last, Kratos, had earned the enmity of many, but he had been like a father to General Macrill. Now that he had passed, all that remained of him were his two children, and it broke Macrill’s heart to see what had become of them after being cheated out of their kingdom. At the time, he had been powerless to do anything but stand at watch. Yet they had endured on their own and, in no time at all, surpassed him. When they took charge of the current campaign, hope had swelled in his chest that the throne might be restored to its rightful masters. But that hope was in ruins now—Igel had perished on the field, and the loss had shattered his sister’s mind.

“What a tragic state of affairs. And I presume to call myself a general...”

As Macrill crossed his arms and brooded, an aide approached him. “Vice-Commander Luka is calling for you, sir. She requests your presence in her tent at once.”

Macrill’s mood immediately turned dour. He struggled to look at what Luka had become. Persistent rumors claimed that she slept with her dead brother’s head cradled in her arms, and the soldiers were beginning to complain about a foul stench issuing from the commander’s tent. Still, he could not turn down the invitation. There was no telling what kind of reprimand she might have in store.

“Very well. I shall be there presently.” He made his way to the tent entrance, musing that a reprimand might be the least of his concerns.

A chill assailed him as he stepped outside. He shrugged off a shiver and set out, his expression surly. Luka’s tent was not far from the main camp, and cries of merriment rose into the air on all sides as he walked in silence between the tents.

At last, he came to his destination. The sentry at the entrance gave a tense bow. The man’s hand trembled as he pulled back the tent flap, perhaps intimidated by coming face-to-face with a superior officer, perhaps out of fear of the profane deeds taking place within.

General Macrill heaved a sigh. Suppressing the desire to turn and flee, he ducked inside. Immediately, a rancid stench assailed his nostrils, vile enough to

make his stomach churn. He clasped a hand over his mouth. As he staggered farther in, he spotted Luka seated in the center of the tent. She looked so ghastly that for a moment it took his breath away, but she gestured for him to sit, and he hurriedly did as he was bidden.

“You called for me, my lady?” He couldn’t quite hide the tremor of fear in his voice. Tentatively, he raised his head, fearful that he had caused offense. He found her regarding him with eyes as clouded as muddy water, her expression stripped clean of all emotion.

“Are you not going to greet Igel?”

“My lady?”

“Igel is angry. You must greet him.” Luka turned her brother’s head to face Macrill. Its flesh was dried, its skin was peeling, and the eyes had rotted out. Macrill’s gorge rose at the stench.

Swallowing hard, he lowered his head. “Of course, my lady! Lord Igel, I am pleased to see you hale!”

He could stand to watch no longer. The murky waters of a bottomless swamp crept over his feet and up his legs. He shivered at a chill that was not quite due to the cold.

“Oh, Igel. What shall we do with him?” Luka smiled as she cradled the skull lovingly. “Really? Will that satisfy you? Well...” She giggled. “You always were a kind soul.”

She gestured for General Macrill to raise his head. His old bones creaked as he looked upward, all the while fighting the nerves trying to resist.

The dim light of the tent picked out the faintest of smiles on Luka’s lips. “In view of your faithful service to our family since our father’s time, you have graciously been spared from punishment.”

General Macrill did not ask by whom. If he did, his head would roll. His voice stayed level as he expressed his gratitude. “I am delighted to hear that, my lady. I will continue to serve you—both of you—with all my being.”

“Now, to the reason I called you here.”

“I am yours to command, my lady.”

“I want you to put all the nearby towns to the torch. Cut down the refugees as they take to the roads and hang the corpses up where they will easily be seen. You are to leave no imperial alive. Turn over every last stone. Lop off every last head.”

Macrill was lowering his head a second time when the unthinkable order entered his ears. He froze mid-motion. Confusion swirled inside his skull, but knowing that he had to give an answer, he steeled himself and spoke.

“My lady...this I cannot do.”

“And why not?”

“It would make us needless enemies. It would adversely affect our prospects in battle.”

“Raise your head, General Macrill.”

With a great thump, his heart began to beat faster, as though a bucket of midwinter water had been upended over his head. His breathing grew ragged as he felt his emotions recoil. With his mind unable to accept a command it could not process, his body initiated a rejection response. Time slowed down. He felt as though he was lost in darkness, a darkness that stretched on forever—but all things must eventually meet their end.

No scream left his mouth as his head finished its arc. Terror stifled his surprise in his throat. But right before his eyes, close enough for their noses to touch, was Luka’s face. Her pupils flared as her gaze bored into him. By her side, level with her own head, she held her brother’s skull.

“Look at what the empire did to Igel. Kill them. Every last man.”

She had been so beautiful when they first met. After her father’s death, that beauty had become her curse, earmarking her to become the plaything of the nobles. Even so, she had never lost her dignity, shining graceful and pure as she kept faith in a brighter tomorrow. She had lived through hell and finally won her freedom, and yet look what had become of her—her body swathed in burns, her dead brother’s head cradled in her arms. Where her eyes had once been clear as amber, now they were clouded with malignancy.

“It will be done, my lady. All who stand in our way will know the meaning of carnage.”

She was careening toward destruction. No one else would follow her now. But if he stood by her side, if he gave her what little remained of his life, perhaps it might repay the debt he owed her father.

“I will give you twenty thousand men. Burn their villages. Raze their towns. Reduce their castles, their forts, everything with four walls to rubble.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Chapter 3: Beyond Despair

Hiro awoke to searing brilliance. The world was filled with light. The glare was so uniform that he couldn't tell whether he was facing up or down, his sense of balance so faint that he couldn't be sure whether he was looking left or right. Only one thing was certain.

I'm back again.

Hiro had been to this place once before. Indeed, his first visit had been one that he would never forget. His return was certainly a surprise, but with that memory lingering in the back of his mind, he felt less alarmed than he expected. Warmth enfolded him, comforting and familiar, as though he had fallen into slumber.

A sense of weightlessness permeated his bleary awareness for a short while, and then it ceased. As his senses came back into focus, he realized that he was lying face-down.

"From the outset, answers are hard to come by. To be expected, perhaps."

A voice drifted down from above, one that he had heard before. He planted his left hand on the ground and levered himself upright, seeking to overlay the source of the voice with the images that it stirred. His head felt heavy. An ornate throne came into view as his gaze moved up, followed by the dignified young man seated upon it. He looked every bit as Hiro remembered.

A gust blew through the featureless space. Its gentle caress set Hiro's heart at ease. Something flat pressed softly against his back. He looked down to find that he was seated on a jet-black throne.

"So astounding is your audacity, I can hardly even bring myself to feel anger."

The voice drew Hiro's attention back up. "Artheus..."

"You haven't changed a jot, Held. Rey would weep to see it."

"I don't regret what I did. It was the best way."

“Yet again, you argue back as though you knew best.” Artheus sighed, pressing a hand to his forehead as if suppressing a headache. “That always was a failing of yours, Held. You insist on doing things your way, never questioning its wisdom, and so throw yourself into peril.”

“And it’s saved more lives than I can count.”

“So you may believe, but has it truly?”

Hiro blinked, taken aback.

“You may have saved some commonfolk from bandits,” Artheus continued, “but did you stay to make certain that their stories ended happily? What of those you freed from noble tyranny? Or those you rescued from monsters? Did you see them all the way to safety?”

Hiro had no reply. His throat grew dry as an invisible pressure seemed to tighten around his neck. Artheus was right. He had never truly seen anything through. Not Artheus’s road, not the dream he’d dreamed; Hiro had fled into obscurity before seeing either to fruition.

“I recognize the irony in my saying this, Held, but you are irresponsible. You draw a line where it benefits you most and declare a matter concluded. That is selfishness, nothing more.”

“That’s not—”

True, he wanted to say, but a wave of Artheus’s hand stopped the word dead in his throat. “You trust no one, you confide in no one, you open your heart to none, and yet you flatter yourself that you will risk your life to save others. What am I to call that but arrogance?”

“I’m not the same person I was a thousand years ago. Arrogance has nothing to do with it. This time, I have the strength I need.”

“Is that why you lost a limb?” Derision flared in Artheus’s golden eyes as his gaze fell on Hiro’s right arm.

Hiro lowered his eyes, biting his lip in shame. “The empire was on the brink of disaster. I had to do something or it would have fallen apart.”

There were so many other things he wanted to say, but the words failed him,

leaving him with nothing but a sheepish retort. It fell flat even to his ears, ringing vainly in the empty air.

Artheus's dismissive snort scattered what remained. "If a nation is so weak that one man's efforts can determine its fate, perhaps it deserves to fall."

The remark fell easily from the other man's lips, but Hiro's eyes widened at his presumptuousness. "What? After how hard we fought to build it? After everyone we lost?!"

"What of it?" Artheus let Hiro's outrage wash over him coolly. He struck his fingers hard against the arm of his throne with a savage smile. "I have no need of such a nation. If my empire must stand on the back of my brother's corpse, let it crumble."

"You can't just decide that!"

"Of course I can." Artheus recrossed his legs, clasped his hands on top of his knees, and flashed a full-faced grin. "I'm the first emperor."

He spoke without shame, smiling as innocently as a child. There, again, was that same confidence that he had always possessed in abundance. Hiro found himself at a loss for how to respond. He felt like he was looking directly into the sun, and he lowered his gaze to escape the glare.

"How self-centered can you be?"

"As much as I please. Emperors must be thus."

Prideful as a lion and haughty as a tiger, Artheus had been born to wear a crown. The arrogance he projected was rooted in an unshakable conviction.

"Ever do you insist on making things more complex than they are. On denying your own heart in service of others. I always disliked that about you..." Artheus broke off and pressed a fist into Hiro's chest. "Enough to want to strike you." He let one eye fall closed mischievously and settled back into his chair. "Sadly, that is not my place. Not this time."

A shadow of loneliness fell over his face. The past and the present had drifted apart, and never again would the twain meet. Artheus's role in history had ended a thousand years ago. For better or for worse, his age had long met its

end.

“There is truly nothing so vexing as to be forced to watch my brother suffer. Would that I were there, Held. Perhaps I could not save you, but I would never have allowed you to end up in such a sorry state.”

As pointless as it was to ponder might-have-beens, Hiro had to admit that Artheus was right. If he were still alive and in his prime, most of the problems facing the Grantzian Empire would disappear. He would sweep them aside with one swing of his mighty arm.

“But that can never be, so there is no more to be said.” Artheus’s regrets seemed to fall from his shoulders as he settled back with a carefree grin. He produced a piece of black card from his breast pocket. Hiro remembered it well—it was the same spirit seal that Artheus had given him before his return to Earth. Over time, it had gradually blackened, the stain spreading progressively faster in response to some unknown stimulus. At some point it had vanished from Hiro’s possession, and yet here it was again, in one piece.

“The final condition has been satisfied. Self-sacrifice always was your way, Held. You are so predictable, I cannot even bring myself to laugh.” There was an edge of exasperation to Artheus’s voice, but it vanished as his face turned grave. “Truly, you push yourself too far.”

Hiro smiled awkwardly, sensing that he was being chided.

“Ever do you seek out the thorniest road,” Artheus continued. “And with every step, you heap more curses upon yourself, as though you felt you deserved the punishment. Tell me, does it not pain you?”

“It does,” Hiro said hesitantly. The oversized title of the Hero King of Twinned Black; the name of Mars, written in the blood of his allies; both weighed heavy enough to crush him. “But I can’t complain.”

“Why not? Do you fear letting others down?”

“That’s not it. I’m not scared of that anymore. I just don’t want to be left with regrets.” Hiro looked down at the trembling fingers of his left hand. “What happened one thousand years ago... I can’t let it repeat itself.”

Did Artheus understand the terror of feeling the warmth fade from those he

loved as they hovered on the boundary between life and death? Did he know the fear of hearing their breath grow ever more shallow? Of instant, irreversible loss, of the dawning realization that only a hollow husk remained—Hiro did not think he could bear that despair again.

“I’m tired of it all. Of losing people I care about. Of failing to protect them.”

“My sister would not want this, Held.” Arthur’s voice was barely more than a whisper. “Rey would not want this. She would disavow what you have become.”

Silence fell between them. The uncomfortable pause stretched on as they both found themselves at a loss for things to say.

In the end, it was Artheus who spoke. “But you are longer beholden to such things. Walk the path you choose, Held. It is long past time that you lived as your heart desired, bound by no one. You have served the name of von Grantz for long enough.”

Hiro gave no answer. He remained silent, his eyes cast down.

Artheus sighed, toying with the black card as he continued. “It was just before you returned to your Earth, was it not?”

Hiro jolted. He looked up in surprise.

“Did you think me so oblivious?”

“No, it’s just...I never told anyone.”

Artheus snorted. “Please. Do you think your own brother would fail to notice?” Behind his mock exasperation, his eyes were full of affection; the words were no accusation. “I admit, I was surprised when I learned that you had challenged the Demiurgos. Then again, attempting to take everything upon your own shoulders *is* very much like you.”

But his attempt had ended in failure, the consequence of succumbing to maddening rage. Resolving never to be ruled by emotion or fear dirtying his hands, he had risen, fought, and reached out to claim the heavens, only to fail to grasp anything at all. For his failure, he now bore a curse. He clasped and unclasped his fingers bitterly.

Artheus smiled ruefully. “I told you once that I cast many possibilities at your

feet.” Three books appeared from featureless space. Hiro recognized them all: the White Chronicle, the Black Chronicle, and the Memoirs of the First Emperor. Artheus took the latter in hand. “When I knew my time was nigh, I began to ask myself what I could leave behind to aid my dear brother.”

Hiro had suspected Artheus’s goal, if only vaguely. Ever since returning to Aletia, he had spent every spare moment cooped up in Berg Fortress’s study, researching all manner of topics in the hope of learning more. The more he read, the more he learned how his actions had affected the world, and with it, the full extent of his irresponsibility. Liz now bore his cursed legacy, which had burdened her with a tragic fate. He had never managed to uncover the true nature of Artheus’s designs in the end, but along the way, he had stumbled across a deep truth of the world.

“What is it you want, Artheus?”

“I have only ever wished for one thing, Held. Only one.” With an impish smile, Artheus picked up the Black Chronicle. “And to that end, I granted you the rank the people always desired. I took the liberty of assuming your likeness and ascending the throne as the second emperor.”

That, too, Hiro had surmised. Artheus had always possessed a mischievous streak; no doubt the deception had amused him to no end. Still, his actions defied reason. Who could conceive of the ruler of a grand empire going to such lengths to distort their own nation’s history?

“Why go so far?” Hiro’s gaze hardened with accusation.

Artheus’s face took on a lonely cast. “I am your brother, and you are mine—the only remnants of each other’s families to emerge from the horrors of the great war. Our bond may not be one of blood, but it is firm even so.”

Beneath his cheerful veneer lay a deep solitude, to the point that he seemed on the verge of tears. This was an expression he would show only to family, and the love therein was eternal and unchanging.

“Even the emperor who challenged the world is but a mortal man. Is it so wrong to wish for my brother’s happiness?”

Within those words lay Artheus’s every dream, his most earnest desire.

“Never falter, Held, even if your hand falls short of what you seek. Walk the path you choose. Chase your most distant ideals. I have left you all I can.” Artheus held the black card over his right eye and grinned. “Now you need only...” He broke off, shaking his head, and smiled warmly. “No, I will not overstep my bounds. But allow me to give you one final piece of advice.”

His tone dropped a notch. Hiro had heard those words many times, always accompanied by the same austere expression. Artheus spoke with the voice of a natural ruler, rich with a gravitas that he could never truly hide. It did not compel the ear so much as make one *want* to listen. He had been a naturally charming orator since the day he was born.

“Once you know the truth, all will be an open book before you. Choose wisely, Held. I can help you no longer.”

Artheus rose from his chair and spread his arms wide as though to encompass the world’s vastness. Even after coming to reign over all the peoples of Aletia, he had never managed to enclose it in his grasp. Yet there was no trace of regret or wistfulness in his hands, only pride.

“But fear not. My will remains. It will aid you, even if I cannot.”

He looked up to the heavens with a piercing gaze, and a smile spread across his face. When he looked back down at Hiro, his face was as bright as a clear sky. Now nothing was left undone.

“The time has come to awaken.”

All at once, Hiro’s vision filled with light. Oddly, it did not dazzle, so he had no need to squint against the glare as he looked back at Artheus.

“Do you think I can find what I’m looking for?”

A vague question, lacking even a definite subject, but Artheus nodded firmly regardless and offered him a warm smile. “I do not doubt it for a moment.”

The tension fell away from Hiro’s shoulders as he looked up at the featureless sky. “I’m glad. Well, I suppose...”

He let the sentence fade away unfinished. Artheus surely knew how it ended, even if he didn’t speak the words aloud. There was only one thing he truly

needed to say.

“Until we meet again.”

He closed his eyes. As the light swelled, so too did the darkness burgeon. The two were inseparable, watching over the world together like the sun and the moon.

Gravity took hold of Hiro’s limbs once more as wakefulness washed over him. He opened his eyes. A wooden ceiling came into view. A light hung from the beams, although its flame was too weak to fully drive the darkness from the corners of the room.

He took a breath, sat up, and examined his surroundings. Only then did he notice the woman standing by the door. Her amethyst hair fell to her waist, shimmering in the dim light. Shadows lay over the corners of her compassionate eyes, and fresh pink lips stood out beneath the bridge of her shapely nose. Her delicate features held an ethereal beauty even in the gloam; one glimpse was enough to sear them into one’s memory forever. Hiro knew her name. She was Queen Claudia van Lebering.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

Hiro laid a hand on his neck and tilted his head. “Well enough. How long has it been?”

“A month, perhaps. Today is the twelfth day of the third month.”

His eyes widened. “Longer than I thought...”

“For a long time, I feared you might never wake. It is a relief to see you unharmed.” Claudia’s brows drew into a frown as she stepped closer. “May I ask what has happened to your eye?”

Hiro cocked his head again. Claudia produced a mirror and handed it to him. His right eye was glowing gold and his severed right arm had been restored. Curiously, the hole in his abdomen had also healed.

Artheus. It must have been.

“The final condition has been satisfied,” Artheus had said. The full extent of the boons it would bring to his body remained unclear, but at the very least,

regenerating from his injuries was apparently one of them.

I suppose I'll just have to figure out the rest myself.

As Hiro rubbed his arm, Claudia spoke again. “Your Black Camellia was the same as ever when I paid you a visit a short while ago, but now it appears to have turned white. However did it manage that?” She looked him over searchingly. “The influence of a dharmastone, perchance?”

Devouring the arm of Igel, the young commander of the kingdom of Vulpes—or more precisely, the dharmastone embedded in his hand—had sealed away the Black Camellia’s power. All of its abilities had ceased to function, including its formidably rapid regeneration. The dharmastone remained inside the garment even now, continuing to exert its effects. Most likely, that was the cause of its change of appearance.

A thought struck Hiro. “I notice the one in my side is missing. Did you take it?”

“But of course. Presumptuous of me, I know, but a promise is a promise.”

Claudia’s face betrayed not a hint of remorse. Hiro gave a hopeless shrug, which turned into a quizzical raise of his eyebrow when she held out a hand.

“What?”

“Two, I believe, was our agreement?”

Hiro smiled ruefully. There truly was no getting anything past her. Unfortunately, he could not afford to return the Black Camellia to its original form. Besides, he was not yet done with Igel’s arm.

It’s bound to come in useful sometime.

The feeling was only a premonition for now, but he felt certain that it would become reality. That would not be good enough for Claudia, however, who would not be satisfied with just one. If he failed to make good on their agreement, she would likely deliver his head to Six Kingdoms in person—or perhaps she would take him captive to use as leverage in negotiating with the empire.

“I’m sorry. I still need this one,” he said. As Claudia looked at him askance, he reached into the Black Camellia’s pocket. “Will this do in exchange?”

In his palm lay a manastone, radiating a baleful aura.

“May I take a closer look?” Claudia took the manastone, her interest piqued. A rapturous sigh escaped her lips as she registered its purity, and a flush crept into her cheeks. She peered at it in the dim light with undisguised fascination. “Where in the world did you find this?”

“I was lucky enough to have the chance to enter the royal treasury. It caught my eye, so I asked the emperor for a favor.”

That was a lie, of course, but it was the only way to convince her not to probe further. It was widely known that there were no longer any pure-blooded zlostas in Soleil, so a manastone of such purity could only come from a limited number of sources. As legend had it, the zlostas had emigrated across the southern sea to the Ambition archipelago one thousand years ago, fleeing persecution in the aftermath of the great war. The truth was impossible to verify—passage to the islands was blocked by raging seas—but in any case, not all zlostas had joined the exodus. At least one was known to have stayed behind in Soleil: Lox van Lebering, Claudia’s forefather and a member of the Black Hand.

“What do you think? Will that be enough? I’d say it’s just as good as a dharmastone, myself.”

“Yes, thank you. This will do perfectly. Our compact is sealed. Henceforth, what strength I have is yours to command.” Clearly satisfied, Claudia stowed the manastone away and gave an elegant bow.

“I’m pleased to hear it,” Hiro replied blithely. “I’ll be counting on you.”

Claudia flashed him a pointedly diplomatic smile. Their alliance would only last as long as their interests aligned; if either ended up at a disadvantage, they would just as readily fight each other to the death. They were working together because they could use one another, nothing more.

“Still, you certainly kept me waiting.” Hiro changed the topic with a reproachful remark. “When I went to the trouble of hiding you among the traitors, I pictured you showing up more quickly.”

“I simply chose the moment when the enemy would be most distracted. The success of your plan came first, after all.” Claudia shot him a disapproving

glance, placed a hand to her brow, and shook her head. Her voice took on an edge of irritation. “Frankly, given the state of the battlefield, the fact that I arrived in time to save you at all is a feat worthy of honors. I daresay you ask the impossible.”

After routing the Vulpes soldiers laying siege to the town of Severt, Hiro had appropriated their equipment, which Claudia’s troops had used to disguise themselves as Vulpes cavalry in the climactic battle against Six Kingdoms. In addition, he had assigned several skilled agents to command the imperial troops under the guise of central nobles, although their command had quickly fallen apart on account of their lack of military training.

“I brought five thousand soldiers to this conflict. Two thousand remain on the back lines in reserve. Of the remaining three thousand who lent their blades to your ambush, only one thousand are left.” Claudia’s voice held no regret as she reported her losses. They were pawns to be sacrificed, nothing more—talented ones, but pawns nonetheless. “I hope my gain will be worth the price I paid.”

She fixed Hiro with a barbed look, but he thought better of taking offense. No point in wasting words on a conversation that was bound to go in circles; it would only fritter away precious time.

“So what’s Six Kingdoms up to?” he asked.

Claudia frowned at the obvious change of topic but elected to humor him. “If the spies we have in their midst are to be believed, they have been feasting day and night in celebration of your death. Making rather merry, by all accounts.”

“Then almost no one knows I survived.”

“So it would seem, thanks in no small part to my skillful performance. In the eyes of the world, you are a fallen legend.” She clearly believed she deserved the credit and wasn’t even trying to hide it. Hiro snorted, which she tactfully ignored as she produced another report. “After losing so many commanding officers to your assault, their upper ranks appear to be in considerable disarray. I am told this led to a disagreement between Commander Lucia of Anguis and her vice-commander, Luka of Vulpes.”

Luka had wanted them to dig their heels in and hold their ground, while Lucia had advocated for retreating to Faerzen and regrouping. Neither was mistaken,

and there would be support among their subordinates for both positions. Nonetheless, Hiro did not expect the Six Kingdoms army to split in two. Human greed was bottomless. Anyone would jump at the prospect of glory if offered tempting enough bait, and he had not only supplied them with a chance that would make anyone drool, he had furnished them with a lie that made it difficult to back out.

“It looks like they’re acting exactly as we planned,” he remarked.

“How maddening it must be for them, knowing that they dance to our tune yet are powerless to do otherwise.” Claudia giggled as she pictured their consternation. “Well then, what next? News of your passing has spread throughout the land. If you were to reveal yourself now, you could leverage your popularity to rally your soldiers’ spirits...if you so wished, of course.”

“I’m afraid not. Revenge will be good enough motivation for the imperial armies. Raising their spirits any higher would just make them reckless. Besides, then there would be no point to any of this.”

Revealing himself now would render all his efforts wasted. There would have been no purpose to his deception. What was more, his reappearance would likely stand in the way of Liz becoming empress. The people would venerate him all the more if they learned he had survived, and the military would extol him too. *The War God’s scion is immortal*, they would cry. *He alone deserves the throne*.

The emperor and third prince were dead, the first prince was gone, and the second prince had no interest in anything south of the northern territories. The fourth prince and the sixth princess, with her claim to the title of first emperor reborn, were the only two contenders left. If Hiro remained in the empire, sooner or later, it would split in two. For all the War God’s renown, it was Artheus’s bloodline that had shepherded the nation for a thousand years. Those who disapproved of him would not hesitate to throw their lot in with Liz, regardless of the cost to the empire, and the grinding of their will against the people’s would set the course for civil war. Caught in the middle, the eastern nobles would crumble. Such a conflict in this time of turmoil would lead to the collapse of the empire.

I have to avoid that at all costs.

Claudia saw him deep in thought. “If you are pondering what I suspect,” she said, “I daresay you are being a little paranoid.”

Hiro looked up, his expression conflicted. His fears were far from a paranoid fantasy. Indeed, he had seen them come to life. One thousand years ago, the empire had devolved into two factions, one supporting him, the other supporting Artheus. In spite of the wishes of the men they ostensibly supported, they had feuded constantly for power. One side insisted that only Schwartz deserved the throne, the other that Artheus was the one true emperor, and neither listened when Hiro insisted that he had no interest in ruling. Exhausted by court politics, Hiro had retreated to the battlefield and kept his silence. In retrospect, that had been a mistake that had only made things worse. People drunk on power abused it at the slightest opportunity.

After the war with the zlostas came to a close, the humans of Soleil looked around for their next battle and found one another. Conflict among the nobility manifested as murders, assassinations, and poisonings. Despite Artheus’s best efforts to quench them, the flames burned higher until even the commonfolk were affected. Then, a third faction began to advocate for a coregency, plunging the political landscape into chaos.

The discord lasted until Hiro gave up his status entirely. He renounced the title of high general, relinquished control of the Black Hand to Artheus, and established a small nation on the eastern fringes of the empire ruled by Artheus’s elder sister, Rey. Known as Baum, that nation was now a site of pilgrimage and the residence of the Spirit King. Naturally, many had resented Hiro for giving up his titles so easily, but the second archpriestess had pledged her loyalty to him, pacifying their outrage.

I can’t let that happen again.

Hiro did not belong to this world. He could not assume the burden of a nation when, for all he knew, he might vanish at any time. So, again, he had put himself in harm’s way in order to disarm the most visible threats.

It looks like the worst has been averted...for now. All that’s left is to deal with the truth lurking in the shadows.

As the light grew in strength, the shadows lengthened, and the resplendent glory of the Grantzian Empire cast a long shadow indeed. Even Hiro could not imagine what might happen if its darker aspects were to be unleashed. He had to strengthen its foundations before things came to that, by heavy-handed means if necessary.

He heaved a deep sigh. “Do you have anything I could use to cover my face?” If he was to hide his identity, he would make long use of it.

Claudia folded her arms and cocked her head in thought. After a moment, she gave a little nod. “I believe so. An article of ceremonial significance, I am told. If you might wait a moment, I shall see for myself.”

She turned about and left the room at a brisk walk. As her presence receded down the corridor, Hiro pulled the nearby desk closer. He reached into the pockets of the Black Camellia and produced a humanoid skull, which he laid on the table, along with more manastones.

“It’s only a matter of time before Orcus makes a move,” he murmured. His voice fell from his lips like malignant, black tar. “Will my hand reach this time, I wonder?”

There was one thing he had not told Claudia. Securing her cooperation was not the only reason he had sought out dharmastones—and while stabilizing the empire, as he had one thousand years ago, had been one of his goals in feigning death, it was only a front for his true intent.

“That lies elsewhere.” His fist thumped down on the table as he glared at the skull with simmering hatred. “Your will still lingers in this world. I can’t exactly ignore that, now, can I?”

Day by day, its influence was making itself known, and the curse Hiro bore was beginning to eat away at his flesh.

“I won’t fail again.”

He would destroy his enemy so thoroughly that not even ashes remained. The dharmastone had succeeded in concealing him. Unable to sense his presence, Orcus would conclude that he was indeed dead.

“So hurry up and show yourself.”

The manastones glowed on the table, illuminating Hiro's face with an ominous light. Rage swirled in the abyss of his eyes as his gaze burned into the skull.

* * * * *

The sun had set by the time Claudia returned, carrying a mask and a tray of dinner. Apologetically, she explained that something urgent had demanded her attention. Hiro had his suspicions about what she meant, which a glance out of the window confirmed as he dug into his meal.

"We're surrounded, I see."

"So you did notice."

"With all the noise, it was hard not to." He spoke between mouthfuls of soup, as nonchalantly as if he were discussing the weather.

"It seems the enemy task force has discovered our position. It was only ever a matter of time, but they tracked us down quicker than I expected."

"Now that you mention it, where are we?"

Claudia drew up a nearby desk, produced a map, and laid it out. "A place called Fort Veritas, in the middle of the western territories."

"Is it strong?"

"Oh, not at all. A large force could break it with ease."

"Then it sounds like I need to get a clearer picture of the situation." Hiro gulped down the last of his dinner and stood up.

"By all means." She held out the mask. "But don't forget this, or your efforts will be for nothing."

"Of course. It almost slipped my mind." He affixed the mask with a practiced hand, much like he had donned his old eyepatch, and opened the door. "Fort Veritas, you said? I'm not familiar. Could you show me to the battlements?"

"It's hardly so large that you will need a guide, but as you wish." With a shrug, Claudia led him from the room.

In short order, they made their way outside. The moon's light greeted them

as they passed through the door. They had been inside a wooden building, the largest structure in the fort. Rows of longhouses—presumably the troops’ sleeping quarters—stood nearby. Harried soldiers in Lebering colors rushed to and fro with torches in hand.

From what Claudia had said, two thousand of her remaining three thousand men were waiting in reserve on the back lines, meaning that only one thousand had accompanied her to the fort. That the place felt cramped even so only went to show how small it was. From what was visible in the light of the bonfires, the walls were low enough to scale with a ladder and had no chance of standing up to siege weaponry. Put charitably, Fort Veritas could be defended just as well by a small force as by a large one; put less charitably, it would crumble at the slightest blow. It was clearly not fit to weather a siege.

Hiro and Claudia walked past the patrolling sentries and climbed up the stairs to the battlements. A powerful gust of wind swirled around them, sending Claudia’s hair aflutter.

“Now that I think about it, they did contact us requesting our surrender. I declined, of course. Along with appropriate provocation.”

It wasn’t exactly sensible to aggravate the enemy, but knowing Claudia’s temperament, Hiro wasn’t surprised. If anything, perhaps he should have been thankful that she was too arrogant to lay down her arms.

“That does sound like you,” he said nonchalantly as he surveyed their surroundings. Lights danced out on the plain—no, more than lights, a roaring flame bright enough to illuminate the heavens. The fort was completely surrounded by an enormous force. A shiver ran through him at the sight.

“Dear me. How will we ever get out of this?” Claudia laid a hand to her cheek and cocked her head—a gesture it was hard to take at face value when her eyes radiated such obvious enjoyment.

She delights in war. No, that’s not it... She doesn’t think she’s really in any danger.

It was easy enough to guess why: she had already concocted a plan to break out of this deadlock. If she was yet to put it into action, that could only mean she was testing him.

“Truly a dilemma,” she murmured. “How would you approach this quandary?”

“It sounds like you’ve already got something figured out.”

She giggled. “Oh, but where would be the fun in doing everything myself? I have not forgotten how ingeniously you defeated my brother’s coup, but much has changed since then. I would know the measure of my ally-to-be.”

Her intention, then, was to watch from up close while Hiro strategized, in order to satisfy herself that his edge had not dulled. Moreover, her subordinates would regard him with suspicion. A mysterious stranger smugly assuming a position at their queen’s side would stick in anybody’s throat, much less being asked to trust them. In short, he had to prove his worth not only to Claudia, but to the soldiers who followed her, and demonstrate that they stood to benefit from his assistance.

Given what’s coming, I can’t blame her for wanting to be certain I can pull my weight.

She was using this opportunity to gauge his true worth; he could sense it in her piercing gaze. And if that was the case...well, he couldn’t let her down.

“Do you know the odds?”

“I do.” There was a beguiling glint in Claudia’s eyes as she replied. “We have one thousand men, while Six Kingdoms has twenty.”

It would have helped to know what kind of commander they were up against, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. Hiro set his hand to his chin and sank into thought.

Claudia glanced his way, then swept her gaze over their surroundings. “As best I can tell from here, their camp is quite secure. There is little chance of staging a night raid, I fear. And they have erected a great many bonfires. We shall all sleep poorly tonight.”

Her point, in short, was that the enemy was well prepared for nocturnal warfare. The moment they saw the fort’s defenses falter, they would stage an all-out assault, and if it did remain secure, they would try to deny the defenders rest.

I'll need to open with something bold and audacious. Let's show them who they're up against.

Demonstrating the difference in their abilities would be the cornerstone of things to come. In a world that readily culled the powerless, some walls were insurmountable. The strong seized victory while the weak supped bitter defeat; that was the law of nature, as simple and clear-cut as it had been one hundred or even one thousand years ago. When life and death hung on a razor's edge, victory was all that mattered.

"Let's bloody them a little." As schemes spun in his mind, Hiro shot Claudia a sidelong glance.

"Oh?"

"I want to get a sense of their commander's temperament—whether they're aggressive or passive. That will help me narrow down my options."

"Do you mean to say you have a way to overcome these odds?" Her eyes opened wide as surprise filled her lovely face. *And several, no less*, she wanted to add, although she stopped short of vocalizing it.

"I wouldn't have said so if I didn't. Stick to the steps I have in mind and our victory will be guaranteed."

That was easier said than done. It was one thing to think of a promising scheme, but another thing entirely to implement it. Some convergence of uncontrollable factors could snatch defeat from the jaws of victory at any time. That was an eternal truth of the battlefield. Yet Hiro spoke with unshakable confidence.

"Emotions are common to all human beings. Even the mightiest emperor or the commander of the strongest army are just people in the end. They come in different types, but they all have their weaknesses."

That made the course of war easy to steer, provided one saw true. If he knew the enemy's heart, he could read their minds and ascertain how best to carry out his plans. It was impossible to lose when he was playing both sides of the board.

"Any more explanation would probably just sound like armchair

strategizing...so instead, let me show you.”

Actions spoke louder than words. Better to give Claudia and her troops a miracle they could not ignore.

“What do you propose?”

“Nothing too tricky. First, could you put out the bonfires on the walls?”

Claudia looked at him in disbelief. “With respect, are you quite sane?”

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained. The bolder our plan, the more cautiously the enemy will scrutinize it. Even the most incompetent commander would get suspicious if we offered them a tasty morsel out of nowhere. That’s just human nature. But it’s also human nature to want to check if it’s really poisoned.” He opened his mouth in a half-yawn and continued. “And reduce our watch. Tonight, we’ll allow all the soldiers we can spare to rest.”

“And what if the enemy should attack?”

“Then we’ll have the remaining sentries retaliate with arrows. Oh, and if you could send the rest to gather rocks...” Hiro cut himself off and looked down at the ground, cupping his chin in his hands. “Yes, about a dozen per soldier. That should do. It shouldn’t be hard to find some in the courtyard.” He smiled sheepishly, seeing that Claudia had fallen silent. “It’ll be fine. Trust me.”

“Are you certain?” She seemed to be choosing her words with care. Clearly, she didn’t quite believe him.

“As certain as I can be. Have a little faith.”

Her shoulders slumped in defeat. “Very well. As you wish.”

She summoned one of her retainers and relayed Hiro’s commands. In short order, messengers dispersed throughout the fort, conveying his orders. The bonfires on the battlements went out one by one. Before long, the light had faded and the fort was swathed in inky blackness.

“The enemy has certainly noticed by now,” murmured Claudia in the dark. “What next?”

Hiro stared at the sea of candlelights flickering out in the night—the enemy encampment. “Their first reaction will be confusion. After that settles down,

they'll try and put together a plan, but opinion will be split into two camps: those who know they're prepared for a night battle and see no reason to hold back, and those who suspect a trap. The debate will get heated, and they'll waste time." He spoke matter-of-factly, as though stating the obvious. "After they fail to reach an accord, they'll send in spies. When you don't know what the enemy is thinking, all you can do is go and listen."

Anyone would be wary of a trap under the circumstances. The enemy's command would naturally be cautious. If they suffered losses attacking a scant one thousand men holed up in a rickety fort, no excuses would save them from ridicule. Everything they had spent their lives building would crumble in an instant.

Claudia nodded hesitantly. "But what if the enemy commander is foolhardy enough to seize what he thinks is an opportunity?"

"Attack or don't, it's all the same in the end." Hiro thrust a hand out into empty air. Every human being feared the dark. It was only natural; there was no way to tell what lurked in its depths. That was why they wandered in search of light: so they could gaze into the abyss for as long as their hearts desired. "I'll crush them no matter how fiercely they struggle. No one can fight their fears in a world without light."

* * * * *

Darkness hung low over the land. A moaning gale carried a biting chill. The light of the torches flickered violently as it passed over them, sending sparks spiraling into the sky like tiny stars.

The Vulpes task force's command tent lay in the center of the camp. General Macrill stood at the mouth of the tent, gazing at the distant shadow that was Fort Veritas.

"An hour already since the bonfires went out..." His brows knitted in bewilderment.

White puffs rose from the mouth of the aide beside him as he read off the spies' report. "There's no sign of the enemy on the battlements, sir. It seems prudent to commence an all-out assault."

General Macrill pursed his lips. “There’s time yet to wait for the scouts to return. What if the enemy is waiting in ambush?”

“We have twenty thousand men, sir. That ramshackle fort will offer little resistance. The battle will be decided in short order.”

“Don’t be so quick to assume. True, we have the numbers, and morale is high. On the face of it, victory would seem assured.”

“Then please, sir, you must give the order—”

General Macrill cut the man off with a wave of his hand. “Think, man. What would happen if we should fail? We will be driven to a cliff’s edge. Word has come already that the empire has finished assembling its forces.”

If they could not take Fort Veritas by the time imperial reinforcements arrived, the troops’ morale would fall dramatically.

“Low spirits we can cope with, but if we suffer a loss on the field, no excuse will be enough.”

The aide dug in his heels, evidently fearing for his reputation. “But sir, with respect, if we surround our prey only to let them go, we will be the laughingstock of the continent.”

General Macrill gave a deep, disapproving sigh. “If they must laugh, let them laugh. There’s no greater shame than defeat.”

Only one thing would decide success in this battle: taking Fort Veritas. There was a world of difference between a failed assault and an assault not attempted. The most important factor was bringing this matter to a close without compromising their future endeavors. If they failed to take a fort of one thousand men with twenty thousand, the consequences would be immeasurable. A drop in morale would not be so bad if it was limited to the task force, but if it spread to the main army, Six Kingdoms might be unable to weather the imperial counterattack.

“Our casus belli is falling apart. We undertook this invasion in the name of Faerzen’s liberation, but what have we done with it? Pillaged the empire’s western territories, that’s what. The other nations will turn on us soon enough.”

Macrill foresaw a brutal, prolonged war in Six Kingdoms' future. They had started in an advantageous position, but that could crumble beneath their feet at any second.

"Our victories have kept morale high, and we still have more than enough men despite our losses. Plunder has kept our food stores full. If not for our lack of officers, we'd be in an ideal position. But that kind of thinking will lead us into a trap."

Namely, arrogance. Repeated victories against the empire had made them overconfident. Now they thought they could best any foe. That was not necessarily a bad thing on its face, but it bred undesirable complacency. To make matters worse, after the battle with the fourth prince, there were not enough superiors to keep the men in line. Now, the soldiers' overconfidence was becoming endemic.

"Every kingdom's officers are competing for glory. There's little we can do to order calm when they're all plotting to undermine one another." All the more reason to avoid incurring losses in a small-scale engagement. That, in a nutshell, was General Macrill's reasoning.

"So you counsel caution, sir?"

"Aye, I do. The bait before our eyes might be tempting, but overextending ourselves now won't do us any good. We'll wait for our scouts to return before we decide whether to attack."

General Macrill expelled a cloud of white breath and looked up at the sky. Presently, the night had been so clear that the stars seemed close enough to touch, but now they lay beneath a thick layer of cloud.

"Even the moon hides herself to fend off the cold. Whose side will the night take, I wonder?"

This was the perfect opportunity for a night raid. The darkness would thwart the enemy's eyes. Under any other circumstances, Macrill would have given the order to attack. This time, however, something in the corner of his mind gave him pause—a sensation that the enemy was lurking in deeper darkness yet, watching his every move.

“These old bones have grown too weary,” he muttered grimly.

The aide’s ears were sharp enough to hear. “Weary, sir?”

“Aye. When you reach my age, you start to lose your edge—”

General Macrill broke off as the sudden sound of footsteps cut through the night air. He squinted into the darkness, his hand instinctively reaching for the hilt of his sword. In an instant, he was ready for combat.

The aide smiled wryly at his reflexes. “You don’t seem to have lost it yet, sir.”

“Aye, perhaps you’re right.” With a shrug, General Macrill lifted his hand from his sword and folded his arms. His face turned surly, embarrassed perhaps by his twitchiness.

In time, several figures emerged from darkness into the torchlight.

“The mission went sour, I see,” he said.

The arrivals were the reconnaissance unit he had dispatched to investigate the fort. They looked far more bedraggled than when they had left. Some had their hands pressed to wounds on their sides, others dripped blood from their foreheads, and yet others shuffled forward blindly, dead-eyed. All of them were pierced deep with arrows.

The moment General Macrill saw their pitiful state, he knew. “So it was bait after all.”

“Forgive me, my lord!” The captain fell to the ground at Macrill’s feet and pressed his head against the earth. “We tried to poke the hornet’s nest to get a sense of the enemy’s movements, but as you can see...it didn’t go as planned.”

So that was the cause of the fiasco: a failure to follow orders. General Macrill had issued no instructions to attack the fort, only to watch and report back as to whether it had any exploitable openings. Most likely, the reconnaissance unit had let ideas of glory go to their heads. Still, he thought better of coming down on them harshly. Scolding bruised soldiers bristling with arrows would only reflect poorly on him.

“Then it was a trap?”

“Yes, my lord. A rain of arrows fell on us out of the dark. They must have been

expecting us.”

There was nothing more terrifying than the sound of arrows in darkness. A man could hold a shield over his head, but the whistle of passing shafts would make him paranoid, and the moment he flinched in fear, he would expose himself. The enemy needed only aim their bows toward the screams and they would die flailing in the night, drowning in a sea of inky blackness.

Macrill offered the wounded returnees a few words of encouragement and turned back to the aide. “They must have been lying in wait on the battlements. We’ll change plans. Tonight, we’ll deny them sleep.”

They would beat the drums and raise battle cries until daybreak. The enemy would not get a wink of sleep with their nerves on end.

“Very good, sir. I’ll relay your orders to the officers.” With a bow, the man turned around and jogged away.

Privately, Macrill doubted that the tactic would have much of an effect. It might have worked well enough on inexperienced troops, but the men holed up in Fort Veritas would not blink at a little noise.

“We’ll attack come morning. Whether we commit our full strength, however... That remains to be seen.”

He ordered his aides to convene in the command tent and, with one last glance at Fort Veritas, stepped back inside.

* * * * *

As the morning sun began to rise, Hiro surveyed the ground outside the gates from the battlements.

“Not much to show for all that noise...”

A gust of wind ruffled his hair. He wrinkled his nose internally at the freezing blast but let no emotion show upon his face. A handful of enemy soldiers, less than half a dozen, lay sprawled in front of the gates. His lips pulled into a slight smile as he saw the scattering of rocks nearby.

“But it looks like it worked well enough.”

In darkness too deep to see, sound became the primary means of discerning

the nature of things. The enemy soldiers had mistaken the thud of pebbles for a rain of arrows, producing the scene before him.

“My,” said a demure voice. “You’re up early.”

Hiro turned to see Claudia, the queen of amethyst, wearing a brisk smile.

“Did you sleep well?” she asked.

“Like a baby, thanks to last night’s lullaby.”

“I am pleased to see that your ruse appears to have succeeded.” Claudia stepped closer. “Do you now have a better grasp of the commander’s disposition?”

“More or less. To put it kindly, he’s a cautious man who thinks carefully before he acts. And to put it less kindly, he’s a fool who fails to capitalize on opportunities.”

In short, he was mediocre. A bland, unexceptional man of no particular talent or note.

“Now here’s a question for you. My plan had several holes in it. The enemy commander didn’t spot them, but can you?”

Hiro turned back to the scene beyond the gate. Claudia didn’t hesitate to follow his lead, placing a hand on the battlements and looking below without question. Her eyes narrowed as though imagining the one-sided slaughter that had taken place the previous night.

“For one thing, I notice there are few bodies. Which is to say, most of the enemy must have escaped alive.”

Judging by the corpses, the enemy had been clad in light armor, but they had at least been wearing proper head protection. The rocks might have rattled a few brains, but they would not have been lethal. All of the bodies left behind sported arrow shafts—the rest must have managed to get away.

“So I can only assume that the commander failed to adequately interpret their reports.”

If he had been more diligent in asking them the details or examining their injuries, Fort Veritas might very well be burning right now.

“Well, perhaps it might be presumptuous to say that the fort would have fallen,” Claudia added. “In any case, he is evidently a rational man, but one blind to small details and ill practiced at reading the battlefield.”

“Full marks. And now that it’s morning, he’ll realize that he’s been tricked.”

Whether he had noticed the scene outside the fort for himself or been informed by his spies, he would be trembling with anger. If he had a shred of self-respect, he would attack—an eventuality that the imperial forces had well prepared for the previous night. Amusement sparkled in Hiro’s eyes as he looked at the enemy lines, wondering when they would begin.

“Well, well. Just as I predicted.”

Drums resounded from the Six Kingdoms encampment. The forces raised a battle cry and began to advance. Horns blared on all sides as the army ground into motion. Here and there trundled the larger shapes of siege weaponry.

“Time to open the gates,” Hiro declared. “Is everything ready?”

Claudia nodded. “Indeed. And with a good night’s rest, the men’s spirits are high.”

“Then let’s get started, shall we?”

He raised a hand. The standard bearer saw the signal and waved a banner. The stones beneath his feet began to shake as the drawbridge lowered. A shudder of surprise ran through the enemy ranks at the unexpected move, but they could not stop their advance; no order had been given to halt. The front line looked clearly perturbed by this, but until the command came, they could do nothing but keep walking.

“How do you imagine they will respond?” Claudia asked.

“If they suspect an empty fort gambit, they’ll most likely pull their forces back.”

“And if not?”

“If they’re foolish enough to think they’ve seen through me, then they’ll charge.”

They had fallen for his trick the previous night. Loath to be deceived a second

time, they would quickly jump to wild speculation. The first instance had robbed them of their composure. More to the point, they would have to be quick about delivering orders to the front line to avoid detracting from the first cohort's momentum, but anything insufficiently decisive would throw the chain of command into disarray. With precious little time left to think, they would naturally resort to simple commands that could quickly propagate through the ranks.

"Either they'll charge or they'll retreat. Unfortunately for them, it won't make a difference. I'll win either way."

As he gazed down, pity in his eyes, the first cohort lurched into motion. A cloud of dust rose in their wake as they accelerated.

"A charge it is, then. I suppose that means I must excuse myself." Claudia headed down the stairs to the courtyard without waiting for a reply.

Hiro didn't spare her so much as a glance as she departed. He pressed a hand to his mask and regarded the enemy with a smirk. "You should have spent a moment to stop and take stock. Regurgitating simple orders isn't the same as thinking on your feet. And when you give up on using your head, you make it obvious that you've been knocked off-balance."

The corners of his mouth pulled into a sneer as he raised his hand to the standard bearer.

At that very moment, the enemy's first cohort cleared the gate and poured into the courtyard. They showed no joy at having broken in, however. There was not a single soldier of Lebering to be seen.

"Have the cowards given up on defending the place?!" one of the men shouted.

"Check the walls!" cried another. "They must be hiding up high!"

They could not very well stand still while assaulting a fortress, especially not with the rest of the army pressing in behind them. They had no choice but to move forward. As they moved deeper, however, many of them inexplicably slipped and fell over.

"What's this on the ground?! Mud?! Oy, watch your feet!"

Horses pitched over with agonized whinnies, dashing their riders against the ground. Pandemonium ensued as the Six Kingdoms soldiers tried to struggle to their feet. Rendered defenseless, they would make easy prey for any archers on the battlements.

“What an embarrassment. Talk about reckless.”

Seeing the soldiers descend into confusion, Hiro sent another signal to the standard bearer. An archer rose from a hiding place on the wall and loosed an arrow. The tip of the shaft was wreathed in fire. It sliced through the air to drive deep into the mud-soaked ground at the soldiers’ feet...and the air exploded outward as a raging inferno erupted in the courtyard.

“Gyaaaaaah! Help m—!”

Dying screams rang through the air. Enemy soldiers fled in all directions, limbs flailing with the unbearable heat. They forgot about fighting, threw away their weapons, even tried to rip off their armor, but burning horses knocked them off their feet and trampled more than a few beneath their hooves.

Naturally, not all of the soldiers were caught in the flames; those who had managed to break free from the carnage in the courtyard were already halfway up the stairs built into the walls. However, they stopped and stared as the fire broke out. At that moment, a rain of arrows struck.

“Gyaaah!”

“Curses! It’s a trap! Fall back! Fall ba— Urk!”

Their shaft-riddled corpses toppled down the stairs. As screams filled the air, Claudia’s voice rang out above the din.

“Cavalry, charge!”

The courtyard shuddered with drumming hoofbeats as Claudia appeared at the head of a unit of riders. They surged forward like a raging torrent, skewering the fleeing enemy on their lances.

“Drive them back to their tents!” she cried, raising her sword high. “All those brave of heart, with me!”

With that, she set about massacring the enemy massing at the gate. Faced

with an unorthodox offensive and a succession of devious traps, the first cohort quickly crumbled.

“Now, the question is whether the rest will come to save their beleaguered allies.”

The blast of horns rose from the enemy lines. Hiro glanced at their main force to see the second cohort begin to move, coming to save the first. He turned away and strolled down the courtyard stairs.

“Bad move. You should have sounded the retreat, not sent more men in.”

As he arrived at the gate, Claudia rode up, fresh from laying waste to the enemy. Her shoulders were heaving, and the battle fervor had not quite faded from her face.

“I see the second cohort has begun to move,” she said.

“It looks that way.”

“The core lies behind them. What say you?”

Most likely, she hoped to harness their momentum to plunge straight into the heart of the army. She was strong enough that she might even succeed, but it was far too risky to attempt. Hiro estimated the enemy’s first cohort at five thousand men, but only around eight hundred had burned to death in the courtyard; even taking Claudia’s charge into account, their losses probably amounted to fewer than two thousand. Fort Veritas was simply too small. If only it had been larger, their losses would have been devastating.

“I think we need another plan,” Hiro said. “This won’t be decisive enough on its own.”

“What do you intend?”

“What’s behind the enemy’s core?”

“Their supplies, I believe. But they are well guarded.”

“It’s not time for that yet.” A faint smile spread across Hiro’s face. “Could you place archers on the battlements? About a hundred should suffice.”

“What are you going to do with that few men?”

“I’m going to capture the commander of the second cohort.”

The commander of the first cohort would have done just as well, but the man had made a lucky escape and probably retreated to the back lines by now. It would not be easy to fool prey that had fallen for a trap once, and there was no need to waste time on trying. Better to change focus to the second cohort, which was rushing in recklessly.

“You truly mean it, don’t you?” Shooting Hiro an exasperated look, Claudia summoned one of her retainers.

“Back soon.”

Hiro set out with a nonchalant wave, as though he were going for a morning walk. He passed through the ranks of heavy infantry guarding the entrance and out of the fort.

The second cohort was charging furiously toward the gate, hellbent on seizing glory. He watched them come.

“Archers, loose arrows.”

His voice was nigh on a whisper, easily snatched away by the clamor of the battlefield. But it carried even so, reaching their ears unfailingly through the storm of clashing swords. Without a moment’s hesitation, the nearby archers dutifully raised their bows skyward and let loose. The first barrage was a warning, taken up by the archers lined up on the battlements. Gaps appeared in the enemy ranks as their momentum slowed.

Hiro took another step forward and patted his neck provocatively. “Well? What are you waiting around for? The commander’s right here. Come and get him.”

The enemy’s front line hesitated for a second, taken aback by this strange masked man’s appearance on the battlefield. A handful of eyes filled with outrage as they registered his noble attire.

“It’s their leader! Cut him down! Leave the rest, just take his head!”

They drew steel and charged ahead, shields raised to fend off arrows from above. The imperial heavies moved forward to shield Hiro. Blades clashed and

metal rang, showering the field with countless sparks. Armor caved in, blood sprayed, brain matter arced through the air. Battle cries drowned out screams, only to be stifled in turn by raw fury.

Seeing the fighting begin, the rest of the enemy cavalry charged, refusing to be left behind. That was a mistake. Their ranks all but collapsed in the confusion.

“Now, let’s find that commander.” With a thin smile, Hiro drew his black blade. “Out of my way.”

Every swing cut another man down as he made his way forward. He threaded his way through the gaps in the enemy lines, light-footed, pressing constantly ahead. A great horde of soldiers swarmed toward him, but their efforts were in vain. Their spears failed to hit their mark, their battle axes clove the ground, their blades slashed empty air, and a mountain of corpses rose in Hiro’s wake. The display of inhuman swordwork left the enemy stunned. Even as the blood flowed beneath his feet, it was as though he were doing nothing but striding forward.

“Terror breeds hesitation,” he said to the oncoming enemy. “Fury breeds stagnation, sorrow breeds stasis, and elation will weigh you down.”

He drove his sword through a soldier’s throat, then spun as he wrenched it free, lopping off the heads of two more. Crimson arced high as his white mantle fluttered through the air, bearing not a single bloodstain. He unveiled feat upon feat of astounding skill, breaking the enemy’s spirits, pushing them to give in.

“Fear, dread, anger, sadness... You should choose one emotion to take to the battlefield.”

“Gah!”

A helmet crumpled beneath the hilt of his black blade. He stepped callously over the body.

“Never hesitate. The battlefield is no place to let your mind wander. Keep your edge sharp and ready to cut down your foe.” His cold warning carried unmistakable fury, promising death to his enemies. “Now taste despair.”

He surged forward, a dancing storm of blood and cutting steel, never

stopping, dispensing death and then streaking across the battlefield in search of new prey. After seeing the carnage he wreaked, not a soul could summon the courage to stop him. The pressure of his presence was something that mortal men could neither resist nor endure.

In time, the enemy's momentum ebbed—little surprise, when they were forbidden from retreating yet unable to advance. And in such circumstances, the role of breaking the deadlock fell to the commander.

“What are you doing?! Press the attack, you louts! Their gates are open! Would you let them mock us?!”

The voice was a little too unseemly to be stirring, lacking in intensity and not quite noble enough to foster courage. It issued from a man clad in extravagant armor, holding a jewel-encrusted sword high. Judging from his well-groomed steed, it was clear that he was the commander of the second cohort.

Hiro turned, a cold smile spreading across his face. “There you are.”

Terror had settled over the enemy's vanguard. It was all they could do to raise trembling blades in his direction. He sprinted across the battlefield, gently carving the heads from anyone foolish enough to stand in his way. Only one thing mattered: the bellowing figure of the commander.

The man saw Hiro coming, and his lips pulled back in glee. “You may call me —”

“Don't bother. I already hold your fate in my hands.”

The nearby bodyguards sprang to defend their master. Hiro planted his foot in the dirt and leaped high, taking two heads over the course of his arc through the air. Alighting on the ground, he picked up a discarded sword and sliced off an astonished soldier's arm before lopping the heads off the men hastening to attack him with a single mighty swing. The commander had lost his guards in the span of a moment. As he looked about in a panic, Hiro's fist caught him squarely in the face.

“Oomph!”

The man fell to the ground like a sack of potatoes, knocked clean unconscious. Hiro picked him up by the collar and looked around threateningly

at the massing Six Kingdoms soldiers. He gave a conspicuous yawn. "Try it."

He made no move to defend himself and looked so tired that a stray arrow or spear thrust or sword stroke would tear through his limbs like paper. But the enemy made no move. Pressure emanated from his slender body like a gale, and the glint of the golden eye behind his mask radiated an indescribable authority.

"I'm taking your commander hostage," he declared. "Do any of you object?"

Unsurprisingly, nobody stepped aside to let him go. Such a mocking request would bruise any warrior's pride. The soldiers' eyes burned bright with the will to fight, regardless of the strength of their opponent.

"Give back Lord Wake!" someone cried. The shout rallied their spirits; they shed their fear and charged.

Hiro could have retreated to the fort with Lord Wake as his hostage, but he wanted to acknowledge the soldiers' bravery. They had refused to flee or abandon their commander, even if it meant death, and that deserved recognition.

"I'll show you the true meaning of despair."

He lifted his fingers to his mask and a gust of wind blew, setting his white mantle fluttering. The shadows on the ground began to dance. Grotesque noises rang in his ears. Screams tore skyward. Howls rose from men on the brink of death, but faced with his strength, their cries faded away as vainly as the flames of their lives. None could stop his advance. To stand in his way was futile. Any who tried were exterminated by overwhelming might, tantamount to divine judgment. He walked, and the way cleared.

By the time Hiro reached the gates of the fort, the commander in his grasp was splattered with gore from head to toe. However, not a speck of dust besmirched Hiro's white mantle, and not a drop of blood had touched the unsettling mask upon his face. The Lebering soldiers greeted him with mouths agape.

Six Kingdoms troops followed him in, seeking to reclaim their commander, although their faces were stiff with terror and they looked ready to weep. Sadly,

their desperate hopes would come to nothing. A rain of arrows fell on them from the battlements, picking them off one by one.

Hiro ordered the Lebering soldiers to fall back and raised his sword to the standard bearer. With a metallic grating, the gate slammed closed. A fierce gust of wind blew through the courtyard. The remaining enemy soldiers stared dumbfounded at the gate, slowly turning pale. With the only exit closed behind them, they were trapped.

“Take them prisoner,” Hiro commanded. “If they fight back, you’re free to kill them.”

The Lebering troops set about restraining the captives. There was no resistance. When Hiro looked back over his shoulder, they had already laid down their weapons and fallen to their knees. He handed the commander off to one of his allies and approached Claudia, who was sipping nonchalantly from a cup of tea in the shade of the trees.

“I’m impressed you can drink tea at a time like this.”

“Would you care for some?”

The courtyard was strewn with the remains of both friends and foes—charred corpses, bodies with arrow-pierced skulls, dismembered limbs, scattered viscera. A flicker of delight passed over Claudia’s face as she smiled daintily amid the carnage. She breathed in the aroma of the tea with evident relish, complaining only that it smelled a little burnt. Either she was suppressing her disgust, or her stomach was so strong that she did not care. The former would at least have been understandable, but if it was the latter, her heart was surely lacking some essential piece.

“Maybe I’ll take you up on that.” Hiro took a seat nearby. “All that running around has made my throat dry.”

She set about pouring him a cup. “What do you intend to do next?”

Hiro made a noise. “I’m still thinking about it.”

The enemy’s future assaults would be less sophisticated. Their morale would suffer dramatically for having fallen into his trap. The commander would almost certainly withdraw for a while in order to rally their spirits.

“Then I shall look forward to seeing what you devise.”

As Claudia poured the tea into a silver goblet—presumably to demonstrate that it was not poisoned—a messenger rode up to her.

“Six Kingdoms has begun to withdraw, Your Majesty,” the man announced.

“So, they’re giving up...and with so much time left in the day too.”

The sun was still high in the sky. All across the fort, soldiers of Lebering raised victory cries. It was hard to blame them—repelling twenty thousand with one was a feat worthy of celebration. In a broader sense, however, they were still surrounded on all sides and cornered like a rat in a trap. The gap in numbers might have narrowed, but the enemy had fifteen thousand men.

“And so we return to square one, although I regret that I must be the bearer of bad news.” Claudia expelled a regretful sigh as she handed Hiro the goblet. “Our stocks of both food and men are dwindling. Shall I call upon the reserves?”

They had won the engagement, but with little provisions stockpiled, it would not be possible to survive a siege. More to the point, there was a limit to how long men could fight on morale alone. They had begun the day with a thousand soldiers and—pending an account of the number of wounded—may have ended it with far less. The pace would not last for the battle tomorrow, or the day after that.

“No food, no men, only high spirits...” Hiro sipped pensively at his tea. Behind the rising steam, his left eye glinted sorrowfully. “There’s nothing for it. We’ll finish this tonight.”

The Six Kingdoms troops had been led around by the nose by a thousand men before being forced to beat a retreat. Their morale would be plummeting, and their general would inevitably bear the brunt of it. As discontent built with a commander who had fallen for the enemy’s tricks, the officers would take out their frustrations on the troops, blaming them for failing to take the fort despite their overwhelming advantage. Their abuse would quickly bring about rupture and discord. Under such circumstances, an army of any size would descend into a mindless rabble...but they were not there yet. Hiro had to sever the thin thread that held them together, and to do that, he had to break their spirits.

“Once night falls, we’ll release the prisoners.” He surveyed the courtyard, where the stench of blood and death was settling. At last, his golden eye came to rest on the Six Kingdoms soldiers seated by the wall. “Until then, keep them blindfolded. And execute perhaps two dozen, if you could.” His tongue slipped out to moisten his lips like a serpent lurking in darkness. Even as he gave the brutal order, his voice was fierce and bold.

Claudia did not so much as blink to see him so, but she did regard him with an unsettling gaze. After a while, she closed her eyes and struck a thoughtful pose, undisguised delight playing on her lips.

“All shall be as you wish, my lord.”

* * * * *

“What a pitiful showing.”

Fury erupted with a crash. The desk shook beneath the old general’s fist. Nobody said a word. They waited in silence for his anger to pass.

“One thousand cavalry dead. Two thousand infantry dead. Four thousand out of commission, including wounded. Grievous losses against a force that size, I’m sure you can agree. We have twenty thousand men, and this is the best we can do.”

“They appear to have a capable strategist in their midst, sir. Once morning comes, surely we can march on the fort with clear heads. I daresay the men will look to the next battle with redoubled vigilance.”

After stumbling repeatedly into the enemy’s traps, General Macrill was furious. His aides hastened to calm him with platitudes, their faces taut with desperation, but none of them dared to look him in the eye. They spoke as though their lips had been greased.

“We came across some old reports, sir. It seems Fort Veritas was formerly occupied by our forces. We gave it up around the time of the battle with Fourth Prince Hiro—too quickly to destroy the place, it seems, but the reports say that we took all the food from the storehouses. The enemy cannot withstand a protracted engagement. So long as we are methodical about our assault, our victory is assured.”

“Do you truly think that capturing one run-down old fort will absolve this disgrace?” Macrill spat.

Far from becoming more vigilant, most of the troops were so despondent that they could hardly fight. Besides, dragging the battle into a protracted siege could quickly turn against them if imperial reinforcements arrived.

“I ask again, gentlemen. Will sacking this place restore our honor?”

Nobody dared reply. They knew it would not. They would all be reprimanded for this failure. If they were unlucky, their heads would roll.

“Then all that matters is bringing this matter to a close. We must finish what we’ve started.”

Victory was a necessity. Defeat would earn them all a thousand deaths.

Three options now lay before General Macrill: to stage a night raid; to attack more methodically the next day; or to return to the main force and await punishment. Another failure was not an option. If he attacked the following day but could not break the fort, time would grow short; the forces of the empire were drawing closer by the hour. An unsuccessful night raid, meanwhile, would not only fail to regain his honor, it might cause responsibility to fall on Luka. While he cared little for his own life, he had no desire to see her executed. To retreat empty-handed would at least ensure her safety.

“Tell me your thoughts, gentlemen. What would you have me do?”

As a sullen atmosphere settled over the tent, the entrance suddenly flew open and a sentry entered. The aides’ despondent gazes converged on him.

“A moment, if you would, sir.” The sentry approached General Macrill, clearly intimidated. “It appears that the enemy has freed their captives. They have just returned.”

Macrill’s brows knitted at this new puzzle. Why would the enemy go to the trouble of taking prisoners only to immediately let them go? With a strange sense of foreboding, he rose from his seat.

“I’ll see them. Where are they?”

After suffering the humiliation of being captured, the men would no doubt

have preferred to receive their punishment without having to look him in the eye, but with discontent building among the troops, that was a difficult request to grant. A display of compassion on behalf of a commander could go a long way to restoring unity. Conversely, if he berated them, morale would fall and his support would crumble.

“They await outside,” the sentry said.

General Macrill set out, and his aides fell in behind him. The cold seized at them the moment they passed through the tent flap. Nearby stood a group of soldiers with their heads bowed. Exhaling misty breaths, they approached the returned captives.

“Welcome back,” Macrill said. “I’m pleased you’re all safe and sound.” He greeted them appreciatively before proceeding. “Now, if I may ask, how did you come to be released? Why did the enemy set you free?”

The question was addressed to the man at the head of the group: Commander Wake of the second cohort. He seemed to have received medical attention—he wore a bandage around his head and carried his arm in a sling. The men behind him were in a similarly pitiful state. None of them had escaped the battle unscathed.

“I don’t know, sir,” Wake replied. His brow furrowed beneath his bloodstained bandage. “They didn’t so much as interrogate us. They simply blindfolded us and let us go. I fear I’ve no satisfactory explanation to offer you. We are just as confused as you.”

“Indeed.” General Macrill unconsciously heaved a long sigh, unable to hide his disappointment.

Sensing his commander’s frustration, Wake pressed his head to the dirt. “Forgive me, sir! I know I have failed you! I only ask that you spare my life!”

If anything, General Macrill was too astounded to be angry, but Wake—convinced that his head was on the chopping block—only continued to plead.

“As unwelcome as this advice may be, sir,” one of the aides whispered, “I believe mercy would be the wiser course. The troops are watching. I implore you to set aside your anger.”

Macrill had never had any intention of executing anyone, but looking around, he could see that a large number of soldiers had gathered. If he failed to show forgiveness, it could easily plant the seed of mistrust in their hearts.

“I’ll see that you’re fed,” he said. “After that, focus on getting yourselves back to health. You’ll be needed soon enough.”

Wake’s eyes widened. “We are not to be executed?”

“Nothing of the sort.” Macrill dropped to one knee and met his gaze. “If not for me, you wouldn’t have ended up in this sorry state in the first place.”

“You are most generous, sir! I will repay this kindness on the field, I swear it!”

Macrill looked on with a smile on his lips as Wake bowed and began spouting adulations. Once word of this spread around the camp, morale would finally begin to recover.

“That will do. Have your wounds seen to.” He held out his hand to help the man to his feet—and froze. A dumb noise slipped from his lips. “Eh?”

Blood poured from Wake’s mouth. A black sword protruded from his back, its malignant blade darker than darkness. He collapsed in a pool of his own blood.

“Run rings around the enemy until they can no longer think, then finish them in one fell swoop.”

Behind, a masked man unwound the bandages from his face. His right eye blazed golden even in the night. A shiver ran up Macrill’s spine. Every muscle in his body froze. Every nerve screamed that this man was dangerous.

The masked man cast aside his bloodstained cloak to reveal a white military uniform. “So goes the essence of strategy. The road to victory. The teachings of Mars.”

Blood sprayed as the black blade slid free from Wake’s body. Eerie shadows danced across the mask in the flickering light of the wind-stirred bonfires. Even in his pure white garb, the stranger’s presence felt so faint that he melted easily into the darkness. Perhaps he had been there from the beginning; perhaps he had only just appeared; perhaps he did not even really exist at all. Macrill shivered. There was no way to tell.

“I’ve come for your head. Time to die a warrior’s death.” The masked man raised his right hand before his eyes. His forefinger unfurled to point squarely at Macrill. “Draw steel.”

The soldiers prostrating themselves behind him jumped to their feet and drew their swords.

“Devour your enemies and offer their souls to the heavens.”

They fell upon the dumbfounded troops around them. The night rang with the sound of steel carving flesh. Before their victims could scream, before they even realized what was happening, they were stabbed through the throat, slashed, pierced, crushed, and exterminated.

Seeing their comrades cut down, a few returned to their senses and began to fight back. Just as the noise of the battle seemed poised to alert the rest of the encampment, a shuddering explosion split the night.

General Macrill spun as blinding light flared behind him. His eyes widened. “What in the blazes?”

A plume of fire blasted skyward. If he was not mistaken, that was where the supplies were stored. As the army’s provisions turned to ash in the blazing inferno, he knew that a true devil stood in their midst.

“What... What...is happening?” he spluttered, forgetting even to draw breath. His mind seized up as it tried and failed to process the situation, leaving him only with questions.

“With the first stroke, foil their footing. With the second stroke, knock them reeling. And with the third stroke, break their spirits.”

Stone crunched beneath uncaring boots. The clamor of clashing steel faded away before the enormity of the presence approaching him. A shiver wracked his body.

“You weren’t even a challenge.”

“Hah... Ha ha... Ha ha ha ha...”

His lungs fought to draw breath. A crushing pressure assailed him, as though his heart were being squeezed in a great fist. The mask looming over him

betrayed not a scrap of emotion. The white mantle fluttered in the wind, shining with dazzling hues.

“This battle is over. The curtain will fall with your death.”

The voice dripped with contempt, but strangely, General Macrill felt no indignation. Any minuscule spark of defiance guttered out in an instant.

“Save your prattle.”

Yet despite it all, he refused to yield. He had something to protect. That gave him the strength to draw his sword.

The masked man’s blade glinted dully in the firelight. A low chuckle slipped from his lips. “Very well. I acknowledge your determination.”

He made no move to defend himself. So colossal was his presence, any cut would strike him.

General Macrill steeled himself and swung with all his strength. “I dedicate this victory to Lady Luka!”

“Too slow.”

The words never reached Macrill’s ears. His head had already struck the ground. His eyes glared furiously at the sky, not even realizing that he was dead.

“I take back what I said. You weren’t a fool. You were a brave man.”

“General Macrill!” one of his aides cried. “You’ll die for this, you cur—!”

“Silence.” A furious slash sent a blast wave streaking forward, scoring a perfectly straight line into the earth. “Struggle all you like; it won’t help.”

The masked man strode forward and began slaughtering the surviving members of Macrill’s command.

“Augh!”

“Fight, you fools! Fight to the last man! Avenge General Macrill!”

Crushing their resistance was child’s play. The masked man cut them down dispassionately, breaking their hopes root and stem. The flames of an overturned bonfire leaped to the tents, and the wind carried the sparks, magnifying the spread. As chaos began to set in, voices rose above the din.

“Traitors! Traitors in our midst!”

“Beware! The bastards have turned to Lebering!”

“Our supplies have burned!”

“The imperial reinforcements have arrived...”

“Flee if you value your lives!”

Scraps of information flew every which way, accelerating the chaos as the night air rang with screams. Almost all of the officers had been gathered in the command tent; now, with the masked man’s attack, nobody was left to issue orders. The chain of command had fallen apart. Nothing was more pitiful than an army with no superiors to relay orders and no leaders to direct it. Now they would descend into confusion and suspicion, and sending a few disguised enemies into their midst would ensure that they turned on yesterday’s friends without a second thought. There was nothing so dangerous as mob mentality on the battlefield. The enemy army’s expectations of a night raid would turn against them, and their soldiers would soon fall upon each other in their disorientation.

“Human hearts are frail and all too easily consumed by fear.” The masked man withdrew his black blade from a corpse.

A unit of riders cantered up to him. “This will suffice, I trust?” asked the woman at their head. “Linger any longer and our losses will become unacceptable.”

“I suppose you’re right. Let’s head back.”

“Indeed. Let us return to the fort. I eagerly await what the morning’s light will reveal.”

He took her hand and swung himself up into the saddle. The group rode away with their heads held high as shouts rang out above the Vulpes detachment’s camp. A wretched sight unfolded in their wake. More tents caught light, burning soldiers rolled across the ground, and frightened horses ran wild. With a symphony of screams that split the night, the Vulpes encampment burned to ashes.

* * * * *

The sky stretched from horizon to horizon, with fluffy clouds drifting gracefully past. Birds soared high against the blue, wheeling between plumes of smoke as they descended in pursuit of the smell of charred meat. The battlefield was still warm, dotted with smoldering corpses and swords plunged into the earth. One wanted to avert their eyes from the grisly sight. Even from a distant vantage point, the reek of death was strong.

Hiro tore his gaze away from the burned-out encampment and turned to the woman at his side. Claudia stood with her hands on the battlements, gazing out at the battlefield. Her face betrayed no emotion.

“I suppose I should say, ‘There but for the grace of heaven go we’?”

“Maybe. But if we’d shown any mercy, that would have been us today.”

Hiro returned his attention to the pitiful sight that was the Vulpes task force’s encampment. No survivors were left, only monsters come to feast on the bodies, wild dogs fighting over viscera, and carrion birds hoping to snatch the scraps. The earth had drunk deep of lifeblood the previous night, and the perhaps ten thousand men who had escaped the slaughter had chosen to flee in disgrace. Now, only corpses remained.

“Consider me impressed,” Claudia said. “My subordinates will have no choice but to acknowledge you now.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” he answered. “With what’s coming, we’ll need to be on good terms.”

“What now?”

“Six Kingdoms’ forces are still causing chaos across the empire. I’d like to thin their numbers before we join up with the imperial army.”

Claudia wasted no time beating about the bush. “Only six hundred men remain in this fort, I must remind you. Two thousand six hundred, including our reserves. I would prefer to avoid any further losses.”

Hiro smiled wryly. “I know. In that case, I’ll just give them the runaround while we wait for the empire.”

“If this is to be believed, they ought to arrive in a few days’ time.” Claudia held out a letter. The envelope bore the seal of the sixth princess.

“So Liz is coming at last...” Hiro touched his mask as though adjusting its position. “I suppose I’ll have to change my name.”

He was hardly honor-bound to tell the truth and reveal his identity. Until his plans came to fruition, he would have to play the part of a false Lord. The time had come to cast aside his new name and reassume his old one.

“Would you call me Surtr from now on?”

Claudia shivered as a thrill ran through her body. She turned to look at him, her face radiating equal parts admiration and ambition. Her lips formed a smile as though she could not contain her delight.

“As you wish, my lord. Our dear, sweet monarch.” A wicked light burned in her eyes as she lowered her head in a retainer’s bow. “All will be as you will it.”

Once, there had been a lord of deepest black, unrivaled in his or any age. More resplendent than the sun in his carnage, as divine as any deity. More resplendent than the moon in his compassion, as dazzling as any demon.

The devourer of all the world’s darkness, an all-consuming midnight sun.

Surtr, the Black-Winged Lord.

Chapter 4: Those Who Cling to Hope

The seventeenth day of the third month of Imperial Year 1024

The army departed Beyrouth, its path illuminated by the rays of the sun. The serpent of Anguis fluttered on its banners. Thirty thousand strong, the host made for Faerzen along the western road, with the commander's carriage trundling along near the middle of the pack. Lucia sat inside, staring out of the window with a disgruntled expression. Her vice-commander, Seleucus, was opposite, as pointedly unruffled as ever.

"You seem in poor spirits, Your Majesty," he said.

"Why shouldn't I be? I never knew we had so many fools among us."

It was patently obvious that there were no more victories to be won in the western territories, and yet the majority of the army had thrown in their lot with Luka. Human greed had worked against her this time. Buoyed up by their defeat of Mars's descendant and thinking of little else, a great number of officers had grown willfully blind and misjudged their own capabilities.

"It's to be expected, perhaps, looking purely at our record."

Lucia snorted. "I pity whatever poor souls must serve under those imbeciles."

When word had arrived that the Grantzian Empire's final tally came to one hundred and thirty thousand men, the other kingdoms' officers had rejoiced to hear that they had the superior numbers. They had overestimated themselves, blind to the truth that they had just lost forty thousand men to a much smaller force. As far as Lucia was concerned, her outrage was well justified. It seemed she was the only one who understood the situation.

"Truly, the War God is worth a hundred thousand men," she sighed sourly.

"'Unrivaled on earth with one thousand, unrivaled in heaven with ten, the War God's machinations rule the world entire,' I believe the words go. One cannot blame them for letting it go to their heads."

Lucia sniffed. “Quite the memory you have.”

After defeating the descendant of such a prolific legend, the Six Kingdoms officers had convinced themselves that the imperial forces would be no obstacle. Knowing the truth of his escape, however, Lucia saw the parade of fools for what it was.

“If only Luka were still in her right mind,” she sighed. “We could have retreated without incident.”

She had anticipated that Luka would be shattered by Igel’s death, but the results had proven far worse than expected—in more than one sense. Her original plan to insert herself in Igel’s place and manipulate Luka into doing her bidding was out of the question now.

“Nothing ever goes as planned, it seems...”

“That is only to be expected,” Seleucus replied. “It is the Grantzian Empire we face, after all.” He was right; winning a string of victories against the longtime conqueror of Soleil would inflate anyone’s ego. “Besides, the heirs to the throne are dropping like flies. The empire is weakening. Everybody can sense it.”

“It has lost but four royals. We are not at so great an advantage as you might think.”

The central and western territories might have collapsed, but the rest still stood firm. They must, otherwise the empire would not have been able to assemble so many troops. It was clear as day that the war was poised to drag out. The empire had held against Six Kingdoms’ strongest blow; at that point, it would have been best to withdraw and let it rot. A common enemy held it together for now, but deep down, each of its factions schemed to undermine the others. The passage of time would have seen it collapse without any need for foolhardy assaults.

“We have mistaken the turning point, ’tis true...”

If Six Kingdoms committed to its offensive any further, it would no longer be able to withdraw. The wise move would have been to withdraw to Faerzen and regroup. Once the empire again turned inward and became embroiled in power struggles, it would have been all too easy to find willing collaborators. Human

greed was bottomless, and it always presented opportunities. They should have watched and waited. That had been the surest path to victory.

“No empire was built in a day. All must follow the proper order. There were many paths we might have taken.”

If their preparations proved insufficient, they could return to the drawing board and think of something else. Dwelling on might-have-beens would not help her kingdom prosper. If anything, it would drive it to ruin.

“Fritter away our soldiers’ lives now and all will be for naught.”

“Then what of Vendetta, Your Majesty? I confess, I fail to see the need to give them to Lady Luka.”

Lucia snorted. “Would you hold a rabid dog by the leash? They were never long for my command.”

Against the empire, the unit of bloodthirsty avengers were a force to be reckoned with, but in battle against the other kingdoms, their indiscriminate madness was a factor that could not be ignored.

“Perhaps it would have been prudent to dispose of them earlier,” Seleucus conceded, “but might they not have been useful in future battles?”

“So long as their madness lasts. But after it is stripped from them, they will be useless even as beasts.”

Seleucus cocked his head in confusion. “‘Stripped from them,’ Your Majesty?”

“Never mind. ’Twould be too bothersome to explain.” Lucia returned to looking out of the window. “I shall set my sights on the next battle. Naught remains for me in the empire.”

“Do you mean Faerzen, Your Majesty?”

“Indeed. Now that I have slain the War God’s scion, I shall stake my claim while the other kingdoms are fixated on the empire.”

“I only hope *she* does not interfere.”

“Nameless? Fear not. She is far too preoccupied with training her new pet. I do not expect she shall emerge until she is done.” Lucia pressed her iron fan

smugly to her forehead. Her expression abruptly changed. "Hm?"

Shouts issued from outside, and the carriage ground to a halt.

"What now?"

This was no squabble between soldiers. The voices were too panicked for that, but there were so many that they blended together, making it difficult to determine any details.

"I will see what is happening, Your Majesty."

Seleucus made to stand up, but Lucia stopped him with a hand. She strained her ears and listened harder.

"We're under attack! We're under attack!" came a distant cry. "They're on the right flank!"

"Oho?" Despite the emergency, Lucia's eyes narrowed with fascination. The first thought that crossed her mind was from whom the attack might come. The second was the possibility of bandits or monsters, but she dismissed that with a shake of her head.

"Your Majesty, we ought...to..."

Seleucus slumped against the wall, out cold. Lucia did not so much as blink as she looked to his side.

"My, my. What remarkable composure."

The mirthful voice sounded out of place in the rapidly cooling air. Next to the unconscious Seleucus sat a hooded figure.

"Nameless. How long has it been?"

The mouth beneath the hood curled into an uncomfortably wide smile. "Too long indeed. How have you been keeping?"

"'Tis rather rude to barge into another woman's carriage. How long have you been there?"

"Why, from the start, of course."

Lucia moved to stand, but a staff appeared from nowhere to push her back into her seat.

“No moving, if you please. I’m quite aware that your Mandala has me at a disadvantage.”

Lucia settled back down, gesturing to the staff with her fan as it hovered in front of her chin. “What is this about, Nameless? Do you mean to bare steel against Anguis?”

“Oh, my. Nothing so forward. No, I have a deal in mind. I wish to trade for Fourth Prince Hiro’s remains.”

Lucia arched an eyebrow. “A deal?”

“Surely you can guess. Orcus, my dear. They will do almost anything for the corpse. We go back quite a way, and they have been awfully accommodating to me in the past, so I could hardly turn them down. Quite the dilemma, don’t you think?”

“If the High King were to learn of your ties to those cutthroats, your head would—”

Nameless silenced her with an accusing finger. “I assure you, we both stand to gain.” She raised the finger and wagged it. “In exchange, I will tell no one that you let your prey escape.”

“Oho.” Lucia’s eyes narrowed angrily. The fingers curled around her fan began to tremble with rage.

Nameless’s shoulders shook with a mirthful chuckle. “Is it truly so strange that I would know?” Her amusement only grew as Lucia remained silent. “It is no bluff, I assure you. I have had my eye on you from the start—although, knowing the gulf between your strength and his, I could have seen the truth blind.”

Lucia bristled, sensing that she was being mocked. She began to seethe with murderous fury. The temperature in the carriage plummeted, a barrel of gunpowder waiting for a spark.

“And in exchange, I would allow you to steal the fourth prince’s remains?”

“Not a bad deal, don’t you think? Just consider—if anyone thinks to inspect them, your deception will come to light. Would it not be convenient to have an explanation for their absence? Besides, you still have the real arm, do you not?”

Presenting that to the High King will only strengthen your position.”

“And why would you aid my lie when you know the truth?”

“Once our present arrangement concludes, I will have no more need of Orcus. I will supply them with a false body, receive what I want in return, and then we will part ways. I see no reason for them to know the truth, do you?”

“Orcus will not look kindly upon your reneging on a deal. Have you a death wish?”

Nameless giggled. “You will be disappointed to learn that I have no such desire. But no, I do not fear assassins. My new guard dog will protect me well enough.”

The mocking voice grated on Lucia’s nerves like sandpaper. She had half a mind to cut Nameless’s head off there and then, but in a confined space with blades pointed at one another’s hearts, she would not escape unscathed herself. As galling as it was, she gritted her teeth and bit back her outrage.

“What is it that you want? Is leverage your game? Do you hope to keep me from the throne?”

“I act only as our Lord wills. Fear not, I have no interest in a throne as paltry as the High King’s.” As suddenly as she had appeared, Nameless melted into thin air and vanished.

Lucia was far less surprised than she was furious. She broke into cold laughter. “The High King’s throne, ‘paltry’?”

She had sacrificed much in pursuit of that throne, climbing high on the backs of others. To be told that it was insignificant was not an insult to be taken lightly.

“I shall get the better of you yet. Someday, you shall eat those words, spoon and all.”

As she reaffirmed her resolve, someone appeared outside the window. She bristled.

“Your Majesty!” came a cry. “The carriage carrying Fourth Prince Hiro’s remains has been attacked!”

She relaxed. It was an ally. “And?”

“The body has been taken! We must dispatch a unit to pursue—”

“Enough. Let it be.”

“Your Majesty?”

“I have no wish to send my men to their deaths.”

If Orcus truly was responsible, ordinary cavalry would stand no chance. Even if they did give chase, the chance of recovering the body would be vanishingly small, and if Nameless was among the enemy, they would only be wasting men. Orcus interested her, now that they had begun to move in earnest, but Nameless’s objectives did too. Still, her games were only one concern among many more...

“A mountain of troubles indeed. Naught to do but squash them one by one.”

* * * * *

The eighteenth day of the third month of Imperial Year 1024

Maruk, in the west of the central territories

The one-hundred-and-thirty-thousand-strong imperial army, led by Liz, had made camp on the westward road. In the center of the encampment, a cluster of lion banners indicated where an enormous command tent had been erected. A variety of extravagant tents crowded around it, vying with one another for visibility.

Liz had stopped here because Six Kingdoms had recalled its full strength and entrenched itself on the Laryx Plains. The grasslands were the site of Hiro’s rumored execution and the remnants of battle lingered still, the ground strewn with uncollected corpses. By odd coincidence, the imperial camp was located on the very same spot where Hiro had set up base before his fateful battle, and Liz and Aura almost felt as though they were tracing his footsteps as they walked between the tents.

“I hear our scouts are back from the Laryx Plains,” Liz said.

She saw a soldier bow politely and noticed the anxious look on his face. Coming face-to-face with Liz probably accounted for some of the man’s

nervousness, but the looming battle no doubt played a greater part.

Liz returned the bow and looked around. The nearby troops wore similarly tense looks as they attended to their duties. The camp was in a state of stress. It didn't seem to be weighing on their spirits, however; if anything, it represented a healthy level of vigilance. No matter what unexpected events arose, they would be ready for anything.

Liz returned her attention to Aura and her report.

"Their numbers are down," Aura said. "From one hundred and sixty thousand to one hundred thousand."

Lucia du Anguis's retreat had played a part, but the battle with Hiro seemed to have cost them dearly in manpower, as had local resistance to their pillaging. That said, the latter activities had boosted their morale and filled their food stores to bursting.

"But they're losing cohesion," Aura continued. "It sounds like they can't control their army. They aren't just taking, they're killing compliant civilians."

Liz frowned. The report described one-sided massacres, and the lands of the western nobles who had sided with Six Kingdoms had not been exempt. When they spoke out against the atrocities, their towns were razed to the ground.

"Six Kingdoms is ruthless. The nobles who took their side have all been executed. It looks like they've decided to destroy the empire entirely."

The western nobles had probably believed that they had saved their hides by turning traitor, that Six Kingdoms would have no reason to harm them. How wrong they had been. The moment they opened their gates and let their new allies in, the slaughter began.

"It looks like some managed to drive them off, however."

Six Kingdoms' attempts had been met with failure as well as success, which had driven their numbers down to one hundred thousand. Still, the report was not all good news. Countless people had died. When Liz's thoughts turned to those who were suffering even now, her chest felt like it would burst with sadness.

“Times are going to be tough for the west,” Aura said solemnly. “For a long time.”

Liz gave a small nod as she squeezed her hand over her chest. Even after the fighting was done, the misery would continue. There would be homeless refugees, marauding bandits, wandering monsters. How much easier it would be if she could tell herself that was merely the cost of war.

“First, we have to win this battle. Then we can think about the rest.” Liz laid a consoling hand on Aura’s head. “It’ll be all right. I’ll make the west beautiful again, I promise.”

She put on the brightest voice she could. Between the grim reality and the weight of her responsibility, her smile came out stiff, but Aura nodded anyway. Considering the great many trials that were in Liz’s future, it was hard to blame her.

“I’ll do it with you,” Aura said. She clenched her fist and looked up at the sky. A pure and beautiful devotion shone in her eyes, one that would fight to overcome any hardship.

“Your father’s in the west, isn’t he?” Liz paused for a moment, then continued hesitantly. “Is he safe?”

Aura nodded and pulled out a letter. “There was a siege, but they held.” She went into more detail. Hiro had written to her father in advance. Accordingly, he had chosen to ignore the enemy’s provocations and managed to survive.

Liz stopped short of expressing relief. To do so would be an insult to those who had lost their lives in the fighting. Some had died for their country, some for their families, some to save their friends. In times of turmoil, national stability came at a human cost. To suggest that life only had meaning to the living was arrogance, nothing more; nobody fell victim to war because they wanted to die.

“He must be a clever man if he raised you. We’ll have to put him to good use.”

Aura nodded. “Work him like a carthorse.”

Liz giggled. “All right, we should get to the strategy meeting. We shouldn’t

keep everyone waiting.”

“Why not? Let them wait.” Aura’s face turned surly. She didn’t even try to hide her displeasure.

Liz smiled awkwardly. She understood Aura’s reservations perfectly well. House Muzuk of the south was being belligerent in trying to assert control. Rosa would have kept them in check, but Beto’s plot had prevented her from joining the march, and the eastern nobles were easily cowed without her to lead them.

“If only my sister was around,” Liz sighed.

“Two of the great houses have collapsed,” Aura said. “House Muzuk wants their territory.”

Her reservations were well-placed, but Liz looked at her reassuringly. “I won’t let Beto have his way.”

The war with Six Kingdoms was changing the balance of power among the five great houses. House Maruk had risen to take charge of the central nobles in place of the collapsed House Krone, but now that its leader had died in battle, its support was dwindling. It had also lost a great many backers in the purges following Stovell’s rebellion.

House Münster of the west was in a similar position. After Third Prince Brutahl’s death, many of the western nobles had thrown in their lot with Six Kingdoms, which had proven a poisoned chalice. That left House Scharm of the north, whose head was a puppet of Second Prince Selene and rarely emerged onto the political stage. It seemed to have no ambitions outside of the north, which had failed to win much support from its nobility.

The result was that House Muzuk was the most authoritative great house taking part in the campaign, and Beto was already putting pieces in place to expand his influence. Strategy meetings had a tendency to center around House Muzuk’s proposals.

“This is my fault. If I had done better...”

It was rare to see Aura question herself. Liz tried to think of something that would allay her doubts. But at that moment...

“What?” Liz’s hand went instantly to Lævateinn’s hilt.

“Hm?” Aura spun to face the same direction. She had noticed it as well. From the distance came the sound of raised voices, shouts with an edge of panic.

“Are the soldiers fighting? We’d better take a look.”

They hurried toward the source of the noise. Soldiers were always nervous on the eve of battle, and squabbles were apt to break out over the smallest things. In an effort to prevent discord, Liz had ordered the officers to give their men drink and try to put them at ease, but things rarely went so easily with fighting men.

“Clear the way! What is going on here?!”

Liz’s voice rang out loud and clear over the din. The soldiers froze as they recognized their commander and stepped aside. Soon the way was clear, but nobody offered any explanations.

The soldiers parted around her like water as she pressed forward to see what was causing the disturbance. At last, she came to a patch of open ground and gasped. A great beast was lying in a pool of blood, covered in wounds. All around it were soldiers, hurriedly tending to it.

“We need more bandages!” one man cried as he tried to staunch the blood with a cloth. “Blast it, where are the medics? Who called for them?!”

“I’ll get some!” another responded. “Hey! You! The last man’s gone walkabout! Go and fetch a medic!”

Another soldier rushed past Liz, so harried that he didn’t even notice she was there. She approached in a daze and crouched beside the great beast.

“Well done,” she whispered. “You made it back.” Its hide was slick to the touch. Warm blood coated her hands.

A nearby soldier rounded on her furiously. “Hey! You! What do you think you’re—” His eyes went wide as he realized who he was addressing. “Pardon me, Your Highness! I said nothing!” He averted his gaze and went silently back to work.

“It must have been hard.” Tears welled up as she took in the arrows

protruding from its hard scales, and she hastily fought them back. A commander could not cry in front of her soldiers. Through her bleary vision, she saw Aura crouch by the beast's side and dab at an arrow wound with a piece of cloth.

"It's his, isn't it?" Aura asked.

"That's right. His swiftdrake. Just look at the state she's in..."

Swiftdrakes were temperamental beasts known for being distrustful of humans, so Liz was astonished when this one had taken so easily to Hiro. While the swiftdrake had never let Liz ride on her back, she had been affectionate enough. To see her now, limp and lifeless, there was almost nothing left of the beast that had so frequently run around Berg Fortress with Cerberus.

"My medical training was for men, not beasts! Do I look like I treat swiftdrakes for a living? You ask me to do the impossible!"

"It's Lord Hiro's steed! We can't just leave it to die! Please, you have to do something!"

The medic was approaching.

"I'll do my best," Liz whispered as she got to her feet. She couldn't stay by the beast's side with the strategy meeting at hand. There was work to be done. If she dragged her feet now, everything she had fought for would go to waste. "Aura?"

Aura froze, her hand on the swiftdrake's saddle.

"Is something wrong?" Liz made to lay a hand on her shoulder, but Aura shot to her feet. Liz blinked. It was rare to see her move so quickly.

"Let's go." Flustered, Aura struggled to maintain her usual composure. "The meeting's about to start."

Liz cocked her head, but before she could ask any questions, the petite girl turned around and began walking away.

"Hey! Wait! What's going on?"

"Swiftdrakes are resilient. It'll heal in no time. Don't let yourself get distracted. You need to focus on defeating Six Kingdoms."

With an unusually verbose speech, Aura stalked away. Bewildered by her response, Liz didn't notice the letter that vanished up her sleeve.

* * * * *

A figure looked on from a distance as the pair departed. Had she not been so distracted, Liz might have taken note of him, or at least his strange garb. He was dressed in white from head to toe, with a mask that covered his face. He turned away from the two figures and approached the soldiers who were tending to the swiftdrake.

"Would you let me through?"

His simple act of speech was enough to make the air grow heavy. The pressure grew until the soldiers could do nothing but yield the way. Their faces tightened as he passed, terrified—or perhaps awed—by his dreadful presence. Nobody thought to ask him his name; they were too stunned to speak. And as nobody dared to stop him, he soon made his way to the swiftdrake.

"Thank goodness," he said, kneeling. "I'm truly glad you're safe." His shoulders shook as he stroked her head.

"Hey! Hey, don't touch it! You'll open its wounds—" The medic steeled himself enough to speak, only to fall silent again at the sight before him. His eyes widened. "It can't be..."

A faint light engulfed the swiftdrake. Slowly but surely, its wounds began to heal. It was a sublime mystery, a defiance of common sense, a miracle brought to heel. The soldiers looked on from a distance, as astounded as the medic by the mysterious power.

The masked man didn't even spare them a glance. "Better?" he whispered. Seeing that the swiftdrake's saddle had been unclasped, he rose to his feet. "Would you leave her in my care?"

"I-I'm sorry, but we can't," the medic stammered. "The beast is Fourth Prince Hiro's steed—"

The masked man grasped the medic's shoulder with his left hand and splayed his right hand in front of the man's face. "I'm afraid I can't take no for an answer."

Golden light poured forth from within the mask. The soldiers reached for their swords, sensing something amiss. Suddenly, the masked man looked up at the sky in exasperation. A long pole fell from the heavens to drive deep into the earth, gouging out a large crater.

“How very unlike you. No matter your delight at finding the beast safe, that is no excuse for indulging in needless conflict.” A female voice, oddly bright, cut through the tension as a plume of dust rose skyward. The crowd of soldiers parted to reveal an amethyst-haired woman.

“She’s my kin, Claudia. I have a duty to keep her safe.”

“Indeed. Which is why I took the liberty of providing you with evidence to support your case.”

“So that’s what that was.”

“Whatever did you think it was?”

“An opening salvo.”

The soldiers froze in astonishment as the pair began to bicker. Not because of them—it was the pole driven into the ground that captured their attention. It unfurled, revealing itself to be a battle standard: a set of scales on a white field, the livery of Soleil’s smallest nation, with influence to match the greatest. Nobody alive had seen the flag fly before. The kingdom had always maintained a neutral position, cultivating a culture that withdrew from worldly concerns, staunchly refusing to take any kind of place on the political stage. To see it in the flesh would leave anybody lost for words.

“My. You all look terribly surprised.” Seeing the soldiers’ stares, the woman named Claudia brought a hand to her mouth and giggled. “Allow me to introduce you...”

* * * * *

Meanwhile, in the imperial command tent, a strategy meeting was poised to commence. The atmosphere was hardly jovial, but neither was it stifling—the appropriate gravity for the proceedings. The nobles looked at the woman at the head of the table with expectant eyes.

The voice of the presiding noble broke the silence. “Her Majesty Queen Claudia of Lebering has reportedly arrived on the field.”

The air in the tent tangibly changed. Claudia’s name had reached the imperial encampment well in advance of her coming. Through the western refugees, word had trickled down of her rescuing fleeing civilians from bandits, liberating towns besieged by Six Kingdoms, and even a thrilling episode where she drove back a twenty-thousand-strong army with a meager thousand men. Someday bards would sing of her deeds, and starry-eyed commonfolk would listen in taverns as they supped ale and watched dancing girls.

“Please convey my gratitude,” Liz said. “If not for her, the west would be in a far worse state.”

Claudia’s deeds merited more than words, of course, but tangible gestures would have to wait until more peaceful days. Until then, it was Liz’s duty as the commander of the imperial army to offer what she could.

“No doubt she will be pleased to hear that,” a noble remarked. “It’s heartening to know our neighbor will ride to our aid in a crisis.”

“True. Although I hear that Lebering’s army has suffered heavy losses.”

Saving the commonfolk had come at a cost. Many soldiers of Lebering had died in the fighting. Liz would have to bear in mind compensation for their families when the time came to issue rewards.

“As far as I’m concerned, I welcome them to our camp with open arms.”

Nobody objected to that. No matter the nobles’ true opinions of Claudia, she had been first on the scene and rescued a great many commonfolk. Gratitude was one thing, but voicing complaints or jealousy was out of the question.

“Anyway, we should get started.” The tent audibly quieted. Liz cast a satisfied glance around the table before turning to the presiding noble. “Could you start by reviewing how things stand?”

“Of course, Your Highness.” The man placed a pawn on the map laid out on the table. “We are presently encamped here, in the province of Maruk, appropriating supplies from the local nobles in advance of the decisive battle. We have dispatched reconnaissance units across a wide area to watch Six

Kingdoms' movements. It appears they are currently encamped on the Laryx Plains."

Liz checked the information against the report in her hand and then looked up at the head of House Muzuk. "Lord Beto, I believe I left you in charge of reconnaissance. Could you tell us more?"

"As you command, Your Highness." Beto stood up and issued a bow, radiating smug confidence. "As my esteemed friend has explained, Six Kingdoms has taken up position on the Laryx Plains. Our scouts put their numbers at one hundred thousand men—quite the decline from their original tally, as you have no doubt noticed, but I believe the odds that more troops are lying in ambush are slim. In light of the news of a disagreement between their commanders, one hundred thousand seems a believable figure to me."

"I heard about that as well. Do you know how it has affected their forces? Has it lowered their morale? Affected their will to fight?"

"Their pillaging has kept morale high, and they appear just as thirsty for battle as ever." Beto's tone conveyed well enough that the enemy was formidable, but there was something else in his face—a flicker of reservation, as if he was mulling over whether to speak. Clearly, there was something more.

"Is something the matter, Lord Beto?"

"It's nothing, Your Highness. Only..." He trailed off as his words died in his throat.

Liz's voice grew steely. "If it may affect our performance in battle, I want to hear it. No matter how good or bad it may be."

Beto drew a deep breath and looked back at his report. "It appears they are calling Fourth Prince Hiro 'the Fallen Hero' beneath his own black dragon. Our reports indicate that they have forced captured refugees to tread on his sacred standard before cutting off their heads."

The nobles froze, so still that they forgot to breathe. So appalling was the news that it silenced their thoughts. The War God's black dragon standard was sacred in the empire, even to those who opposed Hiro. Any soul born and raised on imperial soil regarded Mars of the Twelve Divines as a true deity.

Directing imperial citizens to soil his banner with their boots was inconceivably monstrous.

It was not anger that colored the nobles' faces, however, but alarm. They looked pointedly at their feet, limbs stiff and sweat pouring from their foreheads. A fearsome torrent of fury had filled the enclosed space.

A sound broke the silence—the unsettling *crunch* of something breaking. The nobles flinched. Praying that the anger would not turn their way, they looked toward the source of the noise: the crimson-haired girl at the head of the table.

Liz said nothing, but a trickle of blood ran from the corner of her mouth. She looked ready to draw her sword and charge straight into the enemy encampment, and only her fists, balled against the table, seemed to be holding her back. Her eyes were wide open and fixed on Beto, who frantically wiped cold sweat from his forehead with a cloth. Being the focus of her wrath had chilled him to the bone, even though he was not at fault. He had carved his way through fields of carnage and spun many devious plots, but even he had to break eye contact and look away.

“So that’s how they’re keeping their morale high. With acts of cowardice.”

The ploy was not honorable, but it was clever. Many of those who revered the War God would grow just as angry as Liz. Those around her, however, only grew alarmed and began to sweat. They had not thought she was capable of such violent rage. Her ordinary, mellow disposition had been a rarity in the imperial family, and many of the nobles had believed that she was more of a kitten than a lion. Now, as they watched her fury grow so intense that it seemed to warp the space around her, they learned better. Even lion cubs someday learned to roar.

“We resume our march the day after tomorrow,” she said, her voice low and dreadfully cold. “Keep our reconnaissance patrols up until we depart. We’ll annihilate the enemy on the Laryx Plains.”

Her audience could only nod. The water’s surface had been disturbed, but beneath it lay a deep and boundless sea.

Time dragged on, with nobody willing to speak a word. Silence fell over the tent. With the presiding noble having grown too fearful to speak or forgotten

his role entirely, the meeting ground to a halt. The rest of the attendees looked at him, but to no avail.

It was the silver-haired girl standing behind Liz's chair who finally broke the awkward silence. She rifled through her sleeves for something and then, with no show of hesitation, approached the princess.

"Lady Celia Estrella."

She held out a white cloth, gesturing to the blood trickling from Liz's mouth.

"Oh, right. Thank you." Finally noticing that she was bleeding, Liz frowned and dabbed the cloth to her mouth. The nobles breathed a sigh of relief as the dangerous aura emanating from her subsided.

At that moment, a loud noise erupted outside the tent.

"Please, Your Majesty, a moment! The strategy meeting is in session!"

"Is it now? Well, surely you would not keep me from taking part. I will be fighting alongside you, after all."

"Please at least wait until I get permission! I will only be a moment!"

"We hardly have the time for that, don't you agree?"

A beautiful woman cut through the clamor and strode into the silence within. Her violet eyes gleamed bewitchingly, and a sultry smile hovered on her lips. "I am Queen Claudia van Lebering," she said, taking a graceful bow. "May our alliance be a fruitful one, nobles of the Grantzian Empire."

Several nobles rose to their feet, most fearing that Claudia's insolence would anger Liz after her earlier outburst, although a few were simply outraged.

"The ruler of a northern wasteland interrupting our strategy meeting? Outrageous, I tell you!"

"Begone with you. Your contributions to the war effort have not earned you the right to be so disrespectful."

"Silence," Liz snapped.

The nobles' mouths clamped shut. She rose from her seat and offered Claudia a bow. A hush filled the tent—the leaders of empires were not supposed to

bow to the rulers of their smaller neighbors.

“Please forgive my subordinates’ rudeness. We are grateful for your assistance.” She raised her head and gave a dainty smile. “I am Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz.”

Claudia was taken aback. She seemed to have been anticipating a haughty reply that she could meet with defiance, so Liz’s meek response threw her for a loop. Still, she had won her throne with cunning and guile; she was used to thinking on her feet. She fell to one knee in a vassal’s bow.

“And please forgive my unseemly conduct.” She apologized with full grace, lowering her eyes as though ashamed of her own childishness. “May the bond of friendship between our nations grow long and fruitful.”

“Indeed. Let’s start with a clean slate, shall we?” Liz gestured for Claudia to sit.

At that moment, she caught sight of the figure behind the queen of Lebering and found herself lost for words. He was a man of strange countenance, wearing a mask that rendered his expression unreadable. His pure white garb suggested purity and nobility, but the black blade at his hip was something altogether more malevolent. Light and dark, in perfect balance—a queer appearance that left Liz speechless and the nobles slack-jawed.

“Who is that?” Liz’s eyes narrowed searchingly.

Claudia smiled. “This is the second king of Baum, His Majesty King Surtr, the Black-Winged Lord.”

“It cannot be...” The exclamation of disbelief came from Beto’s throat.

The space inside the tent seemed to converge on the man. His overbearing presence transfixed all who looked at him, as though his preeminence was naturally ordained. Golden light spilled from his right eye, while his left was darker than the abyss.

“I bear a letter from the archpriestess verifying his identity.” Claudia produced a sheet of paper covered in glowing, golden letters, a form of writing known as spirit script, which only the archpriestess could produce. “He despairs at the fate of his old ally, the Lionheart’s nation, and has ridden forth to provide what

aid he can.”



“There is a king in Baum?” Beto sounded distrustful. “I have heard of no such thing.”

Claudia’s expression did not falter. If anything, she smirked. “The truth is the truth, whether or not you have heard it.”

She handed him the archpriestess’s letter. Such an article could not have been counterfeited. Spirit script was a holy form of writing that only those beloved by the spirits could employ. Beto still looked skeptical, but he concluded his inspection with a disappointed shrug, no longer able to deny its authenticity.

“It’s spirit script, true enough. Written by Her Grace the Archpriestess’s hand...” With his will to argue drained away, he slumped back into his seat.

Throughout the interaction, Liz had not moved her eyes one inch from the masked man. At the beginning, her gaze had been suspicious, but over time, it had filled with reproach.

“I suppose he owes his black hair to the blood of the first king of Baum?” Even as she addressed Claudia, Liz’s gaze remained almost obsessively trained on the masked man.

Claudia took a half-step in front of the man, breaking her line of sight, and nodded. “Indeed, Your Highness. You are as well-read as they say.”

Liz laughed. “Very well. If you say so.” She brushed a strand of hair behind her ear, smiling softly with her eyes half-closed.

“Do you mind if we join the proceedings?” Claudia asked.

Liz gave her a nod. “Of course. I’m sure there’s a lot you could tell us about Six Kingdoms’ movements, and I’d like to hear Lord Surtr’s opinion as well. We’d welcome your attendance.”

“Then we shall humbly oblige.”

Sparks showered between the two women as they glared at one another. Aura, watching from a distance, let out a small sigh and shut her eyes.

* * * * *

The sun was slipping below the horizon, dying the sky amber. Distant embers

smoldered on the peaks of the Grausam Mountains. The imperial capital's usual hustle and bustle was beginning to thin.

The palace of Venezyne kept vigil over the comings and goings of the people below, as it had done for one thousand years. In its eastern quarter, where the nobility resided, one mansion stood out: that of House Kelheit of the five great houses.

"It's certainly grown quiet," Rosa mused. She looked around her bedchamber and smiled ruefully to herself. The room seemed terribly large now. Until recently, the mansion had been a lively place—Liz chasing after Hiro, Scáthach watching wryly from a distance, Aura shutting them out as she read her book. Down in the courtyard outside the window, there would be the zlostá and his loyal young lieutenant, or perhaps the sellsword girl who followed her around, determined to protect her mistress's life with her own. It had been fun and full, a delightful chaos that she would never forget.

"I knew it couldn't last forever, but still, a part of me dared to hope."

With a small, forlorn sigh, she leaned back into her chair and stared up at the ceiling. Cerberus snuffled at her feet.

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather be with your mistress?" she asked.

Cerberus cocked her head and yawned, but that was all. She seemed much more placid nowadays than when she had first arrived in the capital, if not completely domesticated. No doubt the servants had indulged her too much.

White wolves were native to the islands to the east, where the beastfolk who lived there had a tradition of keeping them as pets. Indeed, they were considered holy creatures that only beastfolk of royal blood were permitted to own. How Cerberus came to be in Soleil, Rosa could only guess, but she had certainly been astonished when Liz had walked in with the beast in her arms.

She smiled wistfully at the memory as she petted Cerberus's belly. "We women ought to take better care of our appearance, you know."

The proud white wolf had put on weight in recent days. Best take her on a hunt soon or she would cease to be worthy of the name.

"I'll take you hunting when I find a spare moment, shall I? I used to take Liz all

the time.”

All of a sudden, there came a noise from the door. It was too weighty to be a knock, and was accompanied by an unusual clatter besides. Rosa’s eyes turned steely. She reached to her side and picked up Lionheart.

“Is something wrong?” she called.

She had heightened the mansion’s security following Liz’s departure. Two stout men should have been keeping watch outside the door, but no reply came.

She heaved a deep sigh and steadied her breathing. A glance outside the window showed that the sun had set, and the curtain of night had fallen over the world. As the moonlight bathed the room in its silvery glow, Cerberus crouched low and growled.

“So they’ve come.”

She had expected as much, but she had hoped to be proven wrong.

“Good grief. If I really was with child, I wouldn’t dare be so reckless as to stay in the capital.”

It would have been beyond foolish to remain in the palace, especially with its defenses depleted by the war effort. She would have returned to House Kelheit’s seat in Baldickgarten and turned the place into a fortress.

“Now, let’s see which nobles have sent their cutthroats.”

The news that she was pregnant with Hiro’s child had spread like wildfire, and one of the more negative effects of the Grantzian Empire’s thousand-year history was a tendency to place importance on lineage. A child of Mars was to be welcomed, but her political opponents would not be able to celebrate unconditionally. As the next ruler of the empire, her child would command the nation’s reverence even before they were born, which would grant their mother and other relatives a great deal of power. Odds were high that somebody would try to kill her before she could wield it. That was why she had tightened security.

“I’m surprised they got this far. I put some of my best men between here and

the entrance.” Rosa had some martial skill, but only to the point of holding her own against an ordinary soldier. “They must be more skilled than I thought...”

The door gently creaked open. An ominous figure stepped into the room, clad all in black.

“Just one of you?”

He was no novice. That much was clear from the way he moved—and besides, a novice would not have been able to get this far. Rosa clutched the hilt of Lionheart and stood firm, summoning every ounce of dignity she possessed.

“I regret to inform you that I’m well prepared for uninvited guests. Please enjoy House Kelheit’s hospitality.”

She flashed a dauntless grin and snapped her fingers. Soldiers rushed into the bedchamber with swords drawn—from the corridor, from hiding places, from the door to the neighboring room.

“Seize him!” she cried. “Make him tell us who sent him.”

With a roar, the soldiers surged toward the assassin. Beneath his cowl, his mouth curved into an unsettling crescent grin.

“Ghah!”

Every strike brought certain death. The first soldier collapsed, pierced cleanly through the heart. The assassin pivoted on his right foot and skewered another before wrenching his weapon back out and slipping it through the seam of a third man’s helm. Brain matter sprayed. The blood had barely splattered across the floor before he laid open a fourth soldier from shoulder to hip, carving through armor like butter.

Rosa’s guards fell one after another to precise and lethal blows, quite literally cut down in the blink of an eye. They slumped to the ground before they could so much as grunt in pain. The gulf between their abilities and those of their would-be prey was almost unfair. It was a one-sided slaughter; before long, all of the soldiers lay sprawled in pools of their own blood. The assassin stood alone before Rosa. He had not moved from his spot since first entering the room.

“Curse you!”

Rosa whipped Lionheart from its sheath, but the assassin vanished in a blur.

“Urgh!”

An impact blasted through her abdomen. The oxygen burst from her lungs, but even as the strength faded from her arm, she gripped Lionheart tight and swung with all her might.

“Don’t...take me...lightly!”

“A futile effort.”

The assassin batted Lionheart aside and drove his fist into Rosa’s cheek, sending her flying. She crashed into the wall. As she toppled forward, he closed the distance and propped her upright, slamming his fist into her stomach.

“Agh!” Her face contorted in pain.

The assassin grasped her head, blocking her mouth.

“Mmmph!”

“Do you fear death?”

Her consciousness faded for a second as her head smacked against the wall, but another blow to her stomach woke her up again. He would not let her escape that easily.

“Go on. Breathe,” he growled. “I won’t kill you yet.”

Rosa opened her mouth to gasp for air. Immediately, the assassin grasped her neck and began to squeeze.

“I lied. No breathing.”

His incredible strength lifted her up so that her feet no longer touched the carpet. She beat with all her might at his forearms, but to no avail. Her feeble attempts were not enough to break free.

“Gaah!”

The moonlight spilling in through the window cast their shadows on the floor, one struggling violently. Rosa’s golden hair, disheveled as it was, shimmered

defiantly as it shifted. Violence did nothing to diminish its radiance.

“Nice hair,” the assassin murmured. “Soft. Pretty.”

The pressure around her neck vanished. Suddenly, she was free. She fell to her knees, coughing and hacking, and curled up, gulping down air.

The assassin seized her by the hair. She yelped.

“You take good care of it, don’t you? Very...recognizable. It’ll make a nice gift once I strip every last strand from your head!”

“You’ll never— Agh!” Rosa grunted as the stranger slammed her face into the floor—once, then again, and again. Her awareness grew dim, but her strength of will turned against her, keeping her from the mercy of unconsciousness.

“Stubborn stuff, this. It won’t come out.”

His voice was cold. It harbored no vulgar inclinations, only a quiet loathing. He hurt her as callously as he might butcher an animal carcass, striking her face, kicking her stomach, slamming her against the floor. Throughout it all, he maintained his grip on her hair, holding on as though to say he would never let go until it came loose.

“Seems like I’ll have to take the scalp too. Sorry about the broken arm.”

He planted a foot on Rosa’s slender wrist and wrenched with all his might.

“Aaaaaagh!”

Bone crunched. Rosa’s shriek echoed through the room, but still, her torment continued. The assassin’s one-sided cruelty was far from over.

“Still not enough, hm? Then I’ll take your fingers, or perhaps your nose? No, you’ve got pretty eyes. They’ll look good plucked out and— Ngh!”

Cerberus saw her chance. She leaped on the man from behind. Black and white shadows tangled together, dancing wildly in the moonlight. Rosa forced herself up on trembling feet, spitting out blood as she rose.

“If you think a common cutthroat’s going to get the best of me...!” She picked up Lionheart, fury blazing in her eyes. “A third princess doesn’t die lightly. I might no longer be a royal heir, but I still bear the blood of von Grantz.”

She swung at her tormentor, face twisted in agony, but her blade stopped inches from striking home.

“Ah, yes. Yes, indeed. And therein lies your sin.”

The assassin pried Cerberus from his back and launched her into a wall with a vicious kick, but the white wolf was undeterred. She leaped back into the fray, fangs bared.

“Out of my way, mutt.”

He caught her muzzle, seized her by the tail and smashed her into the floor. As she lay there, struggling, he followed up with a merciless fist, and then, as if that wasn't enough, a pulverizing heel.

“Ngh!”

His foot never made contact. It crashed instead into Rosa's back. She had leaped over Cerberus, covering the white wolf with her own body.

“She's family.” A fierce light burned in Rosa's eyes as she smiled back up at her tormentor. “I won't let scum like you lay a finger on her!”

The assassin began to tremble with rage, as though he was struggling to hold himself back. “Then die along with the child in your belly.”

He grasped her by the head and flung her into the wall. A grunt flew from her lips as her back struck the stone. She slid down, smacking heavily onto the floor. Still, she gritted her teeth and pressed her fist against the flagstones, struggling to rise despite the pain.

“Enough. You have nothing left. Give in. You will know the same agony soon enough.”

“Curse you...”

The assassin's hand stretched toward Rosa—and froze. That was no turn of phrase. His arm gleamed in the moonlight, suddenly sheathed in a block of ice.

“Your games end here,” a voice said.

Standing in the doorway was Scáthach du Faerzen. Her turquoise hair shone like silk even in the dark of night, and a silent will burned across the delicate

spun glass of her features. Her slender body was encased in weighty armor, a clean and proper exterior to house her savage anger.



“Forgive me, my lady. The others kept me preoccupied.” She stepped forward, radiating uninhibited fury.

“Curse you! Why are you here?!” For the first time, a note of emotion entered the assassin’s voice. His smug confidence was long gone. Now, he looked so shaken that it was hard not to feel sorry for him.

“What does it matter to you? You will not leave this room.” Scáthach launched herself forward, closing the distance in an instant. “If you think your death will be quick, you are dearly mistaken.”

The assassin scowled and made to leap back, trying to put some distance between them.

“None can escape Gáe Bolg’s chill.”

Both of the man’s legs froze solid, and a flourish of her spear parted his arm from his body.

“That’s better. We couldn’t have you resisting. I’ll do you the courtesy of staunching the bleeding, although there’s no accounting for necrosis.”

“Agh... Gaaaaaahhh!” The weeping stump froze over. The assassin fell to the ground, writhing in pain.

Scáthach brought her foot down on top of him, pinning him in place. “Now, speak. Who sent you?”

“Ghack!”

“If you expect clemency, you will be sorely disappointed. Brutes who resort to such foul methods will earn no mercy from me.”

As the assassin writhed, the hood covering his head fell away, and the moonlight streaming in through the window fell upon his bare face. Scáthach gasped. His features were horrifically scarred, as though he had been tortured. Two gaping pits yawned where his eyes should have been, and his forehead bore a scar where something had been gouged from his flesh. Most remarkable of all, however...

“Lilac skin...” Scáthach breathed. “You’re a zlosta?”

At that, the assassin stopped moving. An unsettling smile spread across his face. “Oh, Father, hear our prayer,” he intoned. “Curse the foolish with eternal torment. Oh, Father, hear our prayer. Bless your faithful with eternal rest.”

There was a beat of silence, and then blood erupted from his every orifice. He went limp, sprawling headfirst across the floor as the strength left his limbs. A bloodstain began to spread across the floorboards.

Scáthach’s eyes flew wide open in surprise. She hurriedly bent down to check if he was still breathing, but he was dead. “A suicide?” she murmured.

Rosa stepped closer. “I daresay you just saved my life, Scáthach. And you too, Cerberus.”

The white wolf sat down next to Scáthach and let Rosa scratch her head. Having gotten her bearings again, Scáthach turned to Rosa and lowered her head.

“Forgive me. My arrival was less than timely. I had not expected that they would be so skilled...”

Rosa shook her head. “I’m still in one piece, aren’t I? As far as I’m concerned, there is nothing to apologize for.” She grinned. “Hardly even a hair out of place. Mine’s rather sturdy, you know.” It was obvious that she was putting on a brave face. Her cheeks were pale, and her brow was drenched in sweat. “Orcus, hm?” She gazed at the assassin’s body as she petted Cerberus’s head.

“Do you know of these vagabonds?” Scáthach asked.

“Only the tales everyone knows. But they loathe the Grantzian royal family, there’s no question of that.” Rosa paused and shook her head. “No, perhaps it’s Mars they despise...”

They hated the War God’s bloodline to an irrational degree. The repeated blows to her stomach had been proof enough of that. She touched her abdomen and winced as agony lanced through her.

“That’s several ribs broken at least. At least he didn’t realize I was never with child or he would have killed me outright. That’s one silver lining, I suppose.”

No, that didn’t make sense. She never would have been targeted at all in that

case, which meant the assassin's goal must have been elsewhere.

"If this is what they do idly, I fear to think what the future holds."

A violent noise interrupted her musing. The corridor rang with a deafening clatter of armor.

"The guards must have noticed the disturbance, my lady. Come. Your wounds need tending to."

"You're right, of course. We can puzzle over this later."

* * * * *

Soldiers flocked to the von Kelheit mansion. Bonfires were lit by the dozen, turning the night as bright as the midday sun. A handful of figures watched from the palace walls. Denser than darkness, thinner than air, they looked on impassively as the scene unfolded.

"The mission has failed," said one, his voice half snatched away on the night wind. "To think that the Boreal Sovereign would be standing guard..."

"What now?" asked the one next to him in a similar voice. "Shall we finish the job ourselves?"

"There is no need. This was only a diversion, after all. Our true objective lies elsewhere." Chancellor Graeci let something slide from his left hand. It fell to the ground with a sickening squelch and rolled away. "We have little time. We must begin." He turned on his heel and began to walk away. "With all eyes drawn to the von Kelheit mansion, the rest of the keep will be poorly guarded. None will stop us from reaching the place we seek."

Graeci stepped forward onto the moonlit path, a host of shadows in his wake. No rain was falling, but the ground squelched like mud, laying waste to the stillness.

"Do you suppose I could tag along?" a voice asked.

A figure approached, walking toward them in the darkness. Their presence was so immense that it was obvious even in the dark of night, and their eye glinted gold.

Graeci raised a hand in greeting. "Second Prince Selene. What an unexpected

pleasure. What brings you out so late at night?”

“I should be asking you the same thing, uncle. What are you doing here?”

With an amiable grin, Selene laid his hands on the hilts of his swords. His smile radiated strength, a promise that his uncle would not pass. The two halted and stared each other down.

“May I ask why you’re keeping such suspicious company?” he pressed.

Graeci spread his arms wide. “A simple social excursion.”

Selene frowned but did not point out the obvious. He looked around at the half-dozen figures, who were now encircling him. “They don’t look very sociable to me.”

“Well, surely you cannot blame them. You haven’t introduced yourself.”

“I see. And should they have introduced themselves too?”

Moonlight spilled through the clouds, illuminating their surroundings. The ground was red with blood—or rather, a gruesome reddish-black that came from gore mixing with earth. No small handful of bodies could have done this. There were scores, carved to pieces and left to lie where they had fallen.

Still smiling, Graeci gestured to a severed head lying on the ground, the object that he had until recently been holding. “It is Second Tribune Drix you ought to blame. If he had not probed deeper than was wise, he and his comrades would still be alive.”

“Wasn’t it you who raised them to be patriots?”

The bodies littering the ground were from the organization known as Vang, Chancellor Graeci’s homegrown cadre of assassins.

“Go on ahead. I will deal with this one.” Graeci shot the hooded figures a meaningful glance. They turned around and departed in silence.

Selene made no move to give chase. He stared only at Graeci with a sour expression on his face. Something tangible had shifted in the air. Condensed mana contracted around Graeci, coiling around him as though to imprison him.

Faced with power of such searing magnitude, Selene had no choice but to

devote all of his attention to the enemy before him.

“I suppose you must want to know why I disposed of Vang.” Graeci raised his head haughtily to the night sky. “Well, allow me to enlighten you. They would have found themselves in decline in the days to come. I thought it best to spare them that fate.”

His face twisted as he looked back down at Selene. His composed facade cracked and sheer delight issued forth: glee, pleasure, joy, rapture, as though all the world were for his enjoyment. He seemed so overjoyed that he could dance.

“Is it not a parent’s duty to bring their children’s end when their time comes?”

Selene’s eyes narrowed in displeasure. “What do you want? No, a better question—who are you?”

“Do you imagine I will simply tell you?”

“I’ll make you soon enough. I swear by all I have, I will avenge Drix and his men.” Selene’s power grew like a ripple in still water, seething with quiet anger. The air groaned beneath the weight of a vast surge of strength and unstoppable fury. He drew his twin blades from his hips. “Mórálltach! Beagalltach! Our enemy is come.”

Graeci scratched at his neck in exasperation. “And you are truly committed to this course?”

“Why not? Let’s make it a contest for the ages. My strength may run dry, but the sound of our battle will draw our nation’s finest.”

“You would sacrifice yourself? Like our dear fourth prince?”

“Please. We are hardly the same. I simply refuse to be bested.” An unbreakable will emanated from Selene. He would not yield, no matter what.

Chancellor Graeci snorted. He laid a hand on his hip and breathed a deep, heavy sigh. “Foolishness.” All of sudden, every emotion that defined him fell away like a husk. His face registered nothing whatsoever, as if he were looking at nothing more than an insect. “Tell me, what know you of fear?”

An immense surge of mana burst forth, tearing the heavens and gouging the earth.

“Quail in terror, cry in dread...and behold my majesty.”

The ground shattered and space was rent asunder as boundless might billowed forth.

“Succumb now to fear. I call upon the Day of Genesis—Longinus.”

The air shuddered. The heavens cracked in desperate sorrow, and the earth split in tearful pleading. Chaos poured forth into the world.

“For my name is—”

“Save it!” Selene surged forward, closing the distance in an instant, and brought both swords down with incredible force. Graeci’s lance repelled the attack with ease, however, licking out to graze his cheek.

“Consider it an honor that a lord would stoop to entertain his lessers.”

“By the end of tonight, they’ll call me Lordslayer!”

Selene wiped the blood from his cheek and unleashed another attack, bringing his full strength to bear. Graeci met his assault with lips twisted in ecstasy, not even deigning to take a defensive stance. The twain clashed. The sky boomed as it failed to contain their violence, and the earth screamed as it failed to match their strength.

* * * * *

The twenty-first day of the third month of Imperial Year 1024

A smaller Lebering encampment had been erected adjacent to the imperial camp, including a tent for Hiro. This was where the day found him, poring over a map spread out on the central table. Nearby, Claudia sipped elegantly from a cup of tea. Also present were a man in traveling merchant’s attire and the captain of Claudia’s queensguard.

Claudia raised her head as he placed pawns on the map. “It seems we have been assigned to the center of the formation.”

“Albeit separately at the rear, yes. Aura will be commanding, so we’re in good

hands. The only variables are the generals defending us on the flanks.” Hiro picked up a sheet of parchment lying on the table—a list of the imperial army’s commanding officers.

Claudia peered at the parchment, intrigued. “Commanding the right wing is...a man named Bassianus, it says. Do you know him?”

Hiro cast his mind back through old memories. “I met him once at a banquet.”

A general affiliated with the eastern nobles, Bassianus was exactly the kind of headstrong commander that military nations such as the empire tended to favor. He had few achievements to his name, however, so he had probably attained his position by birth rather than talent.

“His vice-commander’s capable enough, though,” Hiro added. “I think we’ll be able to rely on the right flank.”

Something else concerned him more. By all rights, Rosa should have taken the position, but she was nowhere to be seen. Where had she gotten to? Second Prince Selene seemed to be absent as well. He found himself feeling strangely uneasy.

Claudia spoke again, sensing his misgivings. “The vice-commander is...Decius Etoll von Bunadala, it says?”

“Aura’s father. He’s never led a force of this size before, but I doubt the man who raised the Warmaiden will fail to impress. He’s a good choice.”

The left wing seemed dependable enough as well. Beto von Muzuk had been placed in charge—with some gripes about having been passed over for high commander in favor of Aura, no doubt, but he was not the kind of man to throw a tantrum. His vice-commander was equally trustworthy: one Rugen Kiork von Gurinda. Hiro couldn’t help but smile as he read the name.

Claudia cocked her head. “Is something the matter?”

“Just thinking he’s gone up in the world, that’s all. He’s Liz’s uncle.”

“My, my. Are you certain she should be placing her relatives in charge? Ought we be concerned?”

“He has a proven record. Mostly just small skirmishes, admittedly, but he’s a

sound commander. I think he's a fine choice for the role."

Kiork's achievements in battle were far from illustrious—it was natural for some to suspect he had leveraged his family connections. He would have to demonstrate otherwise if he was to assuage their doubts.

I'd like him to take this chance to prove himself, if he can.

One show of prowess would be enough. Any general who distinguished themselves in this battle would be above reproach. His men would follow him without complaint.

"Do you suppose we're in for an easy fight?" Claudia asked.

"I wonder. It all comes down to the enemy commander."

Lucia had relinquished leadership of the army to Luka and returned west. Hiro hardly had a complete grasp of Luka, but her command of her forces during her tenure as vice-commander had been superb. It was safe to assume that she was the more familiar one with battles of this scale. Liz and Aura had never led such a large force before, and that was cause for concern. In which case, the center of the formation would be key to the whole engagement.

"What role do we play in all of this, my lord?" The captain of Claudia's queensguard spoke up in grave tones. He was a warrior with steel in his spine, steadfast, conscientious, and intolerant of injustice. Why such a man was willing to follow Claudia was a mystery to Hiro, but no doubt she had struck a chord with him in some way or another.

"We follow our orders faithfully," Hiro replied.

The captain turned his eyes to Claudia, who gave a silent nod. Seeing that his queen had given her assent, he said no more.

"Even if that means following them into defeat?" Claudia said what her subject was unwilling to.

"Even then."

This war was a prime opportunity to assess how much Liz and her allies had matured. Until recently, Hiro had assumed duties that should have been theirs. The situation was improving now, but Liz's growth in particular still seemed a

little slow.

By all rights, she should have awakened sooner.

Hiro only had himself to blame for the delay. He had taken on roles that would otherwise have fallen to Liz and exercised no restraint in them, depriving her of chances to learn. On top of that, he had been too willing to indulge her and overprotective of her talents.

Fighting side by side all sounds very noble, but it won't help her overcome her limitations.

First, she needed the will to lose to no one and the determination to overtake any competition. Only then could they fight side by side on even terms. If she was satisfied by simply catching up, she would never improve.

She's trying to be too much like me and not enough like herself. And I'm not a very good role model.

Simply mimicry was pointless. Only by understanding and applying could one truly grow stronger. By removing himself from Liz and her allies' presence, they would finally start to understand, rather than parrot. They would devour the next enemy, and then the next, until even kings were merely food to them. And beyond that trail of corpses lay an unassailable throne.

The path of conquest, where only the most merciless succeed.

Claudia tittered as she watched his mind work. "You coddle them overmuch," she said.

Hiro simply shrugged and returned his gaze to the map.

Claudia wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed herself against him. He could feel the softness of her body against his back as she brought her lips to his ear. "You claim that you will do as you are bid, but are you not concocting strategies even as we speak?" Her hands seemed to take on a life of their own as they crept across his chest. "I see how you worry. How you fret. Why not simply be honest with yourself?"

As Hiro persisted in his silence, she pressed her shapely nose against the back of his ear. A warm, sweet breath slipped from her lips.

“You are already plotting what to do if they should fail. You say that you have pushed them from the nest, but I know that you will fly to their aid at the first sign of danger, even at the cost of all our plans.”

Her lips traced the line of his neck like a caress. The captain of the queensguard could only stare, aghast, and the merchant averted his eyes, but she paid neither of them any heed.

“Lavish too much attention on others and you’ll start to make me jealous.”

“You worry too much.” Hiro stepped out of Claudia’s embrace and turned to meet her gaze. “They’re not as weak as you think. I’m sure they’ll put me to shame.”

Humans lived in a state of constant change. Different individuals might develop in different ways, but they could not stand still any more than they could cease accumulating years. This war would propel Liz and her comrades to greater heights, winning them glory, increasing their wealth, and solidifying their power. And, in time...

They’ll need a stepping stone to move forward. And that’s what I’m here for.

Hiro began to walk away.

Claudia called out to him as he departed. “Where are you going?”

“A little night air might do me some good.”

He exited the tent without waiting for a response. The camp was shrouded in darkness. Bonfires flickered in the night wind, sending out puffs of sparks as their firewood crackled and snapped. The frail light danced across the vacant features of his mask, casting shadows and imparting warmth.

He stared down at his own hands—hands stained with the blood of countless dead.

I was truly blessed, Rey.

Above his head, a sky’s worth of stars twinkled.

I had Artheus, and you, and all of our other comrades by my side.

And they had been gracious enough to extend their hand to somebody so

naive, so useless.

Maybe that's why, after I lost you...I lost sight of where to stop.

He gave a self-effacing smile. Some things hadn't changed.

But when I was called back here, I found somebody worth fighting for.

Although he knew the moon lay beyond his reach, he stretched out his hand even so.

I found a world worth fighting for.

He had failed to grasp the heavens once before, but this time would be different. A certain someone might scoff at that, pointing out that he had already abandoned his duty. Still, he now had a second chance, and he did not intend to waste it.

So please. Please. Look at my foolishness and laugh.

He carried only one wish in his breast: for them to watch over him to the end. To watch and laugh as he fought against fate.

The happiness I found in those days, in that glorious golden age...

He clasped a hand to his chest and breathed out, low and shallow.

Through Liz, I'll give it all back to you. Until my bones are dust.

* * * * *

"Urgh... I'm exhausted."

With the strategy meeting over, Liz returned to the tent to find Aura already there. She set a finger to her chin and cocked her head, perplexed. It wasn't common for Aura to pay visits.

"What is it?"

"I wanted to get your permission for something, but..." Aura shook her head, stepped closer, and peered deep into her eyes with an intensity that belied her short stature.

Liz stepped back. "What are you doing?"

"Have you been sleeping?" Aura asked.

Liz's heart skipped a beat. She almost found herself blurting out the truth but hurriedly bit it back and forced a smile. "O-Of course I am. Why do you ask?"

Aura pointed. "Under your eyes. There are bags."

Liz's hand went unconsciously to her face. She had thought the makeup would be enough to conceal the evidence, but Aura had seen straight through it. Aura wasn't annoyed by the lie, however. She stared up at Liz with concern.

"You're scared to sleep, aren't you?"

Liz raised her hands in surrender. There wasn't a hint of doubt in Aura's voice; she wouldn't be talking her way out of this one. "Yes."

Ever since word had come of Hiro's death, all of her dreams had been sorrowful ones. She couldn't quite remember what they were about, but after every one, she awoke with her chest full of grief and tears trickling from her eyes. In time, she had become terrified to sleep at all.

"I'm supposed to be all grown up now, but look at me, still just a child."

Liz meant it as a joke, but Aura's brow furrowed with concern. She waved her hands in front of her face, trying to reassure her friend.

"Don't worry about me. I'll make sure I sleep well tonight, I promise."

Aura still didn't look convinced. She moved her head from side to side, perhaps trying to think of ways to ensure peaceful sleep, and then stopped, as though she had hit upon an idea.

"All right. I hope so."

With that, she settled into a nearby chair and began to read the Black Chronicle. At times, she really did act just like an older sister, Liz thought.

"Didn't you have something to discuss?"

"It can wait. Your rest is more important."

The message was clear: *Get some sleep, now*. Liz sighed. Aura could be terribly strict sometimes. Still, it was hard to blame her. Right now, Liz was in command of the empire's entire military. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the fate of the nation rested on her shoulders.

“Sorry for making you worry,” she said, and eased into bed. She couldn’t stay like this, she told herself. Her own weakness was hateful. Sooner or later, she would have to get stronger.

Stronger...stronger...stronger.

Strong enough to stand up to any challenge without moving an inch. With a heart of steel, just like her mother had possessed.

She had heard that her mother had been beautiful. Supposedly, her bloodline stretched back to the twenty-second emperor, the man who had become known as the God of Arms. He had driven the archons and the yaldabaoth back to the farthest reaches of the north, earning himself a place in the Grantzian pantheon in the process. Liz’s mother had been just as courageous as her ancestor. She had also inherited his distinctive flame-red hair, which she had passed on to her daughter—along with the peculiarities that it brought.

Because of that, everything had gone wrong. The people she cared about most in the world had vanished, one by one. Her mother had given her life to save her. Dios, the closest thing she had to an older brother, had died in her name. Now, even Hiro was gone. If only she had never been born...

“You mustn’t blame yourself so,” said a voice.

Liz’s eyes flew wide, and she gasped. All around, flowers bloomed in an array of vibrant hues. A gentle wind blew past. Clean air filled her lungs. All the fear and worry smoldering in her chest faded away.

She searched for words and found none, but she could sense that this was a dream. Even so, something about it felt strangely tangible, as though she were halfway between dreaming and waking.

“What... But how...?”

A profusion of emotions that even she could not understand flooded her heart. They wracked her body violently, so painful that she felt like she was about to burst. She curled up as though retreating into her shell.

“You mustn’t strain yourself.”

A gentle weight pressed against her back. Its presence seemed to take the

pain away.

“Is that better?” the voice asked.

Liz looked up to see a beautiful, blue-eyed woman crouching over her. Her golden hair streamed in the wind, and through it peeked the twin tips of pointed ears. The calm that had come over Liz’s heart began to falter. The woman’s face looked somehow familiar.

“Are you...an álf?”

“My mother was...although my father was human.”

“If you don’t mind me asking...where are we?”

The álf put a finger to her chin. “Hmm... Somewhere very deep, I should say. Far deeper than you ought to be able to go.” She waved her hand, and Lævateinn appeared from thin air. “This little lady saw your torment, so she took it upon herself to bring you here. Evidently, the centuries have made her no less willful.”

With a gentle smile, the woman laid a hand on the blade. A jet of flame coiled affectionately about her. Liz blinked. Lævateinn was usually the temperamental sort—she did not take to people so easily.

“Is this a memory? From one of her old wielders?”

That, at least, would explain her earlier *déjà vu*. As Scáthach had explained previously, the more a Spiritblade wielder drew on their weapon’s power, the more they could access the memories of its previous chosen. Through these memories, they could gain knowledge and learn how to harness their weapon, enabling them to draw out more strength in turn.

The álf however, only gave an unreadable smile. “I fear not. This is not her domain. It is somewhere else entirely.”

“Then where—”

A pale finger touched Liz’s lips. “Must I say it? You already know.” The finger slipped down, the hand opening to press gently against Liz’s chest, and the álf smiled, full and pure. “Do you not?”

Liz wasn’t certain she did, but she nodded anyway. The kindness in the

woman's face—and the earnestness hidden beneath—left her lost for words.

“You can cleave open the way. Of that I have no doubt.” The woman placed Lævateinn in Liz's hands. The flames clung to her still, reluctant to leave. She gently brushed them free and smiled gently. “Give my regards to Lord Hiro.”

She spoke the words like a simple courtesy, but the depth of feeling contained within them squeezed tight around Liz's heart.

“One thousand years I have waited. A dizzying span of time, I'm sure you will agree.”

She looked up at the sky, letting her thoughts fly far afield, and a look of peace came over her face. How she could wear that expression was beyond Liz's comprehension, but what she thought, what she cherished, what she lamented, seared themselves into her heart. “I think,” Liz said hesitantly, “I'm catching up to him now.”

Still, he had eluded her grasp. She could no longer walk by his side.

The woman smiled softly, as though she had read Liz's mind. “What are you saying? You shall surpass him.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your hesitation is commendable, but you must not stop now.” She gazed at Liz with gentle eyes, making no move to rescue her hair from the wind's grasp. She still had not moved a step, as though she were rooted to the spot. “Have no fear. If anybody can save him, it's you.”

She was as close as she had ever been, and yet somehow, it seemed as though she was getting farther away by the second.

“Wait!”

Liz's field of view narrowed with dizzying speed. Agony clanged inside her head, but she gritted her teeth and bore the pain. There was still so much she wanted to talk about, so many memories that she wanted to hear, so many sides of Hiro that she did not yet know. She stretched out her hand, but it grasped only empty space.

“Please, wait! There's still so much I need to ask you!”

She fought with all her might, reaching out desperately, clawing at the air. As the world dissolved into rays of light, a gentle warmth enfolded her hand. The woman squeezed her fingers tight and smiled, as though affirming that she truly was there and always would be.

“How can I save him?” Liz asked. “Hiro, he’s... He’s already...”

Already gone. Was that really true? Some small part of her wanted to believe that he was still watching over her from somewhere. Feelings she did not understand flared in her breast—feelings that she could not control, rage and grief intertwining until they spilled from her grasp. She could no longer say what was true and what was false.

She cried out with a voice born of all her frustration. “I don’t even know what to do anymore!”

“Why, hit him, of course. Hard.”

“Pardon?” Liz could not help the voice that slipped from her mouth. Whatever she had been expecting, it was not that.

“Perhaps you’ve noticed that habit of his.” The woman put her fingers to the corners of her mouth and forced her lips upward. Her cheeks flushed a little, as though embarrassed by the gesture. “Whenever he sees his plans falling into place, he cannot help but smile.”

Her laughter, faintly bashful, echoed in the stillness. It dragged on and on, turning to pleasant music that shook the world.

“So show him no restraint. He is one thousand years overdue for a good punch.”

In the last seconds before Liz’s vision went dark, the woman’s expression turned from kindness to anger.

“Wait!”

As Liz stretched out her hand, a sudden fatigue assailed her. Gravity weighed down on her body and her breath caught in her throat. She lifted her head, rubbing her neck.

“Ow!”

She must have moved too forcefully. Dull pain throbbed in her temples. As she winced and massaged her head, the duvet covering her upper body slid to the floor with a thump. At the same time, footsteps pattered up to her and a hand fell on her shoulder.

“Are you all right?”

Liz glanced sideways toward the voice to see Aura staring into her face. “A-Aura?” she stammered.

“Another bad dream?”

This time, she could definitively say otherwise. “No. A pleasant one.”

A sense of peace spread through her, as though she were being enfolded in something soft and warm—like her mother’s arms, she thought idly. She pressed a fist to her chest, desperate not to let the feeling fade. Who had the woman been? Why had she had that dream? Vague emotions swirled in her chest, and reaching for them was like grasping at clouds. She would get no answers here.

She sank back into bed in resignation. “I think I’ll sleep a little longer.”

“Okay.” Aura said nothing more. She sat down on the edge of the bed and opened the Black Chronicle.

Liz smiled. “Goodnight.”

Staring up at the light on the ceiling, she fell away again into darkness. This time, however, where there had once been terror, there was now a sense of peace. She felt a vague yet somehow certain premonition that she would have no more nightmares. She would sleep soundly tonight.

In the moment before she fully gave herself over to slumber, a voice rang in her ears—a calm, gentle voice that soothed her aches and pains. “Don’t worry,” it said distantly. “Everything’s going to be all right.”

* * * * *

The twenty-third day of the third month of Imperial Year 2024

The Laryx Plains, in the northwest of the western territories

The ruins of battle lay on the ground. A fierce clash had taken place here, and here its traces remained, bleeding resentment into the soil. Unrecovered bodies—none of them whole—littered the grass. The corpses had rotted before winter was out, ravaged by monsters and picked clean of even the most damaged armaments by scavengers. Now they covered the Laryx Plains undisturbed, elaborate decorations stripped of all that glittered.

Today, this site of carnage would become a battlefield once more. To both the east and the west, ranks of soldiers crowded the horizon. A profusion of banners blotted out the sky, each flapping more wildly than the last as though to assert dominance over the field.

To the east were one hundred and thirty thousand imperial troops. A distinctly different force stood in the center, toward the rear. These were from the Royal Army of Lebering, led by Claudia. While they had been accepted as an addition to the army—although kept separate to be employed as shock troops, owing to their different affiliation—their presence had not been especially welcomed. That came as no surprise. The biggest reason was that they were unable to coordinate with the rest of the army, but the glory they had already accumulated also played a role. The imperial command no doubt hoped to avoid giving them further accolades so as not to invite discord.

“And so we have won ourselves a commanding view of the field,” Hiro remarked. He stifled a yawn and leaned back into the seat of his four-horse carriage.

Beside him, Claudia looked up from the tea she was steeping. “We’ve come all this way simply to watch, it seems. We must truly have nothing better to do.”

“Without even two thousand men, there’s nothing else for it.”

Fighting day after day until the imperial forces arrived had depleted Claudia’s numbers. What had begun as five thousand men was now only the better part of two. Still, their sacrifices had not been in vain. They had inflicted disproportionate damage on Six Kingdoms’ numbers.

“Besides,” Hiro added, “I wouldn’t have wanted to be placed on the front lines.” After all the fighting they had done, the Lebering soldiers needed the chance to rest.

“So?” Claudia’s eyebrows rose. “What do you make of the field?”

Hiro looked down at the map by his feet. He set out pawns to represent the two opposing armies. The imperial army’s right wing comprised fifty thousand, chiefly cavalry; the left wing was the same. The central force of thirty thousand was primarily infantry and deployed so as to accept an enemy charge.

Six Kingdoms had comparatively fewer horses. Its left and right wings, thirty thousand apiece, were primarily infantry, and its central forty thousand was a mix, albeit mostly cavalry. Both armies had taken up a similar formation, each seeking to encircle the other.

Claudia craned her neck to peer over his shoulder. “The imperial center seems terribly sparse. Are our forces not imbalanced?”

“We’re basically telling the enemy what tactics we’re going to use, it’s true, but I presume there’s a rationale behind it. Aura prefers offense to defense, so maybe she’s trying to bait them.”

Fewer troops for the center meant the wings would present thicker walls. The key was which would move first. The imperial forces had more spare pieces—which was to say, reserves—so Six Kingdoms would have to start by chipping away at those. On the face of it, they were at a disadvantage, but that would only hold true in practice if they had no plan.

“What would you do were you in their shoes?” Claudia asked.

“I’d take the bait. And then I’d thrash our forces so soundly that they’d regret ever offering it.”

Hiro looked up from the map and out at the front lines. Today, in a span of time both too short and too long, a battle would be fought that would go down in the annals of history. In less than an hour’s time, the cloying stench of blood would fill his lungs, the tang of iron would scorch the grass, and gore would paint the blue skies red. Good and evil did not exist on the battlefield, but the blaring of the horns sounded the creation of a self-contained world where victory and defeat cast their dice with even hands; a bloodsoaked nightmare where horrors lurked and demons stalked.

“It’s starting.”

Horns blew, announcing that battle was joined. Banners rose from both armies to their stately music: a declaration from both sides that lives would now be spent for honor. Which would stand tall by the day's end, and which would drown in pools of blood?

"Six Kingdoms is the first to move, it seems."

Six Kingdoms' right wing began to advance. The drumming of their hooves resounded all the way to the Lebering troops' position. Fierce battle cries shook the air.

"Their morale looks high enough. Now to see how we respond..."

Hiro turned his gaze to the center of the army, where no doubt Aura was beginning to feel the pressure.

* * * * *

As Hiro had predicted, Aura was racking her brains. She envisioned a future without regret or remorse, filled with her friends' smiles...but only her performance today could determine whether her chosen strategy could bring that into being. To execute a battle plan capable of defying so formidable a foe would not be easy, especially for someone of her tender years, but she, more than anyone, understood that this was not a battle she could afford to lose.

"My lady!" an aide cried. "The enemy's right wing has begun to move!"

"I know. Send our left wing forward."

Both armies were trying to encircle one another. As a result, their formations had ended up broadly mirroring one another, differing only in the minutiae. Aura signaled the standard bearer and the left wing of the imperial army began to advance.

"We'll be the ones doing the surrounding."

Another signal, this time for the right wing to advance. The banner waved, the wing responded, and the troops ground into motion. A gap steadily opened up between the center of the army and its flanks. The imperial wings were composed primarily of cavalry, and as a result, their speed was tremendous—a trait that would be put to good use in the encirclement strategy that Aura was

employing.

“What of the center, my lady?” the aide asked. “Will it not be dangerous to lag behind?”

He was wrong. It was too soon to make that call. “We wait for now. I want to see what the enemy does.”

The imperial forces had the numbers. The rest would come down to how they used their reserves, but the moment was not yet ripe for that.

As Aura continued to bide her time, the empire’s right wing met Six Kingdoms’ left. With the imperial center still motionless, the clashing of steel was clearly audible. Riders screamed as arrows pierced their flesh, and masterless warhorses whinnied in agony. Blades clashed, carving flesh; lances crossed, piercing hearts. A red mist rose over the right side of the battlefield.

“But the left...”

Despite setting off earlier than the right wing, the left wing was yet to reach the fray. From the plume of dust rising in their wake, it seemed they were moving with all haste, but they were still chasing the enemy’s shadow. By contrast, the right wing was now barreling forward as its momentum willed. The sturdy walls defending the center had utterly crumbled.

“My lady, this seems...” The aide looked at her with budding panic in his eyes.

“I know.” Aura narrowed her eyes, leaning over her horse’s ears to stare at the enemy core. Flags danced against the sky. Drumbeats shook the air. And as a cloud of dust rose skyward...

“There.”

She clasped a hand over her chest, as though suppressing the turmoil within.

* * * * *

Six Kingdoms’ armies sprawled beneath a brown sky. Leading the forty thousand men that made up its core was Luka Mammon du Vulpes. The woman stared at the ground with vacant eyes, her aides’ reports sliding off her ears. Sitting atop her crossed legs was the skull that had once been her brother, and she caressed its bony head as she watched a column of ants march across the

earth.

“Ants and soldiers have a lot in common, don’t you think?” she murmured. The skull did not answer, but she nodded anyway. A twisted smile spread across her face. “Well said. Even commanders are nothing more than pawns in the end. No different to ants slaving away for eternity.”

As much as she looked like she had lost her mind, she understood her own role well enough. Her clouded eyes watched her aides closely as they ran to their posts, trailing clouds of dust; when messengers rode up to her with reports, she responded, issuing brief but appropriate orders. Her subordinates shared an unspoken understanding that it didn’t matter if she was broken as long as she could do her job. Nobody wanted to try their luck wresting the seat of command from the wielder of a Dharmic Blade.

“The right wing of the imperial army appears to have taken the bait, my lady,” an aide announced.

Luka turned to the man with unfocused eyes, stroking Igel’s skull. That alone was enough to make him gulp, but he rallied, scared to cause offense. Even so, his eyes did not move from Luka’s lap as he reeled off his report.

“What of our own right flank?” she asked.

“They have succeeded in separating the imperial left wing from the core.”

“Have they, indeed. Then you must call for General Macrill.”

The aide remained bowed; indeed, he could not carry out her order if he had tried. The man she had requested was long dead.

“My lady...I know not how to say this...” He steeled himself and lifted his head to find himself looking at a faded husk of a woman.

“Well? Out with it.”

“Regarding General Macrill...I’m afraid that, well...” He had to say it. If he agreed to fetch the man only to return empty-handed, he would soon find himself shorter by a head. He feigned a cough to hide his anxiety while he worked up his nerve, pounded a fist against the ground, and opened his mouth. “General Macrill is dead, my lady! He perished in battle at Fort Veritas several

days ago alongside twenty thousand men!”

Twenty thousand routed by one. Such an upset was without precedent. General Macrill would go down as the architect of the worst military disaster in Six Kingdoms’ history.

Technically, not all twenty thousand had perished. Three thousand survivors had staggered, exhausted, back to the main force. The rest were gone, having turned to banditry and brigandry or fallen prey to those who had.

“I see. So General Macrill has passed away.” Luka set off with uncertain steps. She gestured to one of her guards to fetch her horse.

The aide stood and scrambled to follow her, although he kept a respectful distance. “Where are you going, my lady?”

“If General Macrill is no longer with us, I must lead the charge myself.”

“There are other capable commanders, my lady! Can you not leave the matter to them?”

“They cannot be trusted. Nobody can be trusted. I have no one left but Igel.” Paying no mind to the aide’s protestations, she mounted her horse with astonishing agility and rubbed her cheek against her brother’s skull. “The time is ripe. We will sally forth at once.”

Six Kingdoms’ wings had peeled apart the twin walls shielding the imperial core. Seeing the empire’s superior numbers, Luka had judged that they were likely to be taking an encirclement approach. In response, she had made it seem as though Six Kingdoms’ right flank was doing the same, and the enemy had obligingly hastened to respond.

“All is but a pretense to expose their center.”

As a result, the imperial left wing had been separated from the rest of the force, and the right wing was tangled in battle. With its defenses stripped away, the central thirty thousand were left exposed, ripe for Six Kingdoms’ central forty thousand to charge into with their greater numbers.

“Send Vendetta to the vanguard,” she commanded the aide. “Light cavalry for the first cohort, heavy cavalry for the second. The infantry will remain here to

fend off their right flank. I will take the sixth princess's head myself." With that, she kicked her horse and set out for the front. "Watch over me, brother dear," she whispered, still stroking Igel's skull despite the swaying of her horse. "I will tear every last Grantzian royal limb from limb."

Her guards looked on uneasily, but once they reached the vanguard, they had bigger concerns. The sight of the troops there drove all previous unease from their minds.

"So, this is Vendetta..." one of them whispered. "They're an eerie bunch and no mistake."

Ignoring her guards' reservations, Luka inhaled the stagnant air and expelled a rapturous breath. "I must give my thanks to Lady Lucia," she said.

For all their foul reek, Vendetta—Lucia's Revenant Brigade—were no objects of fear to Luka. Judging by her expression, if anything, they inflamed her sadistic streak. They had originally been under Lucia's command, but for reasons best known to herself, she had relinquished them to Luka before retreating to Faerzen. With no cause to refuse, Luka had accepted, and judging from her guards' reactions, that had been the correct decision.

"We'll tear clean through their core," she said. "They'll never see us coming."

Vendetta's fervor was too raw to be called quiet and too disquieting to be called solemn. "Eerie" was the only word. So thoroughly was their armor dyed with dried blood that even the sunlight could not reveal its original color. The air around them stank of rotten flesh and their bodies issued a bestial reek, with the odor summoning clouds of flies. Their swords were poorly maintained, thoroughly rusted, with the chinks in the blades matted with dried flesh. Worst of all, however, their eyes were as dead as Luka's. They were like walking corpses, wandering revenants, a pack of ghouls with no hint of life among them.

"What... What manner of monsters..." Unable to suppress his urge to vomit, one of Luka's guards leaned over and retched.

"That is no way to address brave soldiers of our nation." Luka shot the man a glance, but he did not hold her attention for long. She turned her gaze to the sky. "You may kill them if you wish. They did not even deign to greet Igel."

The members of Vendetta moved to carry out her orders.

“Wh-What are you doing?! Have you lost your minds?!”

The dead-eyed soldiers dragged the astonished guards from their horses and stomped their skulls in. Some of their victims had their throats torn out, others were dismembered and strewn beneath their own horses, and yet others were simply beaten to death. Vendetta slaughtered them to a man, simmering with enough loathing to stifle their screams.

Luka watched, enthralled, as the gory scene unfolded. “Wonderful. How much purer humans are when they follow their instincts.” She set Igel’s skull gently between her thighs and pulled on the reins. “Today we eradicate the blood of von Grantz! Tear out the throats of every fool who stands before us!”

With an expression twisted as hatefully as a starving beast’s, she turned her clouded eyes to the imperial line.

“Charge!”

She surged forward at the head of the pack. Monsters followed in her wake, jaws slavering. Once they had been men, but no more. A rain of arrows descended from the imperial center, but it did not slow their momentum.

“Call me low if you will! Call me a villain if you must! My name is Luka Mammon du Vulpes!”

With Luka at their head, Vendetta crashed into the imperial lines with pinpoint precision.

“What in the— Agh!” One swing sent a foot soldier’s head flying. Brain matter sprayed, but the beasts of Vendetta did not falter. Their might was fearsome, and the imperial troops quickly began to falter before their offense.

“Hold the line! Hold the line for all you’re worth— Gah!”

The stress and exhaustion of their long march weighed heavy on the imperials’ limbs. Vendetta took to the field like fish to water, wreaking havoc uninhibited. Caught off guard, the imperial ranks descended into confusion, and the first cohort quickly collapsed. The battle became a slaughter.

“Tear! Flay! Ravage! Cut down all who stand before us!”

Luka's troops carved deeper into the imperial core, their momentum only growing as they came.

* * * * *

"Lady Celia Estrella, it appears that the first cohort has been routed."

"I see." Liz nodded firmly and turned her horse about. Behind her awaited a unit of light cavalry clad in vermillion armor. "Not long now. The day has come to show the world the might of the Knights of the Rose!"

A company affiliated with the Fourth Legion, they were the fastest horsemen in the Grantzian Empire; truly the best of the best. In contrast to the heavy cavalry of the Knights of the Royal Black—which Aura had once commanded—they were composed entirely of light cavalry. While they had been too busy keeping the peace in the south to accompany Liz to any of her previous battles, this war was one that concerned the entire empire, which had given them the chance to ride to her aid. Now back under the leadership of their rightful commander, they were the most energized troops on the battlefield.

"If you feel fear, look forward! If you feel terror, look forward! If you feel doubt, look forward! And there you will find me!" Liz drew Lævateinn from her belt and held it high, blazing tip reaching for the blue sky. "I will wash away your fears!"

There was a moment of silence, and then the air erupted with cheers. The Knights of the Rose answered her with a battle cry, beating their shields and raising their spears as they yelled and whooped.

"Spirit King's blessings upon the Valditte!" someone cried.

Their morale was high, their spirits were higher, and Liz was in fine fettle as she took the lead. At last, the moment came. Seeing the rose banner rise from the main force, Liz fixed her gaze on the azure heavens and took a deep breath.

"We ride to flank their core!"

A pull on the reins sent her steed hurtling forward. Her goal was the annihilation of Six Kingdoms' central force, which even now was sinking its teeth into its imperial counterpart. Her unit's position in the third cohort of the left wing had left them perfectly placed to ride to the second cohort's aid.

Everything's going just as Aura planned. She wasn't called the Warmaiden for nothing. All that was left now was for Liz to do her duty.

The moment came sooner than expected. The plan was for her to flank the enemy's core, which should have been engaging the second cohort, but instead...

"What are they doing?"

Off to the side, far past where they should have been, an enemy force surged ahead with incredible speed. She watched, aghast at the force with which they carved through the imperial lines. A little way behind, the rest of the core chased after their allies.

"Your Highness, a portion of their forces is approaching the center of the second cohort!"

The soldier's cry brought Liz back to her senses. It seemed that the enemy charge had been faster than she anticipated. If she did not stop them now, it would derail all of Aura's plans.

"Engage that unit!"

"Are you certain, Your Highness? Were our orders not to flank their core?"

"If we don't do something, they'll tear clean through the heart of our army."

"Surely not. How could they push through with those numbers?"

Liz had her doubts as well, but alarm bells were ringing in her mind. If she ignored the enemy only for them to prove stronger than she expected, she would regret this moment for the rest of her life.

"Turn right! Engage that unit!"

A swing of Lævateinn lit the way, and the Knights of the Rose followed faithfully. The strange cavalry had driven into the second cohort at its weakest point, leaving Liz able to strike it from behind. Corpses littered the ground in their wake, twisted in agony—a field of carnage almost too gruesome to look at.

"Stop them here, whatever it takes!"

As she caught up, she leaped from her saddle, striking the head from a passing horseman in a single blow. Her acrobatics did not end there; she leaped deftly from horse to horse, slicing through each rider's vitals before moving on. At that point, the Knights of the Rose caught up. Their lancepoints gleamed as they slammed into the enemy's rear. They struck with incredible precision, their well-honed prowess tearing a ragged hole through Six Kingdoms' lines.

And yet...

"What in the...? These men have lost their minds!"

A nearby horseman drove his lance clean through an enemy soldier's belly, only to cry out in shock as the mortally wounded man grasped the haft, dragging him down to the ground. The pair vanished in confusion and dust.

"Be sure to finish them, or else get away— Agh!"

Sensing death, one of the enemy soldiers leaped at an imperial rider, knocking him from his mount. Their bodies caught the legs of the horses behind. Seeing that the enemy did not hesitate to embrace death, the Knights of the Rose hesitated and their momentum ebbed.

A chill ran up Liz's spine. The enemy seemed willing to throw away their lives for the slightest chance of taking a soldier of the empire with them. What could possibly have driven them to that point? How much hatred must they bear in their hearts to choose such self-destruction? She did not, could not understand, but nor could she allow any more soldiers to die in vain.

Her decision came quickly. "Raise your speed—"

The rest of her words died in her throat. The enemy had changed course. Knocking imperial troops aside, caring not if they fell from their horses, the Six Kingdoms cavalry forcibly pivoted around.

"Urrr... Graaaaaahhh..."

A groan rose above the din—no longer a voice, but an incomprehensible noise born of dread and despair, a wave of sound that grated on the eardrums. Battle-trained warhorses froze with terror as they heard it. For a brief moment, silence fell between the two sides—not one of calm, but one of vehement loathing.

“GRAAAAAAHHH!”

The Six Kingdoms soldiers charged, sparing no thought for the unhorsed allies they mangled beneath their hooves. Indeed, they no longer seemed able to distinguish friend from foe.

“Drive them back!” Liz cried fiercely as she kicked her horse’s flanks. The knights’ vermilion clashed with their enemy’s blood-matted red. One side raised their spears in hatred; the other drew their swords for pride. The two forces grew entangled. Crimson flowers bloomed across the sky, and red rain soaked the ground. In the span of an instant, the battlefield was transformed into a den of carnage, strewn with uncountable dead.

“What *are* they?”

As Liz cut down the approaching soldiers, a chill ran through her at the hatred in the dead men’s eyes. Their blank gazes took in the bloodsoaked battlefield before them, but their mouths manifested no words, gave no voice to their hatred. They cared for nothing but slaying their enemies. It was hard not to falter when faced with such pointed loathing.

“But don’t think that’ll buy you...” A note of sadness crept into her voice. “...any mercy from me!”

An indomitable will burned in her eyes. Sympathy had no place on the battlefield. The enemy may well be unwilling to yield, but she, too, had something to fight for.

“I’ll take you on with everything I’ve got.”

With incredible force, she leaped from the saddle and plunged into the midst of the dead-eyed enemy. The air screamed with the force of her swings. Even so, the revenants before her didn’t so much as flinch. Her slashes carried incredible force and sprayed nothing so kind as sparks; with every one she unleashed, a great gout of flame swallowed her enemies.

“Ahh...ahh...”

With wordless cries, her foes vanished in flame. A wave of fire spread out before her, a colossal serpent that swallowed her enemies like a raging sea. Its unstoppable heat burned through all defenses, but strangely, it ignored her

allies; its fangs were for Six Kingdoms' troops alone, and it tore through them with vigor.

"A portion of the enemy has split off, Your Highness!" a soldier shouted. "They're carrying on toward the core!"

Liz turned away from the sea of fire and back to the front. A cloud of dust hung in the air, a plume of brown smoke bearing down on the heart of the imperial army.

"No way... Were they just sacrificing their men to waylay us?!"

That would explain everything—the enemy's suicidal inclinations, their sudden about-face. The proof of the deception was right before her eyes. And if the commander's eyes had always been on the imperial core...

"We have to go after them!"

Liz, the army's spiritual leader, might still be hale, but that wouldn't matter if the core was broken. Once news spread that the heart of the army had been gouged out, the empire's numerical advantage would become irrelevant; the battle would take a dramatic turn for the worse.

At that moment...

"There you are."

A syrupy voice, dredged up from the bottom of some dark lake, brushed her eardrums. It sounded like it had come from just over her shoulder, but when she spun around, there was no one to be seen.

No. No, that wasn't right at all. There was most definitely somebody there. The ground cratered beneath a surge of incredible force. A stinging gust of wind blasted outward, ravaging Liz's fiery serpent. As the gale carried the dust away, a woman appeared in the epicenter. Half of her body was gruesomely transfigured by burn scars, and her left sleeve flapped uselessly in the wind. What remained of her slender figure radiated dense, twisted hatred.

"Do you see, Igel? That must be her. Crimson hair, crimson blade, crimson men—all crimson. There's no mistake. We have found the sixth princess of the empire." Her clouded eyes swiveled from the skull in her hand to Liz. There was

no breath of hope to be seen in their depths, only despair.

Liz's breath caught in her throat. She had seen those eyes before, countless times. Indeed, she would never forget them. Even now, the sight was seared into the back of her mind: the nightmare that rose to claim her no matter how much she tried to resist, where all was written in stone. Where she could offer no help, grant no salvation, could only watch hell unfold—and the boy she had seen there had eyes very much like these.

“Watch now, Igel.” Oblivious to Liz's shock, the woman set the skull atop a charred corpse. “There is enough heat left here to warm you. Worry not. I will finish this battle before you grow too cold.”

Liz's mind swirled, struggling to keep up, but she had no time to ponder. A hideous roar drew her attention.

“No way! They're still alive?!”

“GRAAAAAAH!”

A shape shambled toward her, the sickly white of bone peeking through from beneath its blistered skin. Its half-melted armor merged with charred flesh. White smoke billowed from its body like resentment given form, spiraling up on the wind.

“Vendetta...my darling playthings.”

The clashing of blades resumed, with a wicked crunch among them, but the woman's voice cut through it all. Liz looked back to see her with a colossal warhammer in her hands, slumped over as though from fatigue. A smile lay on her face.

“In life, they died, and in death, they live. My poor, misbegotten pets.” She seemed to be looking at once very close and very far away as she stared at Liz. It was hard not to wonder whether whoever she was seeing was really Liz at all. “And I am their mistress, Luka Mammon du Vulpes.”

The earth shuddered with a mighty swing of her hammer.

“Come, now. Drink deep of blood and submit to sweet ecstasy.”

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“My lady! The enemy isn’t stopping!”

The retainers’ cries verged on screams. Their faces grew paler with every new report.

“I know.”

Aura turned her eyes away from the battlefield, dismounted her horse, and cast her gaze to the map of the battlefield on the table. Her eyes darted to and fro as she moved pawns around, taking stock of the situation.

There was no fixing the ragged hole that had been torn in the imperial center. Liz had not been able to lessen their momentum; it seemed to have been all she could do to thin their numbers. Still, the majority of Six Kingdoms’ troops had not penetrated the second cohort. The most pressing issue now was the unit that had broken through.

“We have reserves in the rear we can call on,” one of the aides said.

“We’d be better off retreating ourselves,” another replied. “The entire center should fall back.”

“The more cards we have to play, the better,” a third argued. “This war may not end today. We ought to save the reserves for when they will be most needed.”

Aura heard them and nodded. “How are the wings faring?” She cocked her head, seemingly disregarding all that they had said.

“M-My lady...” one of the aides stammered. “Surely we must focus on the more pressing danger...”

“How are they faring?” Her eyes flashed. She was not looking to debate. The aides gulped. Seeing their hesitation, Aura sighed and pointed at one. “You. Tell me.”

“The right wing is gaining ground, my lady. The left wing has just engaged the enemy.”

Information took time to travel across a battlefield, and the situation would have progressed since that point, but it was unlikely to have changed too much.

From the start, Six Kingdoms' wings had only ever been intended to strip away the walls protecting the imperial center. They were, in short, bait. While their commander no doubt hoped they would prevail, they were almost certainly under orders to draw out the fighting as long as possible if they fell into difficulty.

"So, that's their plan. Straight through the middle."

With the imperial army's wings peeled away and Six Kingdoms' center bearing down on its core, Aura knew that her prediction had hit the mark. She had never believed that the enemy would truly attempt to encircle them. She had known, however, that they believed the imperial army would attempt to do so with the benefit of its greater numbers. Accordingly, she had diverted soldiers from the center to the wings to lure them in. In case they proved cautious, she had attempted a reverse encirclement, subconsciously pushing them toward a central charge. That was the key: giving them an opportunity so tempting that they wouldn't hesitate and wouldn't suspect—and all of the pieces were finally in place. Not everything had gone according to her predictions, but for the most part, events were proceeding as expected. Now to play her next card.

"It's time to put my plan into action."

The ploy wasn't strictly necessary. Left to its own devices, the battle would fall in her favor. The empire had Six Kingdoms beaten in numbers; its triumph was guaranteed. But a predictable triumph would not win Liz any laurels. Aura's true challenge in this battle was to produce a victory spectacular enough to leave the whole continent slack-jawed.

"I'll win this battle with minimal losses."

Aura produced a letter from her sleeve: Hiro's final letter that she had taken from his swiftdrake's saddlebag. She regretted opening it before realizing it was addressed to Liz, but the more she had read, the more thankful she had become that it had not reached its intended recipient. It detailed Hiro's origins, as well as the schemes he had left in place. Aura had stopped reading the section about his origins partway through, cut it out, and stored it in a safe place. She had not been certain that Liz could stomach it in her delicate mental state.

That decision proved wise. When Aura showed Liz what remained of the

letter—the part detailing Hiro’s schemes—it had left her profoundly shocked, to the point that she had feared reading it. Aura had resolved to keep the rest from her until she was ready to handle it. She did not know when that day would be, but in the meantime...

We won’t let Hiro’s plans go to waste.

She and Liz had decided as much together. They would make the most of the boons he had left them.

“Raise it,” she commanded the standard bearer.



The aides' eyes widened as they watched the standard rise. In a second, their wild panic transformed into the indomitable expressions of seasoned warriors. It was as though they had become completely different people—as indeed anybody would at the sight. A dragon took flight on a field of midnight black, clutching a silver blade as it unleashed a mighty roar. Above the field fluttered the sazul, the sacred standard of the man once known and feared as the War God.

“Listen to me,” Aura said. “What we do here will decide this battle.”

The aides stood at attention at the sound of her voice. The critical moment was upon them. They could hold nothing back, committing their all to seizing victory.

“First, we rout this unit approaching the core.”

“Aye, my lady.” One of the aides grinned. “We can’t very well leave them to run riot, can we?”

“No.”

The situation was not as desperate as it seemed. The enemy cavalry had punched through the second cohort with fearsome speed, but the third cohort still remained behind that. It was true that their current momentum put them in danger of reaching the Imperial core, but as far as Aura was concerned, that was a trivial matter. Their actions were unexpected, but not unanticipated.

“Shall we issue the reserves?” another aide asked.

“Mm. But only Queen Claudia’s unit.”

“The Lebering troops, my lady? Alone?”

The aide seemed skeptical that Claudia’s troops could halt the enemy cavalry. It was hard to blame him—even Liz hadn’t been able to stop them. By the same token, however, it would have taken their best to waylay her. The Lebering troops might be tired after their string of battles, but they had by far the most experience fighting Six Kingdoms and had the greatest chance of success.

There were political factors as well. The Lebering forces had contributed a great deal to the war effort, and leaving them to rot on the back lines would risk

inviting criticism that the empire was too petty to allow them further glory. On the face of it, the empire would be indebted to Lebering, but considering how much the latter would benefit from its boost in status, it was, in fact, they who would owe the empire.

“Give the signal.” Aura drew the spirit weapon from her belt and leveled the tip at the standard bearer. Once the flag of Lebering flew high, she turned back to the aides. “Send word across the army. This is where we make our stand. Every unit is to hold position. Stop their charge with all we have.”

“At once, my lady!”

The aides jumped to their tasks. They turned immediately into a milling mob, dispatching messengers to all corners of the army.

Aura watched for a moment as the core came alive, then turned around and looked to the rear. The Lebering troops’ flag danced on the wind in answer.

The zlosta had ruled all of Soleil once upon a time before being driven to the far reaches of the north. Many in the empire regarded their frozen kingdom as a jail, with the zlosta as its inmates. Yet upon seeing Claudia for the first time, Aura had marveled that anybody so beautiful could exist, and after both witnessing her brazen cunning at the strategy meeting and glimpsing the burning ambition that lurked beneath, she had developed something of an admiration for Lebering’s frigid queen.

At that moment, an aide approached to alert her of a new development. “Lady Aura! Smoke has been sighted on the enemy’s back lines!”

Aura pushed her musings from her mind and turned to look at the western sky. Black smoke rose in the distance, billowing fiercely as though declaring its intent. A shiver ran through her. Her eyes widened as she pressed an overlong sleeve to her mouth. She had believed she would never see them again, had given up on ever again witnessing their valor.

“Thank goodness you’re safe,” she whispered.

The Knights of the Royal Black are alive in Faerzen, Hiro had claimed in his letter.

In Faerzen was a man named Rache du Vertra. While the royal family still

reigned, he had been the captain of the royal guard, and after their deaths, he had served as Scáthach's deputy in command of the Faerzen Resistance. There was no telling how many of the Knights of the Royal Black had survived under his command, but word had come on the day before last that they were making for the imperial border—the only good news amid a deluge of bad.

Admittedly, she had been uncertain how best to put them to use. After their historic defeat in Faerzen had permitted Third Prince Brutahl's capture by the enemy, their survival might well be considered a stain upon their pride—something that they understood themselves. Accordingly, they had sought out Rache and gone to ground. With him, at least, they would find honorable deaths.

Hiro's letter, however, had stressed their importance. They had not fled, he had insisted, but were seeking a chance for revenge—a chance that he had requested Liz grant them.

He left us plenty of options. Plenty of possibilities.

When she had realized Hiro's true intentions, she had been overjoyed but also felt terror stir in her chest. Just how far had he seen? It was as though he had read the future. It was impossible not to feel awe. Orchestrating this was a deed beyond the province of mortal men; it was the work of a god.

But I'll still surpass him.

She could not afford to give up or fall short; not with the name of the Warmaiden around her neck. She wanted to see what he saw, to understand to what end the Hero King of Twinned Black had dreamed of such unprecedented feats.

If the truth is anywhere, it's there.

But for now, she stowed her ambitions deep inside herself and held her spirit weapon high.

"Send word to all the reserves. The time has come. They are to skirt around the battlefield and crush Six Kingdoms' core." She slowly lowered her weapon so its tip faced the smoke rising in the west. "Tell all units that victory is at hand, but they aren't to be complacent. I expect nothing less than their best."

Emotions welled up in her aides' hearts, fierce yet rooted in tranquility. They turned their gazes to the sky. Tears trickled from the corners of their eyes, in shame, perhaps, of their previous hysteria.

"Oh great Spirit King, father to us all, sing praise of our lord's deeds." One by one, they fell to their knees and bowed their heads. "Our lord's justice shall pierce the heavens. His might shall split the earth. His passing shall part the seas, and his deeds shall light all of creation."

In a world of clamor and chaos, here alone was an island of calm, a space where time seemed to have stopped. As the aides lowered their heads, Aura laid a hand to her chest and issued her final decree.

"Fight with honor, in the War God's name."

"As you command, my lady." They rose as one, quietly, fiercely, and burning with an unbreakable will.

Chapter 5: Despair Forth from Darkness

A group of horsemen—the imperial army’s only independent unit—raced across the plain on horseback. From their midst rose the flag adorned with two crossed horns on a lilac field: the symbol of the zlostā. Beside it flew another banner, a horned white horse cantering across a similar field of lilac. The same flags rose from the imperial core as they approached the imperial center’s third cohort.

A four-horse carriage trundled at their head. Queen Claudia of Lebering sat in the driver’s seat with a whip in one hand, her amethyst hair streaming in the onrushing wind.

“It hardly seems wise for a man who cannot ride a horse to venture onto a battlefield at all,” she remarked, steering the carriage skilfully as it bucked across the rocky ground.

The masked boy leaned back with his arms thrown over the sides of the carriage, gazing up at the sky. “It was less of a problem when I had a swiftdrake instead.”

“Then why not ride her now? You went to the trouble of recovering her, did you not?”

“Her wounds have healed for the moment, but they’ll reopen if I push her too hard. She needs to rest.” Hiro unfurled a map as he spoke, pinning it in place with a nearby sword in lieu of a clasp, although it still fluttered wildly in the wind. He crossed his arms in consternation.

“What use is a map when we are already on our way to the battle?” Claudia shouted back.

“There’s something I want to make sure of. It’ll be easier to picture with a map to look at.”

Even as they spoke, the map tore free from its bindings, skimming Hiro’s cheek as it flew away and vanished into the distance behind them. Claudia

snorted.

Hiro continued amiably, "I see the Knights of the Royal Black have succeeded in burning the enemy supplies."

Claudia took on a guarded look at the abrupt change in topic. Hiro had a habit of testing her with sudden questions. No situation was too pressing for him to throw her a new enigma to crack.

"Did you treat Lady Celia Estrella this way, may I ask?"

Hiro did not reply, which Claudia took to mean that he had not.

"I must find the opportunity to speak with her once this battle is over. I would love to make her acquaintance."

She recalled the solemn girl she had found at the strategy meeting. The crimson princess had struck her as being born possessed of purity and sublime composure, both so rare in the imperial line. Her slender body was battle-tested despite its elegance, her features could have rivaled the work of any master sculptor, and her abundant charisma had stoked the flames of even Claudia's jealousy. Suffice to say, she had made quite a first impression. She would make a most entertaining conversation partner.

Hiro let the silence hang. "If you can find the chance, be my guest," he said finally.

Claudia giggled. His voice had been inflectionless, but she had seen the glint of human emotion in the eyes behind the mask. A flame lit in her breast. Here, she realized, was the way to make him her own.

That would come to nothing if she made an enemy of him first, however. Judging that she ought to address his question, she looked to the western sky. An answer was not difficult to find. The change that had come over the field was obvious.

"If, as I suspect, that smoke indicates their supplies are burning, the scales of battle are about to tip dramatically."

"Precisely."

Hiro recalled that his letter to Liz had been absent from his swiftdrake's

saddlebag. Among other things, it had revealed the survival of the Knights of the Royal Black. Dealt a stinging defeat, they had gone to ground in Faerzen, where they had awaited their chance for revenge.

“Six Kingdoms was too impatient for results. If they’d been more methodical in rooting out survivors, this battle would have gone differently.”

Either that or relocating their supply trains could have avoided the current tragedy. Still, there was no point in entertaining might-have-beens. Reality was what it was—they would have to drink that draught, no matter how bitter it tasted.

“That said, I’m impressed that the Knights of the Royal Black pulled it off. They really do live up to their name.”

The column of smoke rising in the west was testament enough to that. It was material proof that the trap had been sprung and the surviving knights had succeeded in their task.

“And it looks like Aura is making the most of this chance.”

He glanced across at the imperial core, where a profusion of standards had gone up. Small plumes of dust trailed across the center—messengers bound for the commanders of every unit. Aura was readying for an all-out offensive.

“Six Kingdoms’ morale will be damaged, no doubt,” Claudia remarked, “but they will still fight for all they’re worth.”

“Agreed. The next few minutes will decide it all.”

Six Kingdoms had expected to punch through the imperial center with no resistance and were no doubt reeling from their maneuver being anticipated. What would they do next? The only sensible option was to double down. There was no other way but forward. They had already opened a hole in the imperial lines, and now they would fight tooth and nail to push through it and tear out their enemy’s throat.

“I do hope all this scheming doesn’t turn against us. Six Kingdoms still has the momentum, but the cornered rat ever did bite its pursuer. There is nothing so fearsome as prey with its back to the wall.”

“I’m aware. But then again, that’s why we’re here.”

The noose would tighten around Six Kingdoms’ throat, as slowly yet surely as water seeping into wool, and they would never even notice until it broke their neck. That was the outcome Hiro sought, the path to perfect victory.

“To buy time for the circle to close indeed. I should hope to be handsomely rewarded for this.”

Claudia brought the carriage to a halt. They had reached their destination: the vanguard of the third cohort. Ranks upon ranks of stern-faced soldiers stared at the Lebering troops. They did not appear to be surprised—presumably, word had reached their commanders.

“No need to sound so sour about it.” Hiro leaped down from the carriage and turned back up to Claudia, testing the ground beneath his feet. “I’m sure Aura knows. In fact, that’s probably why she gave us such a critical role.”

And if they were to meet those expectations...

“We just have to deal with *them*.” Hiro gestured toward a churning knot of movement in the rear ranks of the second cohort. At that moment, a host of cavalry burst through, trailing an enormous dust cloud. They fought like demons to plow through the imperial troops, kicking, crushing, forcing their way forward.

Claudia’s brows pulled together in distaste at the sight of the uncanny soldiers. Behind her, the Lebering troops raised their spears and adopted battle stances.

“My,” she whispered, making no effort to hide her disgust. “How utterly hideous.”

“Vendetta, I hear they’re called.” Hiro’s voice was matter-of-fact. “A private force that Six Kingdoms’ old commander put together.”

Claudia listened with interest. “Well, aren’t you knowledgeable... Should I take it that you’ve crossed blades with them before?”

“Sadly not. I’ve only read about them in reports. I can’t say how strong they are...although they’ve gotten this far, so take that as you like.”

What Hiro had heard described them as animalistic warriors who slaughtered anyone of imperial blood without distinction. To let beasts like that loose upon a battlefield took a particularly twisted kind of mind. It was a mystery that they had not yet been disbanded if they were the previous commander's pet project, but there was no point in mulling over questions like that. Even if any answers had been forthcoming, they would not sway the course of the battle. The enemy stood in his way, so he would cut them down; that was all there was to it.

"We can't let them pass," he said to Claudia. "I assume you're ready."

"But of course. My men are stouthearted. They will stand firm, no matter what horrors we face."

"I'm glad to hear it. Let's send these living dead back to the hell they crawled out of."

Hiro's lips twisted with savage glee behind his mask. Claudia took that as a signal to draw her sword. With a fierce look in her eyes, she leveled it at the foe.

"You stand before a lord, and to look down upon him is the utmost arrogance. Let us drag those who would try from their horses."

With a cold smile, she gestured lightly to the side with her arm—a call to arms born from supreme arrogance. It was far from a stirring blaring of horns, but the Lebering troops' will to fight exploded even so.

"May Her Majesty's name ring in Lord Lox's ears!"

The soldiers drove their heels into their horses' flanks and surged forward, straight-backed. Their lancepoints gleamed as they caught the sun, casting rays of light across the battlefield. Armor clattered with every hoofbeat. They tucked their lances under their arms and braced for contact with Vendetta.

For a moment, all was still, and then the two forces met. Blood arced high, arms flew, heads toppled from shoulders. Helmets crumpled, torsos caved in, and shredded viscera spilled free. It was carnage. Soldiers gritted their teeth and pierced their enemies' throats, even as they spewed crimson from their own mouths. The two sides washed each other's blood away with their own,

clove one another's flesh, shattered one another's bones, crushed one another's souls.

“Raaaaaagh!”

Battle cries raised Lebering's troops above the fear of death, giving them courage to leap into the mouth of hell. They slaughtered their foe with pride in their breasts—all glory to their queen. Yet no matter how fearsome their charge, some of the enemy survived.

“Wreak havoc and do not look back,” Claudia commanded. “I will take care of the rest.” With rapturous glee, she launched toward the members of Vendetta who had escaped the storm of violence. “Dance wild and free. Your queen demands you kneel.”

Snowflakes swirled around her. Her sword swung like a raging blizzard beneath a clear sky.

“I'll see your hideous faces twisted in agony, your frail hearts broken, and your paltry souls rendered unto me.”

Her bladework defied imagining. Her enemies' horses availed them naught; all who stood before her were cut in twain. Her soldiers rejoiced to see her peerless bladework, their spirits soaring so high that even the imperial troops shared in their elation. She seemed to have brought the north with her, imposing a breath of boreal cold upon a battlefield made warm with boiling blood.

“Give your despair to me. I will devour it all.”

“Grahhh... GRAAAAAAHHH!”

“You're slow enough to put me to sleep. And weak enough that I don't even need to wake.” The masked man cut down the soldiers of Vendetta dispassionately, without even so much as moving from his spot. “You won't have your revenge like this. You won't achieve anything at all.”

A single stroke of his sword sent the enemies before him toppling to the ground like puppets with their strings cut. Overwhelming dread clove apart the hatred shrouding the battlefield and asserted its own supremacy.

“RAAAAAAGH!” With a hate-filled roar, the soldiers of Vendetta leaped from their horses. They bore down on Hiro, blades bared.

“Whatever conviction inspired your despair, it wasn’t enough.”

Blades swung for shallow vengeance were as twigs before him. No blood stained his white garb, even as it lay thick upon the glutted earth. He fought atop a bloody pool, radiating incomparable power as he unleashed merciless blows.

“Whatever you’ve lost, whatever was taken from you, whatever was destroyed before your eyes...the emotions it inspired are scattered, not one the same.”

His eyes swiveled down. A fallen soldier lay on the blood-slicked ground, struggling to rise. Hiro regarded the man for a moment with empty eyes before thrusting Dáinsleif into his neck.

“Gaaahhh!” The man sank back into the pool of blood.

Hiro withdrew his black blade from the unfortunate corpse and looked around. “But despair comes equally to all.”

The enemy backed away. He stepped forward and cut one of them down with a single stroke. A plume of blood sprayed from the body. He watched impassively as it rose.

“If you cursed the injustice of the world, you should have seized the heavens and changed it for yourselves.”

He gazed up at the azure heavens as he spoke. It was impossible to discern for whom his words were intended; all traces of his expression were obscured by his mask. He sagged, lord atop a sea of blood in the midst of ceaseless clamor. To an amateur’s eye, he looked defenseless—as frail as a rotted tree, easily knocked over with a single push. Yet the soldiers of Vendetta surrounding him stood as stock-still as if they had been clasped in irons. Several even backed away despite the chance they had been given.

“Agh!”

A grunt burst from one man’s lungs as a spear was thrust through his back.

The soldiers of Vendetta had been so preoccupied with Hiro, they had left themselves open to the imperial infantry creeping up behind them.

“Aaahhh... Aaahhh...”

Seeing their comrades fall restored them to their senses. No more were they revenants driven by hatred, only pitiful human beings who did not want to die.

“Hraaagh... GRAAAAAHHH!”

They fell back, desperate to survive, raising the battle cries of living men.

“That’s why I told you it wasn’t enough.”

They had come as far as the third cohort; to expect to escape unscathed now was beyond foolish. The notion was so ridiculous, Hiro couldn’t even laugh.

“How disappointing.”

They had snarled like beasts and fought like beasts, but they had only been sheep in wolves’ clothing after all.

“Congratulations. You were human to the end. Just humans who resorted to the lowest and most cowardly means you could.”

Dáinsleif traced a perfect arc across a soldier’s throat as he fell back, then clove another’s skull in two, cutting off his faint scream. A third man tried to throw down his weapon, but Hiro skewered him where he stood.

“Ngh... Ahhh...”

“Beg for mercy if you want, but I have none to give.”

He made certain to cut down anybody who tried to surrender before mob psychology could take hold. Many commonfolk had suffered in the name of Vendetta’s twisted idea of vengeance, and many more had died in despair. These men had offered no mercy to those who begged for their lives, shown no hesitation in cutting down women or children, and gleefully fallen upon those who were powerless to resist—and then, when their grim work was done, they had savaged the corpses, gladly playing the part of the villains.

“How could I leave even one of you alive?”

“Agh... Gyaaaaaah!”

Hiro cut the head from one man and tossed it into the midst of the rest as they continued their futile resistance. “There’s nothing more to say. Nothing matters anymore.”

His blade skimmed across the ground and came up to rest on his shoulders. He glared at Vendetta. As one, they halted in their tracks.

“Ah...”

There was no telling from whose throat the whisper had come, but he spoke for them all. Comprehension spread through their ranks: even if the heavens overturned, they could never defeat this man. They began to back away, trembling. Animal instinct dictated that one did not turn one’s back on a predator; to do so was tantamount to throwing one’s life away. They were like thieves who had strayed into a wild beast’s den.

Hiro strode forward, covering twice the distance they had retreated.

“Let’s start high.”

A stunned soldier’s head sprang from his shoulders. Blood sprayed like a fountain.

“Now low.”

Hiro whispered again even before the crimson plume colored the heavens. He picked out his next target and swung his black blade horizontally. The man’s top half parted cleanly from his bottom half.

“Now right.”

His swings were neither fast nor weighty. They were as light as a child swinging a stick and slow enough to see with the naked eye. Yet none of his victims were able to move out of the way. One by one, they slumped to the ground.

“Still not enough. Come on, show me some spine.”

It was a mystery that they even allowed the attacks to land at all. It was as though they did not understand how to defend themselves, could not fathom how to stop his wicked blade.

“Can you fight back hard enough to sate my ambitions?”

Golden light spilled from the right eyehole of his mask, pregnant with chilling battle fervor, keen enough to pierce the world. The full glare of the sun did nothing to diminish its brilliance. Had only the one eye been notable, it could have been dismissed as the Baldick, but his left, too, was unusual, imbued with darkness and steeped in fury as sharp as a honed blade. Their combined gazes seemed enough to penetrate the very soul.

The soldiers of Vendetta stared back with naked fear. The two hues were anathema to one another, and the annals of history made no mention of any human being who had possessed both at once. If such a creature did exist, they could only exceed the realm of mortal comprehension; in short, they must wield power akin to a god. Little wonder that the soldiers froze with terror to witness such a miraculous harmony in the flesh.

“You thought your paltry convictions made you qualified to stand in *my* way?”

He showed no mercy. Whether or not they moved to defend themselves, his blade struck to kill. Such was only natural. He had no capacity for forgiveness. The slaughter would continue until all his enemies were dead.

“Ahhh... Aaahhh!!!”

Every clash of blades taught a new enemy the difference in their skills. The piercing gaze of his multicolored eyes filled them with a terror that gnawed at their soul.

“Silence.”

He did not even let them succumb to fear. Resistance was futile before a god’s judgment, and that realization broke their spirits. Vendetta’s hatred was sundered in its entirety, their bodies brutalized without mercy. For so long, they had existed as patchwork creations of stilled tongues and despairing smiles. They had maintained their hearts’ equilibrium through hatred alone, but now that balance had fully tipped.

“Dear me. Whatever happened to your hatred of the empire?” Claudia watched in contempt as the men of Vendetta threw down their weapons and fled in confusion. “What a disappointing final act.”

She let her sword fall, no longer caring to fight. Her eyes followed them coldly

as they ran, bearing a look one might reserve for roadside refuse. A thought seemed to strike her, and she cocked her head.

“But is a lord’s wrath truly so easy to escape?”

She turned to the black-haired boy to whom her words were directed. His right eye radiated august splendor beyond mortal ken. His left eye burned with fury as it followed the fleeing soldiers of Vendetta. An uncanny smile spread beneath his mask as he raised a hand to the sky.

“What do you know of despair?”

The heavens swirled at his words. The earth shuddered and groaned, as though crying out in pain. A vast torrent of power burst forth, striking dumb friend and foe alike.

“Weep for spirits broken. Shed tears for hope lost. Wear with pride futures undone.”

The ground cratered beneath his feet. Space ruptured under the unbearable weight. Awe consumed all, and despair spread across the field.

“Dáinsleif, their dismay is yours to devour.”

All sound vanished from the world, as though the very concept of it had never existed at all. Silence fell like rain upon the battlefield.

“I am Surtr, the Black-Winged Lord.”

His presence swelled, and an inexplicable weight settled over the world around him. There was no escaping the tyranny of the silence he brought. As all who watched began to quake in fear, he raised Dáinsleif and held it flat, choosing his prey.

“He who beckons all lives equally to nothingness.”

He unleashed Muspell—Mortal Terror. Time stood still but for a thumping heartbeat that resounded across the field. All who lived relinquished their place in time’s flow. Friends, foes, beasts, insects, flora—all froze where they stood.

“Now, dance for me upon death’s stage.” Hiro pressed a hand to his mask as he spoke, like a god of death pronouncing judgment upon the condemned.

Thence came Schwartzwald—Deathly Stillness.

A pitch-black maw descended from above, falling shut upon the world like a deluge of curses.

* * * * *

Liz gasped and spun around as a chill ran up her spine. A pitch-black dragon had descended from the heavens, billowing with a baleful aura like black smoke. She was not the only one to notice. The nearby soldiers let their weapons fall and stared at the otherworldly spectacle. Wickedness given form shrouded the sky, terrifying to behold. The charge in the air crackled across their skin.

“This presence!”

Liz narrowed her eyes, sensing something strange about the sight, but before she could identify it, hostility flared closer at hand. She swung Lævateinn up to guard herself. An instant later, an impact rang through her body, so fierce that the earth bowed beneath her feet.

“You must be awfully confident in yourself not to give me your full attention.” An unctuous voice slipped through the crossing point of crimson blade and warhammer, devoid of inflection, devoid of life.

Distracted from discerning the nature of the darkness, Liz turned to Luka with fury in her eyes. Her opponent gazed back through clouded irises.

“Does it really fascinate you so?” With a glance at the sky herself, Luka pressed down with her warhammer, seeking to crush Liz to pulp.

Liz braced her legs and pushed back. “A mysterious power like that? Anyone would wonder what it was.”

“Mysterious, you say? Do you truly not recognize it?”

Luka’s answer was curious, but with their weapons pressing against each other, perhaps she was simply trying to distract Liz from plotting her next move. As much as she wanted to know, Liz maintained her composure.

“Not at all. That’s why I was so interested.” Flames erupted from her blade, mirroring the anger beginning to seep into her voice.

Luka scowled and leaped away, putting some distance between them. She glanced at her charred left sleeve and snorted in annoyance. “What a nuisance those flames are. As persistent as a snake.”

Liz took the opportunity to look back up, but the sky was as clear as it had ever been. The ominous presence she had felt was already fading. Its lingering traces were just about strong enough to determine where it had gone, but not to whom it belonged.

“Now that your worries have resolved themselves, would you be so kind as to die?” Luka forced her mouth into a bright smile. Needless to say, it did not reach her eyes.

Liz forced the turmoil bubbling in her chest back down and began to inch forward, moving with sliding steps that hid her approach from Luka. “I’m not going to die today.”

She steadily closed the distance, alert to the slightest sign that Luka had noticed, but her enemy continued to stare blankly at nothing.

“I do so hate that baseless confidence of yours. And that pretty face too. You don’t know the meaning of suffering.” With lightless eyes and an unbroken smile, Luka gave voice to her barren heart.

“Maybe not compared to you.” Liz had to concede that much. She was well aware that she had been blessed. Her life had been a series of tragedies since the day she was born, but she had stood firm because other people had been willing to lend her their hands.

“How surprising that you’re willing to admit it. I had not expected the sixth princess of the empire to be quite so frank about her flaws.”

“My sister always said I was too quick to speak the truth, but I think that’s a good thing, don’t you?”

What Liz did not yet realize was that her pureness of heart had developed into its own kind of charm. If anything, her frankness had made it more difficult for her to attract allies. Scheming to undermine others was hardly unusual in the world she inhabited; letting her uglier, more human side show would have earned her more supporters, and had she cared to learn the art of

manipulation, she could have cemented her position with no need for Hiro's help. Naturally, she felt as much jealousy, anger, and hatred as any other girl her age, but that was child's play compared to the villainy of adults. She had no place among the intrigue, scheming, and conspiracy that plagued the shadows of the royal court.

"What a pure soul you are," Luka crooned. "As unblemished as a newborn babe. A light noble and virtuous, too bright and beautiful to admit any sin."

Fury poured forth from her. The air began to constrict with her hostility.

"Ha ha... Ha ha ha..." Her shoulders shook as her throat rattled with laughter. "Aha ha... No."

For the first time since their meeting, Liz saw her expression change. Her face twisted into something so wicked that it could not even be called human. She seemed on the point of crying with rage.

"No, no, no!" The howl was loud enough to split her throat. Her malevolent strength rent the earth asunder. "I will not suffer you to exist!"

She surged toward Liz, sending a plume of dirt flying up behind her.

Liz had been biding her time, waiting for her chance. Gauging the distance between them, she stepped forward and thrust Lævateinn out. The crimson blade traced a perfect line through empty space as it bore down on Luka. Just as it came within reach of the tip of her nose, she jerked her head to the side. The force of the thrust sliced her cheek open as it gouged a chunk out of the air, but she was otherwise unharmed.

Liz grunted in frustration. She shifted her weight onto her left leg, moved her right back, and twisted her torso to retract her arm.

"Did you think I didn't realize that you were plotting something?" Luka sneered as she unleashed a mighty blow.

Liz managed to catch the strike with Lævateinn, but the warhammer lifted her feet from the ground, sending her sailing through the air.

"My turn, I think."

A tempest swirled. The warhammer bore down on Liz, tearing the earth apart

as it came. Luka's strength was remarkable on its own—she wielded it one-handed, swinging it around like a toy—but it was the unpredictable nature of her attacks that truly sent a shiver up Liz's spine. What seemed to be a swing from above turned into a bone-crunching swipe from the right at the last moment. Even as Liz fended off the warhammer's odd motions, however, she saw her chance to put a stop to its momentum.

“Yah!”

She braced her left fist against the flat of Lævateinn's blade, turning it into a shield. As the blow struck, she withdrew her hand with impeccable timing, letting the hammer's head slide past her. The weighty swing left Luka wide open—an opportunity into which Liz drove the full force of her right foot. Luka used the fact that she was leaning forward to take the kick head-on, and with a twist of her right wrist sent her warhammer rocketing up toward her opponent.

“I'll paint the ground with your innards!”

Recognizing that she was too off-balance to dodge, Liz flung herself toward the warhammer. Luka frowned, taking the move as an act of resignation, but Liz thrust Lævateinn forward, striking its tip against the hammer's head. Sparks flew as metal grated against metal.

Luka's eyebrows rose. “Oh? A test of strength?”

“Go ahead, but I'm not playing!”

No sooner had the words left her mouth than Liz released her hands from Lævateinn's hilt. With the equilibrium broken, the crimson blade shot up into the sky. Genuine surprise flickered in Luka's eyes as she watched the Flame Sovereign arc high, but her wonder did not last for long. As Liz fell to the ground, she pivoted on her right arm and kicked Luka's leg out from under her.

“Wha—”

Luka lost her balance and toppled. As she fell, Liz righted herself and landed a fierce kick in her abdomen.

“Oof!”

Luka bounced across the ground as though tumbling down a cliff, forming a

gust of wind that streaked across the blood-soured battlefield. She sprayed up dirt and soil as she tumbled, eventually vanishing into a cloud of dust.

As Liz watched the woman go, she glanced upward and raised her hand. “Welcome back,” she said. Lævateinn landed perfectly in her grasp, glowing with indignant flame.

She returned her attention to her enemy, who still had not emerged from the billowing haze. As she gazed into the dust, she steadied her breathing and listened to the world around her. Most of Vendetta had been slain by now, she could tell. The skirmish was coming to an end. Despite the force of the enemy’s boiling hatred, the Knights of the Rose had held their ground.

“It’s almost over.”

Perhaps it was because she was fighting a formidable foe, or perhaps her connection to Lævateinn had grown stronger, but her senses felt sharp enough to grasp the flow of battle. The rhythms of the field had thoroughly changed. The enemy unit pressing in toward the imperial core had been stopped dead, and while a great rent still remained in the imperial center, it was now less of a hole than a pitfall trap, locking Six Kingdoms’ forces in place. The imperial reinforcements were now sweeping in from behind to surround them.

“All that’s left are the flanks.”

A glance to the sides revealed the telltale clouds of two fierce battles being waged in the distance. Their fight was still continuing. The noise of battle nearby was far too loud to hear, but no doubt bodies were piling up just as high there as here, and blood was flowing just as freely. To end it as quickly as possible...

“It looks like I have to take care of you.”

Liz looked back at the figure who was now steadily approaching. The left side of the woman’s body was covered in dreadful scars, and her left sleeve flapped in the wind as if to assert its emptiness. More than that, however, it was the expression on her face that drew Liz’s attention.

“Igel... Igel... Lend your dear sister your strength...” Eyes wandering vacantly, like a lost child searching for her mother, she crouched down before the half-

rotted skull and brushed the dust from it, muttering under her breath, “Forgive me, Igel. Forgive me. You need only wait awhile. This will all be over soon; I promise.”

She stroked the skull feverishly, her smile as compassionate as a Madonna’s, her eyes as dead as a devil’s. Scraps of dried flesh fell loose with every touch.

“Are you cold? Worry not. You will not have to bear it for long.”

It was not uncommon for those who spent too long on the battlefield to develop mental peculiarities. The specifics varied from person to person, but this was the first time Liz had seen anybody as tragically broken as Luka. She tried to probe the depths of the woman’s hatred. What drove her to keep fighting? Was she fueled by revenge? Was she seeking a worthy death? Or was she perhaps looking for a reason to live? Several possibilities came to mind, but Liz felt certain that all of them were wrong.

“Once I eradicate the blood of von Grantz, your heart can rest.” Luka stroked the skull one last time before reluctantly standing and turning to Liz. “Now, would it be too much to ask you to die for Igel?”

“You have nothing left, do you?”

Belatedly, Liz realized that Luka had always been broken. Her heart was a barren wasteland. Whoever this Igel was, now that he was gone, she had reverted to who she really was. It was impossible to say when, where, or why she had become this way, but it was her true self.

“You’ve lost your home. Now you’re just wandering with no place to go back to.”

She had been a living shade from the beginning, existing in a world in which she saw no hope, and yet even when she had succumbed to despair and prayed for death, circumstances had conspired to keep her alive. It was an inversion of Liz’s fortunes, or perhaps misfortunes. Liz had been born cursed but saved by the charity of others. Luka had been born blessed, yet suffered at the hands of others’ cruelty. And both had clung to life until this moment, whether they had wanted to or not.

“Are you quite done trying to rifle through my brain?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. But I feel like I understand you a little better now.”

“And what use is that understanding? We two will never see eye to eye.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Liz sounded almost regretful.

“Then the least we can do is fight to the death, don’t you think?” Luka’s smile spread so wide it threatened to split her lips. The wind snatched away the strings of spittle stretching inside her mouth. “Give me your head—just like Igel did!”

She braced her feet against the ground and leaped high into the air. Her warhammer plummeted from the sky with a harsh whistle. As Liz dodged to the side, the impact blasted a crater into the ground behind her, sending a cloud of dust into the air. Luka burst free from the haze, already following up with a second attack.

“Die! Die, die, die, die, die!”

Liz grunted as she took the blow with the flat of Lævateinn’s blade, but that wasn’t enough to allay its momentum. The impact crushed her into the ground.

“Gah!”

“I’ll flay that pretty hide and give it to Igel!”

The warhammer swung down with enough force to pulverize Liz’s bones, never mind her skin. Liz struck the ground with her fist, spraying up dirt. Blinded, Luka’s swing went wide, striking deep into the ground. She scowled and readied her warhammer for a second blow, but Liz was no longer there.

“I won’t lose here!” came a voice from behind her.

Luka ducked out of the way, leaning over so far that her entire body was horizontal. As Lævateinn swung over her head, her right foot kicked up in a counterattack. Liz focused her strength in her legs, standing firm as she bent over backward. No sooner had Luka’s foot whistled past the tip of her nose than she saw the warhammer swinging in from the right.

“Hah!”

She didn’t bother to straighten herself. Instead, she gritted her teeth, twisted around, and met the attack head-on with Lævateinn. The two weapons clashed,

then bounced forcefully apart.

The wielders righted themselves and charged back into the fray, intent on taking one another's lives. Once they clashed, twice, thrice, each trying to batter the other down with their full strength. They lashed out to sweep each other's legs, resorted to fists when that failed, followed up with a kick to their opponent's torso. Liz swung with every ounce of power she possessed, but Luka almost seemed to read her attacks, evading with lithe movements and striking back without hesitation. Their battle was a tug of war between adaptability and speed.

The air groaned as it swirled about them, slicing like a storm of blades. Cuts appeared on their cheeks and soon began to burn, but the irritation went unheeded amid the clashing of their wills. They fought with all they had until their bodies were exhausted, their minds spent, and one of their souls shattered—and, at last, the scales began to tip.

"Curse you... Curse you!"

Luka tilted her mouth to the sky, gulping down oxygen. Liz saw her chance. Lævateinn's point raced toward her foe.

Luka snorted. "Can't you tell a ruse when you see one?"

Liz grinned. "You tell me."

Blade's edge met hammer's face. As the weapons bounced apart, Liz swung Lævateinn back up one-handed. The warhammer came down from above, but she dodged out of the way with a sideways step. Its force still knocked her strike astray, and her crimson blade cut only empty air, but there was no time for regrets. Luka's hammer was embedded in the earth. This was her chance, and she did not intend to waste it.

"Take this!"

She breathed out and stepped forward, and then—

"Too slow."

"Wha— Oof!"

There was no warning. No indication that anything was amiss. One second,

she was standing, the next, a pulverizing impact blasted through her. A sickening crunch rang through her body, as though all her bones had broken at once. She steadied her feet, desperate to stay standing, but the effort only sent a gout of blood bursting from her clenched teeth. As it splattered on the ground, she fell to one knee, clutching her right side.

“What... What happened?”

She looked up, her face twisted in agony. Above her, Luka stared down with empty eyes.

“Ah, yes. I suppose I forgot to mention...” Luka stroked the handle of her warhammer lovingly. There was not a shred of apology in her face. “I wield one of the Noble Blades—the Dharmic Blade Vajra.”

Liz stood up with a groan. She had guessed that Luka was more than just an ordinary human, but that, she had not expected. Even so, in spite of knowing that she had the stronger arm, she had taken care not to be reckless, or let her feelings cloud her judgment, or allow her foe the slightest opening.

“Ah...”

She opened her mouth to ask the question, but instead of words came a gout of blood.

“Let me guess. You must be at a loss as to what just happened” Luka glanced briefly at her warhammer before returning her attention to Liz. “Vajra’s Graal is named Vajradhara, and its nature is Purging. There are some nuances to its use, but suffice to say it feeds on my strength to slow my opponents’ movements.”

“Are you saying you tricked me?”

“Precisely. By the time your dulled senses perceived Vajra lodged in the ground, it was already gone.”

“All right, then... Why are you telling me this?”

Liz had not yet yielded. If the battle was going to continue, telling her the nature of Vajra’s Graal seemed like a grave misstep.

“You have already been duly purged. It only seems fair. Besides, the knowledge will not help you.” Luka set an amused hand on her chin and cocked

her head. “I can only wonder why it had no effect on *him*, but it seems to work on you well enough.”

Liz began to tremble. She could already guess who Luka was referring to.

Luka voiced a wordless cry of joy to see her opponent so pained. “Shall I tell you who I mean?”

Liz knew she should not listen. Nothing good could come of it. Yet her body refused to let her turn away; her brain blocked the signals, desperate to hear Luka’s answer.

“Shall I tell you who it was that knelt pathetically in the dirt, waiting for my blade to take his head?”

Luka’s voice took on an oratorical tone as she spoke, relishing Liz’s dread. Nothing seemed to amuse her more than watching her enemy struggle to deny the cruelty of the world before succumbing to despair. As likely as not, she had revealed her Graal purely so that she could enjoy this exchange.

“Who?” Liz whispered. She didn’t want to hear it, had no intention of believing it, but her heart spoke before her mind. The noise of the battle faded away as she waited to hear his name.

“It was Hiro Schwartz von Grantz.”

“Ah...”

Even after the words took on form and sound, they still didn’t seem real. As she berated herself for even asking in the first place, her vision blurred. Bitter sadness welled up from the depths of her heart. Dark emotions flooded her chest. Black despair poured forth, feeding on her hope to keep living. A single tear trickled down her cheek—

“Oh, no. You mustn’t break just yet.”

“Agh!”

One moment of distraction was enough. Luka saw the opening and pounced, slamming Liz into the dirt. As Liz gasped for a breath that would not come, Luka brought a crushing heel down on her stomach. Her body bent in the middle, and blood sprayed from her mouth. Yet the pain in her abdomen was nothing

when her heart felt about to burst. A wail slipped from her lips.

“Fear not. Soon I shall send you to the same place he resides. Then neither of you shall be alone.”

“Guh!”

A vicious kick to the ribs sent Liz flying, but even as she skimmed the ground, Luka was faster. The woman caught up with astonishing speed and swung her warhammer down with tremendous force.

“Farewell, fortunate princess. I hope you learned something of true pain before the end.”

Through bleary eyes, Liz saw Vajra descend, intent on smashing her body to pieces. The warhammer seemed terribly slow. Memories played back over and over in her head, like her life was flashing before her eyes. Confused emotions swirled within and battered her chest as she struggled to decide which of them was true. And through the storm, through the visions repeating over and over again, through the feelings tearing apart and remaking her heart...she saw him.

The boy whom she had so pursued, whom she had so admired, whom she had so adored. She saw his back.

“No. No more running away.”

She had cried enough tears.

She had nursed enough doubts.

She had shouldered enough regrets.

She had made enough excuses.

No more would she repeat the same mistakes.

“That’s right. I don’t need his help anymore.”

All at once, a vivid scene seared itself into the back of her mind. Her senses flooded with renewed clarity. Luka’s warhammer was approaching, bearing down on her. She righted herself in midair and, as soon as her feet touched the ground, unleashed a fist. A mighty noise resounded across the battlefield, the harsh clang of metal.

Anybody would have expected to see Liz's arm shatter. Instead, she stood firm, fist extended but unharmed. It was Luka who reeled back, pulled off-balance as her warhammer sailed backward. Shock spread across her face as she processed that Liz had repelled Vajra barehanded.

"I promised I was going to hit him," Liz said. "Hard."

She had been on the point of reaching out to him for help again, and for what? Because her resolve had faltered? How strong had it ever been? How many times had she told herself that she couldn't rely on him to fight all of her battles? She had been too weak, too dependent, and because of it she had almost given up on walking on her own two feet.

"I'm not some little girl anymore!" she cried, as much to herself as to anybody else. She sprang forward furiously, her sword bearing down on Luka.

Luka, however, was just as fast. Even as Lævateinn reached the end of its arc, her warhammer was already there.

"That stomach wound really must hurt," she crooned. "You've grown so very slow."

"Keep talking!"

Their weapons locked together as they clashed head-on, leaving them pushing against one another.

"I almost forgot to mention—it was I who killed your dear fourth prince. Oh, how you must despise me. Do you not just wish you could carve my head from my body?"

"Shut up!"

"Ngh!" Luka's attention was so focused on Lævateinn's crimson blade, she didn't even see Liz's fist until it crashed into her cheek. The impact was so forceful that it cracked the earth at her feet. Even so, she did not fall. As she halted, lopsided, her clouded eyes swiveled in their sockets to glare back at Liz.

"I still believe in him," Liz said.

An unwavering will blazed in her eyes, and Lævateinn roared in answer. Crimson flames poured forth into the world, radiating azure light. Liz stepped

forward, and an inferno sprang from beneath her feet, a pillar of flame rising toward the heavens.

“But I’ve decided I’m done with doubting myself.”

Flames of clear blue wreathed her, an azure inferno that swirled about her like a pair of wings.

“I’m done with questioning myself.”

Holding Lævateinn in a reverse grip, she raised the Spiritblade until it was level with her eyes. She ran her other hand along its length. Blue flames issued forth, spiraling about her as though to encircle the world.

“So I’m not going to hold back.”

A vow to become stronger burned in her chest, as fervent and true as the day she had first made it.

Her flames were Sheol.

Her flames were Inferno.

Her flames were Purgatorium.

“Bloom in splendor, Lævateinn.”

Myriad Blossoms—Ragnarök.

Lævateinn vanished from Liz’s hand. All at once, the world was azure and crimson. The transformation extended to her too. Blue flames coiled around her body, healing her injuries in an instant.

“Now we can begin.” Her voice was soft and sweet. It bore none of its former bravery, or its former defiance, or its former dignity. Its tones were smooth and sultry, and their touch paralyzed the mind.



“What... Who...?”

Luka stared in shock, mouth opening and closing like a goldfish. She lowered her gaze to Vajra. As she did, something else caught her eye.

“Igel?”

The skull she called her brother was wreathed in flame.

“Igel!”

She dived toward it, but dazed as she was, she was too slow. Her hand plunged into the fire without a moment’s hesitation, but the skull had already been reduced to ash.

“Ah... Ah... Aaaaaahhh!”

She tried to scrape together the remains, but her hands closed around empty air. Her plaintive wails trailed away unheard. Crimson flame devoured all, leaving her to beat her fists impotently against the ground as she gazed up at a scorched sky.

“Why? Why, why, why? Why?!” Luka leveled her gaze at Liz again, her eyes filled with pure rage. She sprinted toward her enemy. “Why must you stand in our way?!”

Liz wordlessly gestured with her right hand. The coiling flames converged in front of her like a shield.

“Aaaaaaaaaggghhh!”

Roaring like a feral beast, Luka unleashed a volley of tremendous blows, but it was meaningless. Her efforts were futile. The flame clung to Liz like a living being, shielding her from harm.

Luka only struck harder. “What did I ever do wrong?!” she cried. “Dare to wish for happiness?! Was that such a grave crime that this must be my punishment?! All I ever wanted was to live in peace with my brother! That would have been enough!”

Liz gazed back at the warhammer through the flames, smiling sadly. “I don’t know the answer.” She gestured toward Vajra. The blue flames followed her

command, coiling around its head. In a moment, the handle, too, was sheathed in flame.

“Curse you!” Luka grimaced and relinquished the weapon, unable to bear the searing heat.

“But I promise I’ll find it someday.”

The flames coiling around her began to grow. Slowly, they took the form of a blue and crimson lion. The beast stood taller than a sizable monster, and its tail trailed through the air like a snake. Liquid fire dripped from its jaws, its burning paws gouging furrows into the earth.

“What... What sorcery...?” Overcome by the lion’s awe-inspiring presence, Luka fell to her knees in defeat. “Why is it...that nobody ever comes to save me?”

Liz raised her hand high. With a roar, the lion surged toward Luka. The woman could only watch as her doom approached, her last drop of strength expended.

“Igel...forgive me...” Something flickered in her eyes, and a single tear trickled down her cheek. “You will not be avenged after all...”

Her sorrowful voice, ever so small, vanished into hellfire and burned away with her tears. Flames surged outward, covering the field where she had been. The ground rocked. Even the black smoke in the sky blew away. The fires of Gehenna raged across the field, burning everything in their path to ashes.

At last, the flames’ momentum ebbed. They burned out and faded away, leaving behind only pockets of smoldering earth. Liz stared expressionlessly at the ground before her. There lay Luka. In the end, she had not been able to kill her. Letting her live was naive, Liz knew. Still, she could not bring herself to do otherwise. She had sworn not to doubt herself anymore. She would follow her heart, even if it led her astray, and this was the first step on the way.

It was uncertain what could be done for Luka, but she recognized that sparing the woman’s life came with some measure of responsibility.

“First, you must atone for your crimes,” she whispered, “but after that... After that, we’ll find you a reason to live. Together.”

“So that’s the path you’ve chosen,” said a voice. Applause echoed through the enclosed world. Liz had used Lævateinn to seal off their battlefield with a wall of flame, but apparently it had not been sufficient. She spun around, eyes flashing.

A man stood nonchalantly nearby. He was clothed all in white, a strange mask on his face and an ominous black blade hanging from his belt. “A path even the first emperor did not take, or the second, or any other since. But you might just do it justice.” He stepped closer, a pleased lilt to his voice, stopping before Liz as he glanced down at Luka. “So I would ask that you give her to me—”

He looked back at Liz, and the words died in his throat as he saw the grin on her face.

* * * * *

“Why do you always act like you know everything?! Why do you always speak like you’ve got all the answers?!”

A stunning blow struck him in the face. Before he knew it, he was on his back, looking up at the sky. Before he could register the pain or even process what had happened, an impact ran through his abdomen. The cause was clear: Liz was straddling him.

“Who do you think you’re helping with these stupid games?! You’re not going to make anyone happy!” She grabbed Hiro by the lapels and yanked his torso upright. “You’re just doing it for you! That’s all!”

His brain was rattling so fiercely that he could hardly think. He couldn’t have answered if he’d tried.

“Why do you have to try and solve everything on your own?!”

The sight of the anger beading in the corners of her eyes stole the words from his mouth.

“Why won’t you just ask someone for help?!”

She flung him back against the ground. Watching her fight back tears as she vented her emotions, Hiro remembered what Artheus had said.

“I guess you were right.”

Perhaps Artheus really did have him dead to rights. Everything Hiro had done had been selfishness, nothing more. It certainly hadn't done Liz any good, only made her despise him.

He reached up toward her face. "I'm sorry, Liz. I never meant to hurt you—"

"Shut up! That's not for you to decide!"

She smacked his hand away and followed up with a vicious headbutt. He couldn't even groan. The sight of her tears made everything numb.

"I'm not smart enough for fancy words, so you'll have to speak plain!" She grabbed his shirt with trembling hands and buried her face in his neck. "Just tell me..."

"What are you...?"

"Am I really that weak?"

Her voice cracked. Tears soaked his collarbone.

"Am I really so weak that you can't even turn to me for help?"

As he struggled for something to say, she began to sob.

"I'll get stronger. I promise, I'll get stronger..." She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him close with feeble strength. "Strong enough that I won't lose to anyone." As she pulled away, face scrunched up to force back the tears, a fierce light glimmered in her eyes. "Strong enough to carry your burdens, so please..."

Tears trickled down her cheeks. They splattered on Hiro's face like rain, filled with gentle warmth.

"So please, wait for me." She cupped his cheek with a tender hand. "Soon enough, I'll come and find you, and I'll snatch everything you're carrying right off your back."

Her voice sounded clear as a bell as she stroked his cheek apologetically. The pain and heat gradually faded away.

"Until I get there, do whatever you have to do. But if it's ever too much, if you ever think you can't take it...you come right on back to me, do you

understand?" Through ugly teardrops and wracking sobs, she grinned. "Even if the world gives up on you, I'll be with you to the end."

She wiped her eyes bashfully. Her grin became a tender smile.

"And if you still don't get it, then just remember this..." The weight vanished from his abdomen as she stood up. "I'll overtake you someday, and that's a promise."

Her words floated down from above, full of tender emotion.

"So just sit tight and watch me."

Sensing her leave, Hiro gave a low sigh. His shoulders trembled as he covered his face with his hands. Her words had struck home. This was a final parting—perhaps. A tenuous connection still remained.

If she had cursed him, he could not have blamed her. If she had expressed her hatred through her fists, he would have had no right to fight back. He would have deserved it. Yet she had chosen forgiveness, promising him that he still had a place to belong.

Joy welled up within his chest. Unrestrained delight filled his heart. No more was she chasing his shadow. She was looking past him now, and her feet were strong enough to take her there.

I really couldn't be happier.

He was like a selfish child next to her. While he remained where he had halted one thousand years ago, she had begun to move forward. She had grown strong, he thought. She truly had his respect.

I suppose I'd better set out too.

Soon, he hoped, he would stand before her again—not as a goal, but as an obstacle to be overcome. The thought filled his chest with pride.

You'll overtake me, you said. Well, I'll be waiting.

Hiro picked the mask up from the ground and set it back over his face.

Epilogue

When she awoke, everything was over. A hideous stench yanked her back to consciousness. She sat up to find herself on a grassy plain teeming with charred corpses.

“Urgh... Why...do I live...?”

She distinctly recalled being swallowed by flame. By all rights, she should have been turned to ash, yet she could feel no burns, only the dull ache of blunt force trauma echoing within her body.

“Finally awake, I see.”

A man leaned down to address her. His appearance was curious, to say the least. He was dressed all in white, with a strange mask over his face. He squatted in this world of death like he was its natural denizen.

“And who are you?”

Her eyes flashed in an attempt to intimidate the man, but in the end, it was she who was shaken by his uncanny presence. Sweat beaded on her forehead. Her body trembled with fear. It felt like he was leeching her life away, carving through her soul as easily as he might her flesh.

“I’m glad you seem well. If you’d died, all of her efforts would have been for nothing.” The masked man’s power crackled on her skin with every word that passed his lips. “Two paths now lie before you.”

She said nothing.

“You can wait to rot away on an old battlefield or pick yourself up and seek out a new one.” *Now, which will you choose?* He looked her up and down, appraising her.

Her throat grew dry. Her lungs screamed for air. Silence dragged on between them.

At last, the masked man let out a sigh. “I know decisions can be difficult. But

once the choice is made, everything will be so much easier.”

Slowly, slowly, he raised his arms. She flinched away, but he only scoffed.

“No need to be so twitchy.” With his hands on either side of his mask, he stepped silently closer. “Do you desire rebirth? Or a final end?”

He removed his mask, revealing his face.

Her mind went blank. Raw fury sprang unbidden to her lips. “I’ll kill you if it’s the last thing I do,” she spat.

“Then I will give you hope.” The man’s smile was menacing in its innocence.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up this copy of volume 7 of *The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles*. To all my returning readers, welcome back. I put the pedal to the metal for the chuuni again on this volume, so I hope you enjoyed it.

Volume 7 is something of a turning point—the end of part one, if you will. The next volume will be the start of part two, although I mean to keep packing the story as full of chuuni goodness as I have so far. We haven't met any dwarves or beastfolk yet, have we? Well, I'll keep my lips sealed on that point, but I'm piling up the pressure on myself to make sure you all enjoy what's coming up.

Now then, dear readers, I humbly ask you to take a look at this volume's cover. Done? Then I'm sure you understand what I'm getting at. What's that? Hiro looks cool on there? He sure does. One glance from his golden eye and you'd either lose your will to fight or fall for him completely. He's the kind of protagonist who gets cooler every volume. But no, that's not what I'm asking. This time, there's something more.

That's right, I'm talking about Claudia's belly button. Her tummy. Am I the only one who thinks it's super hot? Back when I got the illustration, it was the first thing I noticed. The way her muscles and the smooth lines of her abdomen make her belly button stand out...it's obscene! I love it. I stared at it so hard I almost started drooling. Her chest and thighs are great as well, of course, but I'm a belly button fan at the end of the day. What's your preference, dear reader?

Anyway, I'd better get to the thank-yous.

To Ruria Miyuki-sama, your elegant and stirring artwork never fails to awaken new possibilities slumbering within me. I'm truly grateful for your work. To my editors, S-sama and I-sama, I'm sure I make you put up with a lot, but I hope you'll continue to lend me your assistance. And to the rest of the editing department, the proofreaders, the designers, and everybody else who helped to make this book a reality, thank you very much.

And last but not least, you, my readers. Without your help, I never could have made it this far. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I'm going to keep the chuuni rays at full blast over here, so I hope you'll continue to support me.

Until we meet again.

奉 (Tatematsuri)

Bonus Short Stories

Blissful Days with the Valditte

“Hiro!”

It was early morning, scarcely past sunrise. A flurry of footsteps rang through the hallways, light and cheerful, suggesting joyful feet. The sixth princess’s flame-red hair streamed behind her as she ran.

“Hiirooo!”

Smiling from ear to ear, she combed the halls for any sign of him. The sight of her would have made anyone soften their gaze tenderly—anyone but the boy she was looking for.

“I’m not mad, I promise!” Her voice abruptly dropped in pitch. “So come on out already.”

Hiro quivered in the nook where he was hiding, scrunching himself up into a tighter ball. His black garb blended in with the shadows, rendering him perfectly undetectable.

I knew she wasn’t happy with me, but when did this escalate so quickly?

For a while, Liz’s attitude toward him had been ineffably hostile. She had greeted him with her usual smiles, but they had not reached her eyes. Too conscious of his own culpability to argue back, he had taken to hiding until her anger blew over.

“I hear you bathed with Scáthach again today! And with Rosa yesterday, and who else? Cerberus, your swiftdrake, and Tris? Don’t you always say that you hate bathing with women? Well, now I’m getting some answers out of you!”

That was the long and short of it. If bathing alongside women was the problem, he didn’t understand why men or animals were an issue too, but then, there was a lot about the situation that he didn’t understand.

Scáthach is too bold to predict, and Rosa is too cunning with the way she picks her moments. Maybe it's because they've got a couple of years on me...

His internal monologue started going in directions that either of them would be furious to know about.

“Even Huginn was crying because you didn’t let her join! Muninn started lording it over her that he got to bathe with you, and she knocked him across the room!”

With a brief prayer for Muninn’s swift recovery, Hiro put a pained hand to his head. He *had* bathed with Scáthach and Rosa, so he couldn’t pretend that her charges were false. More to the point, choosing to hide had clearly only poured fuel on the flames—for that, he blamed his male instincts.

“You’ll bathe with them, but the moment you see me start to change, I can’t see you for dust! I know you ran in on Aura once too, you know! She told me how she had to fend you off with the Black Chronicle!”

That particular incident had been...accidental fanservice, one might have said back on Earth, but it didn’t seem like Liz would be receptive to that explanation.

“Aren’t you always going on about how boys and girls should bathe separately? You can’t even practice what you preach!”

Hiro curled up tighter. She had him dead to rights on that.

“What in the world is all this racket?”

A woman’s voice—Rosa’s, by the sound of it—addressed an increasingly incensed Liz. Hiro could make out more sets of footsteps than just hers, but he couldn’t see who else was there from his hiding place.

“I want to settle this bathing thing with Hiro once and for all, but I think he’s hiding from me.”

“Dear me. Are you still angry about that? I thought I told you that you’re invited next time.”

“That’s not good enough. I want to hear what he has to say for himself.”

“I see. So it’s a confession you want.” Rosa sounded amused. “Very well. I’m certain Huginn and Scáthach will be delighted to help.”

“If you wish,” came Scáthach’s voice.

“It pains me to turn against His Lordship,” Huginn chirped, “but I suppose needs must!”

“This is silly,” said a quiet voice.

“So you say, Aura, but I see you setting aside your book.”

There was a pause. “I reached the end of a chapter, that’s all.”

Now they were all coming for him. Hiro’s blood ran cold.

“Seeing as we’re all here, why don’t we seize him and take him to the baths? Surely any man would dream of being attended by so many beauties.”

Sensing imminent danger, Hiro turned to flee, only to find his path blocked.

“Oh. Hey, Cerberus.”

The white wolf cocked her head, regarding Hiro with doleful eyes. His shoulders slumped as he realized what was coming. A moment later, her teeth parted and a piercing howl echoed down the corridor.

“Yeah... Should’ve figured.”

With a dry chuckle, Hiro raised his eyes to the ceiling in defeat.

Fair and Square

“How about this?!”

Her late father had taught her that children of Faerzen were fierce.

“Too slow.”

Even as the boy’s voice reached her ears, their wooden swords thwacked together. Unable to take the impact, Scáthach’s weapon broke before its counterpart.

“Curses!”

Her eyes burned with defiance, looking around for a way to regain the advantage. They found a spare wooden sword lying nearby. Her body sprang into action. She kept her opponent pinned down with her bare hands as she

made her way over to the weapon before snatching it up and turning round to swing.

“I’m not done yet!”

Her late brother had taught her that children of Faerzen were bold.

She saw her opponent’s strikes coming but forged forward fearlessly. A blow struck her shoulder. She grimaced but didn’t slow, focusing on opening him up.

“Your movements are too obvious.”

“You needn’t remind me!”

Scáthach’s bladework was well honed, but very much by the book. Such predictable technique was unlikely to turn the tables in her favor. It might win her thunderous applause on the stage, but she would struggle to hold her own on the battlefield against an opponent of equal skill.

Again, the boy’s strike broke her wooden sword in two. She picked up a longstaff and continued her assault, wielding it so deftly, it moved like an extension of her arm.

“Your spearwork is versatile, but you’re too orthodox in how you use it.”

Her thrusts missed the mark. Her downward swipes cracked the earth, but nothing more. Her upward swings all fell short of clipping his chin. She tried a sideways swipe, aiming for his torso, but it didn’t quite reach, like she had misjudged the distance by just a fraction. She tsked in annoyance. Haste bred errors, and errors were fatal.

“The people of Faerzen are like that, I hear. Maybe that goes for their princesses in particular.”

He was right. In a word, the people of Faerzen liked to fight fair and square. They eschewed subtleties and roundabout means, invariably taking the most direct route to their goal. As a member of the royal family, she was intensely proud of those values and sought to uphold them, even if they might someday mean her death.

“Maybe so. But I will fight as I was taught, no matter what.”

Her martial skills were one of her few remaining ties to her family. Developed

over grueling hours of training, they were the product of the kindness of her father, the sternness of her brother, the warmth of her mother and younger siblings that had inspired her to protect the ones she loved. When she took up her spear, she could feel their presence still.

“I am of royal blood, the last of my line. I will not forsake my knighthood.”

Those were stubborn, almost childish words. Many would have scoffed at her for them, but her practice partner was not one of them.

“So you’d rather be true than wise. Well, then. You should hold those feelings close.” The boy smiled back, looking almost envious.

“I’m pleased you approve. Then this time, I shall get the better of you!”

“That’s not what I said.”

She thrust the longstaff toward him. The air swirled around the end, howling like a gale as she swept it sideways. He dodged, but she had expected as much, drawing herself in with the staff to counterbalance and striking with the heel of her palm. The blow caught him so hard in the chest that his feet left the ground.

“Ngh!”

“Gah!”

Even as her attack landed, however, the boy’s kick struck her in the shoulder. Neither could allay their momentum, and both went flying.

Scáthach hit the ground hard, the impact driving the air from her lungs. She ignored the pain through sheer force of will and pressed her fist into the ground, forcing herself to her feet.

“Raaagh!”

She lashed out to the right with an overhead swing, relying more on instinct than sight. A savage *crack* echoed through the courtyard.

“I suppose we should call this a draw.”

Her eyes caught up to her longstaff, drawn by the boy’s voice. He had blocked the blow, his weapon raised in a high guard.

“A battle with no victor... There is little so vexing.” Both of their weapons

were beaten and splintered. Scáthach gulped down a lungful of air, exhaled again, and tossed her longstaff away. “Well, now that we’ve worked up a sweat, what say you to hand-to-hand combat in the baths?”

“Wait, what?”

“I promised you that I would win today. One way or another, I will make good on my word.”

“Now, hold on a second. Let’s think about this...”

“What is there to think about? I used to do much the same with my little brother. We shall emerge with bodies clean and scores settled. Can you say fairer?” The boy tried to back away, but she seized his hand and began marching toward the baths. “We shall have no arms or armor to lean on, only our bodies and the skills they have learned!”

“I get what you’re saying, I do, but you haven’t considered—”

“No more tricks. I shall defeat you fair and square!”

A Gift for the Warmaiden

With the westward march to engage Six Kingdoms pending, Hiro was busy tidying up his chambers. As he cleared his belongings away, he noticed an article of southern jewelry lying unattended. It was nothing especially valuable—there were pieces like it all over the southern territories—but he had come across it while buying gifts in Gurinda. The bracelet had gone to Liz, the necklace to Rosa, and the ring had become the prize in a game which Rosa won. Now this, his gift for Aura, was all that was left.

It was a necklace. He had picked it out thinking she might like the dragon design but had never been able to give it. She had belonged to an opposing faction back then, for one thing, although for the most part, events at the time had simply been too chaotic.

“I suppose now’s as good a time as any.”

At that moment, a sharp rap at the door announced a visitor.

“Come in,” he said.

The door slid open, letting in the evening chill. A girl of short stature entered with the breeze. Her silver hair and leaden eyes gave her a frosty appearance, but he knew that her strategic mind harbored burning ideals. From time to time, she produced schemes so ingenious that even he was impressed.

“Sorry,” she said. “I know it’s late.”

She trotted over to a nearby chair and eased herself into it. Hiro had to assume that she had come on some kind of business, but for the time being, she simply sat quietly, studying him.

The silence gradually grew too uncomfortable to bear. “Would you like something to drink?” Hiro asked.

“No.”

“All right. Well, what’s up?”

“Nothing.” She continued to stare at him intently, scrutinizing his every move.

He sighed, feeling like an insect under a microscope. “I’ve got something for you.”

Hoping to break the curious stalemate, he offered her the dragon necklace. Her eyes widened in surprise. Evidently, it had piqued her interest. She stood up from the chair and stepped toward him. He smiled to show her that he wasn’t a threat—like coaxing a cat to eat from his hand, he noted with private amusement.

“Sorry it’s so late. I’ve meant to give it to you for a while now, but I never found the chance.”

“It’s for me?” She looked between Hiro and the necklace, eyes widening again.

“That’s right. I hope it’s to your taste. I know you like dragons.”

“It’s really cool...” she whispered.

Hiro gave a wry smile. Cool, indeed. Not quite the response he had expected from a girl like her, but she seemed to be pleased with it. She turned it this way and that, inspecting it in the light. For once, her blank expression loosened into what might have been a faint smile. He breathed a sigh of relief, glad that it met

with her approval.

Aura clasped the necklace into place and turned back to him. A faint blush colored her cheeks.

“It looks great on you,” he said.

“Mm.” She raised her hand to the dragon device and nodded several times, as though affirming to herself what he had said. Feeling sheepish at seeing her express her feelings so openly, he busied himself with getting ready for his departure.

“Thank you.” The voice came just as he turned his back, trembling with more gratitude than words could express. A smile spread across his face, and he gave a small nod. Something pulled at the back of his shirt. “Take care.”

“I will.” Her voice had not been insistent, but Hiro could tell how deeply she cared for his well-being. “You take care too. There are just as many dangers inside the empire as outside.”

“I know.”

And that was that. The conversation died away and silence fell over the room. Even so, none of the earlier awkwardness remained in the air, only a sense of peace. Aura stayed by his side, watching him work in silence, as if to say she would be with him until the very day and hour of his departure.

Memories in Flames

She was born into a world stained red. Conflict after conflict weighed upon the people’s hearts, while desperation fanned the flames of their suspicion. Despotism abused their charges to breaking point, and the hatred of men spread upon the wings of war.

“And yet there was hope. A light so fierce it seared my eyes.”

She would never forget it. A single droplet of black ink that descended on a world bereft of hue. It had filled her vision with magnificent color, quickening a heart that before had beaten for nothing.

“Forgive me, Lord Hiro,” she whispered. Before her eyes, a fiery maelstrom

raged.

A tear trickled from her azure eyes as she fell to her knees. There would be no escape for her, no salvation, not even the luxury of bemoaning her fate. A wall collapsed, as though the entrails of the building had been crushed by some great hand, and the flame-warmed rubble scorched her skin. Still, she felt no fear. The storm of violence held no terror for her.

“My path was fated to end here. Nobody is to blame, you least of all. This was destiny. I could never have eluded it.”

Abruptly, she was seized by a coughing fit. The room was filling with foreboding smoke, but this was not the cause. With her blessing to defend her, it could have done her no harm.

“Even now, my illness will not be denied.”

Her eyes narrowed sharply at the sight of the blood on her palm. She smiled bitterly, but as she closed her fingers as if to conceal it, her face took on a look of acceptance. She raised her eyes to the ceiling, where white smoke billowed.

“It must be raining out there.”

Her vision shimmered with a faint light. All at once, her eyes took on a mystical blue glow. Reflected in their depths was a boy clad in black. He cut down foe after foe as he sprinted across a battlefield, his features set in fierce determination.

“I have lived a happy life, Lord Hiro,” she whispered, willing her gratitude to reach him.

Her eyes reflected a night sky swollen with stars as she watched the carnage unfold. A world of tranquility and bliss unfolded in their depths.

“So do not grieve for me. Do not weep for me.”

The flames boiled her tears away as they trickled down her cheeks. Soon, no trails even remained to mark their passage. The inferno would have snatched away a lesser person’s consciousness, but her smile never faltered.

“At the end of your road, at the end of your despair, there is light. I have seen it.”

She had left nothing undone. Nothing undone...but she did have one regret. A future that no wish could make hers, but which nonetheless lingered in the depths of her heart.

“If I could have one thing... Just one thing...”

The unfulfilled desire stirred within her chest, demanding release.

“If I could be granted just one selfish request...”

She had never once bemoaned her fate, but this would be the sole exception.

“I would have wanted to live just a little longer!”

She bit her lip, fighting back tears, shaking her head as though to dispel the image in the back of her mind. With a bitter smile on her lips, she returned her gaze to the sea of hellfire.

“Let nothing stand in your way. Fix your eyes forward and run for as long as your feet will carry you.” She smiled at where he would never stand, where he would never come to her aid. “I will wait for ages. For eons. Until the end of time.”

She bowed her head to the boy who was not there. When she raised it again, her expression was calm and composed.

“Let us begin.”

Her voice was soft, sweet, and devoid of emotion—a pure white canvas. Solemn, beautiful, its touch lingered forever in the memory. It was truly the voice of the divine.

“Beyond despair awaits a future worth fighting for.”

Her golden hair streamed through the air, unblemished by the blaze, and her porcelain skin shone brighter than the flames. Her eyes, said to pierce through all, burned with an unbreakable will, refusing to falter at the despair they saw.

“And a world ruled by terror—a world of chaos—will birth naught but sorrow.”

Her last words were directed to the intruder who appeared within the flames. The figure approached slowly but surely, untouched by the blaze, at last coming

to a stop before her.

“Tell me,” it said, “what know you of fear?”



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The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles: Volume 7

by Tatematsuri

Translated by James Whittaker Edited by Tess Nanavati

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